Promoting Women in Academic Medicine during COVID-19 and Beyond

KEY WORDS: COVID-19; gender equity; diversity; virtual lecture.

INTRODUCTION

Despite extensive work to improve gender equity in academic medicine, women lag in terms of promotions and leadership positions (1). This inequity intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic which has disproportionately affected women, particularly those at early-career stages, who have been bearing the load of additional caregiving and homeschooling responsibilities (2–4). National surveys of early career faculty also highlighted the devastating impact of the COVID-19-related travel ban and the resultant cancelations of meetings on their careers (5).

One reason for the lower promotion rates of women is impediments to travel for national and international presentations, which are associated with opportunities for networking and collaborations, critical to academic promotion and success (6). Due to the COVID-19-related travel bans, most grand rounds and visiting professorships are now being conducted virtually which has removed barriers to travel and provides an opportunity to involve more women in visiting professorships.

The Center for Faculty Development at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) designed a program to promote women faculty and postdoctoral fellows during COVID-19 by providing the opportunity to serve as virtual visiting scholar at national or international institutions combined with mentorship, coaching, and peer-to-peer networking. In this report, we describe the design and short-term outcomes of this program.

METHODS

The Anne Klibanski Visiting Scholar Program was established in July 2020 with the goal to identify women faculty and postdoctoral fellows disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and who would benefit from national or international speaking, mentoring, and networking opportunities. The review committee consisted of senior members from different departments who were tasked to identify opportunities for a visiting lecture in their field and served as sponsors.

A Visiting Lecture Series was created to support and advance the careers of women faculty at MGH, the US, and abroad. These lectures bring together faculty members from outside institutions and MGH on topics that overlap both research areas with the intent to build relationships and advance science across institutional, national, and international borders.

All scholars participated in two individual coaching sessions with a professional leadership coach and were enrolled in a 6-week small-group leadership coaching program focusing on career development and community building. The coaching program covered topics such as imposter syndrome, identifying sponsors, finding and leveraging opportunities, networking, and development of a national reputation. Scholars were encouraged to continue to meet and network after completion of the program.

Selected scholars completed a survey on the impact of the program and answers were compared using the chi-square test. This study was exempt by our institutional review board.

RESULTS

From 74 applications, we selected 36 scholars for the program (Table 1). All requests to outside institutions to host our scholars were accepted and scholars gave 32 national and 18 international talks. The experience of the scholars was consistently positive and led to new collaborations. In fact, many institutions wanted to implement a similar program, which led to the creation of the Visiting Lecture Series, for which we invited 8 national and 5 international women speakers who were paired with our scholars for joint lectures.

Since the beginning of the program, more than one-third of scholars have been considered for promotion to Assistant or Associate Professor, two received major institutional leadership positions, one a tenure track position, and five received other awards.

The survey response rate was 94%. There was a significant increase ($p < 0.05$) in the number of scholars who agreed or strongly agreed that by implementing the award, MGH created an environment that promotes a culture of mentorship and visibility, increases knowledge of available institutional...
DISCUSSION

Our study showed that the implementation of a virtual visiting scholar program positively influenced women’s careers by providing them the chance to build a national/international reputation to support their promotion. Given the significant institutional financial constraints due to the pandemic, this initiative presented an innovative low-cost way to support women faculty and trainees, researchers, and clinicians, during a challenging time. In times of crisis, the opportunity to connect with other institutions without barriers and advance their careers as well as to form small communities, equipped the women with a network that will keep expanding and a sounding board that will resonate.

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Declarations:

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they do not have a conflict of interest.

| Degree | Postdoctoral fellow | Instructor | Assistant professor | Associate professor |
|--------|--------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| MD     | 3                  | 2          | 17                 | 5                 |
| PhD    | 2                  | 1          | 4                  | 2                 |

| Department          |            |            |            |            |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Anesthesia          | Dermatology| Emergency service | Medicine | Cancer center |
| Neurology           | Ophthalmology | Orthopedics | Pathology | Pediatric surgery |
| Psychiatry          | Radiation oncology | Radiology | Surgery | |

Table 1 Demographics of the 36 Selected Anne Klibanski Scholars

| AK Visiting Scholar Pre-Program Survey |
|----------------------------------------|
| Environment that promotes a culture of mentorship | 51.61% | 12.90% | 35.48% | 75.76% | 9.09% | 15.15% | 0.0459 |
| Environment that promotes feedback and sharing of information | 48.39% | 25.81% | 25.81% | 66.67% | 15.15% | 18.18% | 0.142 |
| Environment that promotes visibility | 38.71% | 22.58% | 38.71% | 63.64% | 24.24% | 12.12% | 0.0478 |
| Environment that provides actionable advice and guidance | 45.16% | 22.58% | 32.26% | 60.61% | 24.24% | 15.15% | 0.2194 |
| Knowledge of available institutional information | 41.94% | 41.94% | 16.13% | 75.76% | 15.15% | 9.09% | 0.0063 |
| Knowledge of how to access institutional resources | 41.94% | 38.71% | 19.35% | 75.76% | 12.12% | 12.12% | 0.0063 |
| Someone to turn to in case of difficulty | 67.74% | 9.68% | 22.58% | 84.85% | 6.06% | 9.09% | 0.1091 |
| Faculty feel they are part of a close-knit team | 41.94% | 29.03% | 29.03% | 60.61% | 27.27% | 12.12% | 0.1384 |
| Faculty share information. | 45.16% | 41.94% | 12.90% | 66.67% | 18.18% | 15.15% | 0.0854 |
| Faculty strive to support each other. | 51.61% | 22.58% | 25.81% | 57.58% | 27.27% | 15.15% | 0.6343 |
| Your work is consistent with your expectations | 61.29% | 22.58% | 16.13% | 69.70% | 24.24% | 6.06% | 0.4824 |
| MGH is open to change. | 38.71% | 35.48% | 25.81% | 69.70% | 12.12% | 18.18% | 0.0135 |
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