

Perspective/Opinion



KERN NATIONAL NETWORK
FOR CARING & CHARACTER IN MEDICINE

Connect, Convene, Catalyze Toward Flourishing: Reflecting on the Inaugural Kern National Network Conference

By Kimara Ellefson, MBA, Sarah Williams and Joëlle Worm, MPA (Photos: Jay Westhauser)

In late September, hundreds of healthcare educators, leaders and learners gathered in Milwaukee to share and celebrate transformational work that is creating a brighter future for the profession of medicine. Explore themes from the first Kern National Network conference and discover ways to get involved in the movement toward flourishing in medicine...

Informed and inspired. Energized. Hopeful. A notebook full of ideas to follow up on.

Those were just a few of the reactions that participants shared throughout the inaugural [Kern National Network for Caring & Character in Medicine](#) (KNN) conference held in Milwaukee on September 29 and 30, 2022. The work of the KNN, including the conference, is made possible through the support of the Kern Family Foundation, and we extend our sincere gratitude for this extraordinary partnership and investment.

The conference, “**Connect, Convene, Catalyze Toward Flourishing**,” created a unique opportunity to recognize and learn from transformational work nationally that is shifting the culture of medicine to elevate flourishing, meaning and purpose.

Beyond setting the tone for the conference, that theme also offers a useful framework for exploring the event’s significance and contributions to the growing movement toward flourishing in medicine.

Connect: Tapping into transformative energy and community

For many, the conference was a long-awaited opportunity to reconnect in person with peers who had been working to integrate caring, character and human flourishing in medicine since the network initially took shape in 2017. Throughout the pandemic, the KNN's seven founding member schools remained committed to using creativity and technology to stay connected—and successfully enacted many collaborative initiatives within and across schools. (For examples, see the digital [viewbook](#) of panels from the conference gallery wall.)



However, the joy of reuniting in person with colleagues and friends, old and new, was palpable. As one participant commented, the energy felt real enough to tap into “like an electric current.”

Throughout the conference, the KNN's founding members were joined by individuals from 28 additional medical schools and health-related organizations (e.g., health systems and non-profits), demonstrating a critical mass of interest in promoting flourishing in medicine and a positive outlook for ongoing growth and expansion of the KNN. Nearly 250 thinkers and change agents from 19 states and the District of Columbia discussed how the [KNN's integrated framework](#) concepts—caring, character, practical wisdom and human flourishing—could be practically applied to medicine.

In addition to thinking about and discussing those topics, participants had the opportunity to practice their own flourishing and connect (or reconnect) with their purpose. Plenaries and workshops allowed for intellectual engagement and deep reflection, while additional activities included yoga and basic self-defense, as well as a self-guided walking meditation through Sculpture Milwaukee. A storytelling booth led by Milwaukee's own Ex Fabula storytellers allowed individuals to share their experiences of flourishing both personally and professionally.

Convene: Coming together on meaningful topics

More than 80 abstracts were submitted for the KNN conference during a call last spring, populating a varied agenda that featured plenaries and focused presentations, as well as deep-dive workshops, roundtable discussions and a poster session. Overarching themes included:

- Creating psychological safety and supportive cultures/learning environments
- Learner engagement, wellness and leadership
- Professional identity formation
- Mentoring and coaching
- Kindness, compassion and mattering

- Storytelling and medical humanities
- Inclusive excellence and health equity

Presenters also categorized their work by one or more concepts within the integrated framework, and plenary sessions were organized around those components as well.

In the opening plenary on flourishing, Matthew T. Lee, PhD, of Baylor University and the Harvard Human Flourishing Program set the stage for conference participants to reflect on “who loved them into being.” Beyond touching on individual flourishing, his remarks also highlighted the importance of systems transformation, referencing the quote “Every system is perfectly designed to get the results that it gets.”



A lunch and learn panel—featuring Calvin Chou, MD, PhD; Krista Gregory, MDiv, BCC; James Woodruff, MD; and moderator Chris Stawski, PhD—shared their experiences of integrating practices of caring and character. Self-awareness emerged as a core theme, with Rev. Gregory introducing the Plimsoll Line—a shipping mark that shows maximum load capacity—as a metaphor for evaluating our own level of “overload” and how it may be affecting our interactions with others.

Margaret (Peggy) L. Plews-Ogan, MD, delivered a moving closing plenary titled *Wisdom in Action: Medicine as Music*, which highlighted parallels between musical composition and the cadence of practical wisdom that one doctor exhibited. The case study, drawn from Plews-Ogan’s own life, made apparent the nuanced art of a doctor’s role beyond diagnosis and treatment alone.

The conference also amplified student voices: Nearly 20 presentations were submitted by students or student groups on topics that ranged from peer mentoring to failure and remediation, to reconceptualizing empathy and more.

Ultimately, participants left with new contacts and a renewed sense of how to continue the important work to advance flourishing within their own institutions.

Catalyze: *Growing the movement toward flourishing in medicine*

Along with celebrating achievements, the conference also heralded the KNN’s next phase of work beginning early 2023. This growth phase will offer more ways to engage and expanded membership for individuals, organizations and initiative partners across the health ecosystem.

For example, Cheryl A. Maurana, PhD, announced the launch of the KNN’s *Bridging Across Differences Toward Flourishing* Initiative, with a focus on a mindset of open inquiry.

Additionally, one way to engage now is to [join the KNN's new online community](#)—a space where colleagues across the country can share new ideas, explore different ways of thinking and approach issues with a spirit of curiosity.

The online community is also where you can access conference materials and artifacts like presentation slides, posters and videos. We invite you to continue the conversation and join us in the movement toward flourishing in medicine.

Exhilarated. Humbled. Grateful. Those are just a few of the feelings the KNN team had at the end of our first national conference.

We hope to see you at future KNN events!



The Kern National Network for Caring & Character in Medicine (KNN) is a movement focused on integrating four foundational elements—caring, character, practical wisdom and human flourishing—within the profession of medicine to ignite positive culture change. We advance this work by connecting and convening stakeholders across the healthcare ecosystem, catalyzing transformative initiatives and influencing policy and systems change.

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Joëlle Worm, MPA, is a program director with the KNN who provides leadership for conference planning and the KNN student network, among other activities. She contributes more than 18 years of experience in program management and direction in nonprofits and university settings in the fields of the arts, education, community building and healthcare.