



## *Director's Corner*

# What a Week for Democracy! A Great Time for Kern to Build Community Through a New Funding Opportunity

by Adina Kalet, MD, MPH

What a week it has been! As expected, the presidential election results took four long days to reach a conclusion. Although frustrating, there was a beauty to watching our electoral system work at human speed, votes counted one at a time all over the country. When our new President-Elect and Vice President-Elect were finally able to make victory speeches on Saturday evening, the reality and symbolism of seeing a woman of color give the acceptance speech moved me to tears.

Nearly half our fellow Americans are disappointed with the election's outcome. It has never been more important for us to navigate forward gently but courageously, with respect and compassion.

There is no doubt that we face a dramatic next two months. We can anticipate being schooled in the technical intricacies of our government. We will learn what guidance our constitution does and does not provide. In my house, we will read and listen to podcasts, watch news, documentaries and movies, and endlessly discuss the historical precedents for this moment. This will go on, all while we face what could be the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic here in Wisconsin. I do not have any answers, but I do want to consider the questions, together in community.

## **Kern will Fund "Collaboratories" that will Transform Medical Education**

Into this context, on November 1, 2020, the Kern Institute launched our Medical Education Transformation Collaboratories Request for Proposals ([RFP](#)). The

explicit purpose of the RFP is to incentivize groups of medical educators and scholars to seek each other out across disciplines, institutions, and other boundaries, to propose policy papers and projects that can contribute to transforming medical education. Letters of Intent are due before our winter holiday season. We have suggested some areas of interest:

- Best Practices in Medical Education
- Data Science in Education
- Linking Medical Education and Patient Health
- New Models for Structuring and Funding Medical Education

We will give funding priority to members of the Kern National Network, groups that include patients as partners, and projects that have an explicit focus on evidence-based integration of character and caring in medical education. That said, we are open to all ideas.

Proposals will describe in equal measure, a meaty problem or gap, an audacious idea, and a plan for assembling a small diverse group of partners in the work. We will require a clear and compelling description of the “problem to solve” as well as strong and convincing evidence that the group will work together effectively. This includes showing how the team will organize, communicate, plan, define roles and criteria for accountability and share credit generously. These are some of the key features of strong “Collaboratories.”

### **What is a Collaboratory?**

I have been animated by the idea of Collaboratories since being introduced to the concept by a computer science colleague with whom I worked in the early 2000s. First described in the 1980s as a “laboratory without walls,” it was an idea which grew as technology-enabled scientists living at great distances to work closely together, sharing techniques and equipment in real time. As we all have learned too well recently, nearly ubiquitous technology makes it possible to be “socially networked,” yet the technology is necessary but not sufficient for success. Collaboratories are powerful when there is careful attention and lots of trial and error to establish “norms, principles, values, and rules” that enable both the things we have always done (teach, learn, meet, create) and to work

together to generate solutions to complex new challenges. The future of medical education is a complex challenge and I believe Collaboratories is a good way forward.

Hopefully, we will have at least a handful, if not a pile, of good proposals to review come January 2021. The money we have saved in Kern this past spring, when travel and sponsored events were cancelled one after another due to COVID-19, will now be put toward funding the Collaboratories. Those who receive funding will be expected to meet together regularly to discuss their work and, in this way, “cross-pollinate” other groups creating a densely intertwined medical education transformation community of practice. Even if we can only fund some of the proposals we receive, the process of writing a letter of intent is, in my experience, never wasted. Good ideas, once articulated, are like genies released from their bottles. Magical things happen.

### **The Collision of the COVID-19 Spike, Fatigue, and Opportunity**

The unseasonably balmy weather this past week has enabled many of us to manage the tension of the election by being active out-of-doors. In Wisconsin, especially, we could remain in denial, pushing off the inevitable few more months of sheltering at home as daily COVID-19 cases hit all-time highs. The situation with the pandemic is different from what it was in the spring. As our hospital census of COVID-19 patients ratchets up to unprecedented levels, we reap the benefit from what we have learned. We now know how to provide routine medical care safely. Scheduled procedures continue, telehealth has found its groove, our students and faculty are in a virtual routine.

The downsides are also obvious. We are fatigued from mask wearing and yearn to be together physically without constant consciousness of the “social” distance. We will be working from home, forming “pods” with our close friends, and grieving family Thanksgiving dinners, winter vacation travel, and some outdoor sports. School-aged children’s schedules will change weekly, our college-aged children will be taking final exams remotely surrounded by family and not friends. We are exhausted from talking about testing, quarantining, and vaccine distribution plans, and from all the pivoting. An effective vaccine is

likely to be implemented in a couple of months. For those of us who have lost loved ones, there is little comfort in this unprecedented scientific wonder.

Now is the time to focus on building hardy communities. Now is the time to collaborate, cooperate and communicate as if our lives, work and future depends on it. At Kern, even as we live through upheaval, we look forward to being a catalyst for transforming medical education.

*Adina Kalet, MD MPH is the Director of the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education and holder of the Stephen and Shelagh Roell Endowed Chair at the Medical College of Wisconsin*