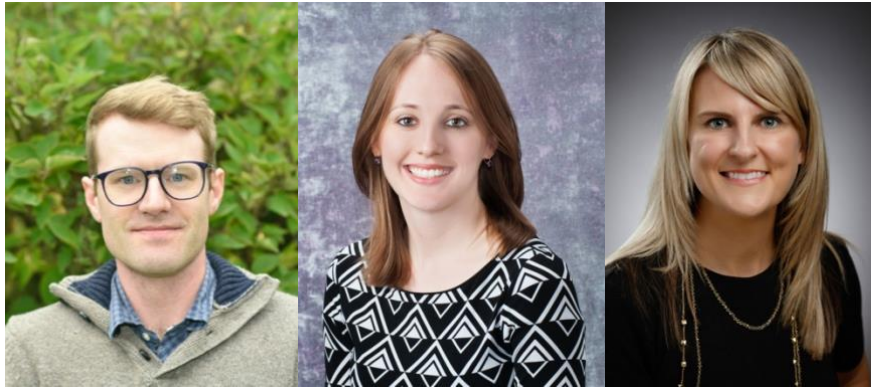


Perspective/Opinion



Caring and Character Are the Foundation of Transformative Medical Leaders: A Reflection from January's KICS Medical Education Journal Club

By Michael T. Braun, PhD; Amy Farkas, MD and Kristina Kaljo, PhD

The January meeting of the Kern Institute Collaboration for Scholarship (KICS) Medical Education Journal Club was held on Wednesday, January 12. Dr. Sarah Merriam, clinical assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, discussed her article ["Establishing Competencies for Leadership Development for Postgraduate Internal Medicine Residents."](#)

Reflecting on the article and journal club discussion, we consider the core leadership skills identified as most important for residents and the trajectory of leadership development in healthcare through the lens of caring and character education.

Though we don't always talk about it in these terms, medical students and residents are training to be leaders—people with the responsibility to manage the care of others using their own expertise and guide the actions of others toward a shared goal. Yet, as Merriam et al. note, the average learner does not receive "training in skills necessary to be an effective leader" (p. 682).

A simple answer to this issue would be to implement "leadership" training program as part of the medical trainee's core curriculum. Unfortunately, available curricula for this type of training have several issues. For example, "published curricula are heterogenous in terms of content and delivery" (p. 682), leaving administrators with a difficult choice of what curricular package to select. In addition, many available leadership programs "place a disproportionate level of focus on technical/conceptual knowledge and individual skill development, as opposed to other

domains of effective leadership such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and organizational understanding" (p. 683).

As such, we are left with an overarching question that demands to be answered before we can add effective leadership training: What are the leadership skills that residents truly need? Dr. Merriam and co-authors set out to answer this question by convening a Delphi-method panel of medical education experts.

The experts highlighted necessary leadership skills that would likely make up anyone's list: communication (ability to communicate with individuals of all backgrounds; provides effective feedback to others), character (promotes equity and diversity; understands personal values and principles), and growth mindset (treats mistakes as learning opportunities; seeks and acts upon feedback from others). Additionally, these skills are not unique to leadership preparation or leadership roles; they are valuable for anyone in any role.

Other expert conclusions were surprising, specifically the leadership skills judged unimportant for residents. These skills include administrative abilities (able to run an effective meeting; project management skills) and transformative leadership skills (understanding work culture; understanding the economics of medicine; negotiation skills). These are skills that are vital for our traditional view of leaders, so why aren't they on the list of leadership skills needed for residents?

We considered this question as part of our journal club discussion, and Dr. Merriam noted that leadership is not a finished state that we want residents to reach, but rather part of a career-long journey. For a transformative medical school like Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), those perceived "unimportant" skills are vital for hospital leaders. But they cannot be built by watching a TED Talk or sitting through a lecture. Instead, they must be fostered over time, through experience and mentoring.

But what then is the connection between the skills identified as important for learners and the skills they will need to develop to serve as transformational leaders? Dr. Merriam contended that the initial skills lay the groundwork for greater growth. For example, how can a resident expect to be an effective negotiator if they do not first learn how to effectively communicate with people of all backgrounds? How can a resident learn key elements of diverse leadership styles if there is not an opportunity to learn from missteps? We must help our residents build a foundation for leadership growth and development.

We content that character and caring ultimately establish the groundwork for leadership enrichment. MCW's work to build transformative leaders begins with respect for all humans, a desire to connect with and care for others, foundational humanistic values that reflect understanding of life beyond a laboratory, and a commitment to lifelong learning and growth. Though the healthcare leaders participating in Dr. Merriam's study were not specifically assessing caring and character, their conclusion support our work and highlight the importance

of foundational values that support residents as they begin their careers and aspire to take the helm as transformative leaders in healthcare.

We leave you with these questions to consider: How do you hope our new medical education curriculum will enhance leadership attributes in our learners? How can medical education and leadership education, grounded in character and caring, foster the next generation of transformative leaders?

We hope you will join us for our next journal club on Wednesday, February 9, 12:15–1:00 PM Central.

Next month's speaker is:

[Dan Schumacher](#), MD, PhD, MEd, Director, Education Research Unit
Associate Professor, UC Department of Pediatrics, from Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

Dr. Schumacher will discuss his article, "[Distant and Hidden Figures: Foregrounding Patients in the Development, Content, and Implementation of Entrustable Professional Activities](#)," published in the journal *Academic Medicine* in 2021.

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