



Perspective/Opinion

The Kern National Network Site Visit of MCW's Kern Institute

by Michael T. Braun, PhD

"Among the multitude of animals which scamper, fly, burrow, and swim around us, man is the only one who is not locked into his environment. His imagination, his reason, his emotional subtlety and toughness, make it possible for him to not accept the environment but to change it. And that series of interventions by which man from age to age has remade his environment is a different kind of evolution—not biological, but cultural evolution."

—Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man*

Ironhide: Why are we fighting to save the humans? They're a primitive and violent race.

Optimus Prime: Were we so different? They're a young species. They have much to learn. But I've seen goodness in them.

—*Transformers: The Movie*

This past January, the MCW Kern Institute was pleased to host colleagues from the Kern National Network for Caring & Character in Medicine (KNN) for a virtual site visit. The visit was led by KNN Director Cheryl Maurana, PhD, along with Bonnie Miller, MD, and Kimara Ellefson, and highlighted the Kern Institute's work here at MCW including our growth since the 2017 founding and opportunities for continued growth and partnership. Adina Kalet, MD, Director of the MCW Kern Institute, began the site visit by highlighting the structure of the Kern Institute, especially the founding and expansion of three labs which knit together the founding pillars. After this initial presentation, the team

welcomed representatives from all of the Kern Institute's major initiatives to share with the KNN site visit team their innovative, impactful work.

Innovative Programs Making A Difference in the Lives of Students and Faculty

The Kern Institute's activities touch the lives of many in diverse ways. Consider, for example, the **Student Pillar**, led by Cassie Ferguson, MD, and its mission to create an equitable, inclusive, and hopeful learning environment. Via its REACH (Recognize, Empathize, Allow, Care, and Hold each other up) curriculum, participants engage in discussions about critical things previously kept private—imposter syndrome and health and well-being. This leads to learning about the value of mindfulness and gratitude. Our intention is that as students continue through medical school then out into residencies and the working world, the transformative power is transmitted into these new environments—gratitude is contagious!

A sister program to REACH is the 4C (Coaching for Character, Caring, and Competence) program, led by Kurt Pfeifer, MD, as part of the **Curriculum Pillar** led by Marty Muntz, MD, and Kaicey vonStockhausen. This program creates and supports small group academic coaching for students and faculty. 4C focuses on building future physicians with the lifelong learning skills, adaptability and support to succeed in their work and to create an environment in which others can succeed. Students who participate in the program report greater well-being and ability to cope with the demands of medical school.

From the **Faculty Pillar**, Alexandra Harrington, MD, and Vivian Dondlinger presented that the KINETIC³ faculty coaching program has graduated nearly seventy participants, with 45 more enrolled in the third cohort. This program enhances the teaching skills of all faculty—especially faculty with clinical and basic science expertise who may never have received training on effective instruction techniques—so they can transform our classrooms into spaces where innovative curriculum delivered passionately becomes the norm, not the exception.

Moving outside of the classroom and clinical walls, José Franco, MD, and Joan Weiss presented for the **Community & Institutional Engagement Pillar** on some of their most meaningful and impactful work in the last twelve months. This included the MaskUpMKE initiative, a partnership to create and distribute non-medical face coverings. The program delivered over two million masks to local residents, targeting those most vulnerable to serious consequences from COVID-19. It also provided an opportunity for medical students—dedicated to caring for others yet sidelined during the pandemic—to assist with this community health initiative.

Growth and Development Through Expertise and Partnership

Our pillars provided an initial organizational structure that shepherded our ideas for transformation into flourishing programs. Some of our new structures weave together the pillars into a tapestry of excellence, and their vision for transformation provides the Kern Institute with its path for growth. Tavinder K. Ark, PhD, discussed the **Data Science Lab**, which aims to identify, integrate, collaborate, and develop frictionless systems that allow data from all learners to describe the impact of transformative medical education on learners, instructors, systems, and ultimately patients themselves. Fabrice Jotterand, PhD, who leads the **Philosophy of Medical Education Transformation Lab**, provided a virtue-based, conceptually rigorous, and practically useful approach to transformative medical pedagogy. Karen Marcdante, MD, and Julia Schmitt presented on the **Human-Centered Design Lab**, its Transformational Ideas Initiative (TI²) program, and their focus on integrating human-centered design in project development and problem solving.

Each of these labs impacts the work of our pillars. In addition, the labs can provide support for initiatives that transcend the Kern Institute and involve all the Kern National Network partner schools. We have no monopoly on data systems, thought leadership, or innovative design of new programs, and much of our discussion centered around how to partner with other KNN medical schools and others around the country to share expertise and help all transformative medical education efforts to flourish.

Transforming Our Curriculum to Meet Our Learners' and Communities' Needs

Our site visit came to a close with conversations about curriculum changes at MCW's two regional campuses, **MCW–Green Bay** and **MCW–Central Wisconsin**. In their creation, these campuses scaled MCW's traditional four-year curriculum into three years and provided opportunities for community medical practice experience earlier in the process. In sessions with the regional campuses' curriculum team (Jeff Fritz, PhD, Craig Hanke, Amy Prunuske, PhD, and Jacob Prunuske, MD) and MCW–Central Wisconsin Dean Lisa Dodson, MD, all described the collaborative role the Kern Institute plays in shaping the curriculum and increasing faculty teaching capacity through our KINETIC³ and TI² programs.

How will We Transform MCW's Curriculum?

Still, the question remains: What is the Kern Institute's role in curriculum change at the Medical College of Wisconsin? Our mandate is clear; our role, less so. And as noted above, the transformation of medical education does not start and end in the classrooms. The curriculum that guides the experience of those learners is not sufficient to transform medical education. Its necessity, however, is undisputed. We remain full partners in the School of Medicine's curricular reimagining process that is underway. This includes the participation of our post-doctoral fellow, Jeff Amundson, PhD, who is staffing the process. The site visitors noted that it was obvious that the Kern Institute provides a safe space for risky ventures, shepherds promising practices, and amplifies voices that are too often ignored. In these ways, the Kern Institute serves as the catalyst for curriculum growth, development, and change.

We look forward to continued work with our partners at the Kern National Network as the two entities—the KI and the KNN—with common ancestry grow into distinct, yet closely related entities. This opportunity for reflection on work to date with experts has been stimulating, and we feel the exigency of this moment in medical education. The need for transformation knocks and nags and keeps us energized.

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