Empowering Women in Academic Health Centers: Past, Present, and Future

By: Marjorie Jenkins, M.D., Professor, Associate Dean for Women in Health and Science; Director and Chief Scientific Officer, Laura W. Bush Institute for Women’s Health; Mrs. J. Avery “Janie” Rush Endowed Chair of Excellence in Women’s Health and Oncology, and Darshana Shah, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Faculty Affairs & Professional Development, Professor & Chief, Pathology Academic Section, Department of Pathology, Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, Byrd Clinical Center

Women leaders are at the cusp of a paradigm change in their growth and position in the world. We need to think big and scale up rapidly in each and every area of our academic health centers. As our growth continues, we should not forget that history is a witness to female leaders who have demonstrated unique leadership capabilities in the past. We can learn a great deal from their journeys to success.

In this issue, we interview two of those leaders, this year’s awardee, Stephanie Abbuhl, M.D., professor & vice chair of Faculty Affairs, Department of Emergency Medicine; executive director of FOCUS on Health & Leadership for Women, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania; 1995 recipient of the GWIMS Leadership Development Award; and Merle Waxman, associate dean, director, Office for Women in Medicine, Ombudsperson, Yale School of Medicine.

Both women have made a great impact through their career journeys, bringing success not only to themselves, but to countless others. We had the great fortune to converse with these two professionals about their careers and perspectives as women leaders in academic medicine. We hope our readers will receive some valuable pearls of knowledge from the journeys of these two inspiring women.

GWIMS: What do you consider to be the main ingredients of a successful career?

SA: Finding satisfaction and reward from what you do. Find something that inspires you. If you do so, it will be rewarding and rejuvenating. You may take some time to find it, but it will be worthwhile to achieving your success. Another ingredient is finding harmony in your professional and personal life.

MW: Passion, skill, and determination.

GWIMS: What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

Stephanie Abbuhl: To understand they can’t lead alone; the complex world of academic medicine has too many moving targets, so don’t be a solo leader. Solo leadership is not desirable or effective.

Merle Waxman: The ability to see anything from every perspective.

GWIMS: Stephanie, in your 18+ years at Penn and your role as executive director of FOCUS on Health and Leadership for Women, have you found any recurring themes in women faculty careers that tend to derail their success?

SA: Working too long in an environment which is not working for them leads to burnout. Women need to make a change if they are in an environment which is not good for them. Ask for change or change the environment. Women can lack confidence in all they have achieved and may feel there is no better opportunity for them elsewhere.

GWIMS: And Merle, in your 25+ years at Yale, what themes have you observed?

MW: There are inequities; some are major, and some are micro. Differences I have observed are the things that discourage women, which may not impact men as much, such as little slights. These can derail someone if they focus on them and expand them from a minor to a major issue. Women must not let these things interfere with their progress, or they must learn a new approach that counters their automatic response. Embrace and believe that you can’t please everyone all the time. Also, women don’t ask as much about things like finances/salaries, and often times this can lead to dissatisfaction when salary inequity comes to light. We have made progress, but we are still up against a brick wall.

GWIMS: How do you engage institutional leadership to better serve women faculty?

SA:
- Show the data and logic which indicate the value of female talent in institutions.
- Recruitment /retention data, talent, and money
- Identifying the problem and offering the ideas/solution is one approach to engage the institution.

MW:
- Leadership and strong messages help women faculty and junior faculty. For example, always have the dean come to a new faculty orientation.
- Enthusiasm in communication. Sitting down and introducing yourself to leadership early in the discussion.
- Providing hard metrics of success and
achieving them. We had a goal to
double the number of tenured women, and that was a measurable outcome.
We had some money to bring in senior
tenured women because the pipeline
to grow from junior to tenure is a long
journey, and senior tenured women
are great role models and mentors for
junior faculty.

GWIMS: What do you think is the biggest
challenge facing women leaders today as
compared to when you began your career?

SA: In the early 80s there was
unconscious bias and few role models—
we have made significant changes since
then. However, there are fields where
women are still in the minority, in surgery
for example, an unconscious bias still
exists. Often, identifying what is required
to balance professional and personal goals
is a real challenge.

MW: In our current climate, economic
challenges to bring in funds are
increasingly felt by women clinical faculty
since the bar has moved higher.

GWIMS: What advice do you have for
women who are early in their professional
development that you wish you knew
when you were starting out in your career?

SA: Your career is a wonderful, long
marathon—do what you have to do
to reach the milestone, but you don’t
have to do it all at once. You will get
a chance to accomplish all of it in your
time. It is important that you do what you
care about the most, not to just please
somebody. Whether it is patient care,
research, or education, find out what
you enjoy the most. If you are not doing
what you desire, ask or make a change
accordingly.

MW: Develop a unique skill and make
sure it is in line with the departmental
and institutional direction. Some women
don’t understand why they are continually
undervalued when they are passionate,
innovative, and work hard. The problem is
their priority is not often the departmental
or institutional priority so they get
exceedingly frustrated. It is great if you
can develop something on your own and
sell it, but if it is academic success you
are striving for, make sure it is in line with
your institution.

GWIMS: We know there are many, but
if you could name one, what is your
proudest career achievement to date?

SA: I would have to say taking the WIMS
and women career issue and legitimizing
it. Some of that entailed addressing the
“elephant” in the room. I have been
proud to embrace these issues, tackle
them head on, and take a team approach
to deal with them.

MW: Working with national leaders and
expanding the Ombud’s Model to other
medical schools. Also, the early mentoring
of women which, when I started, entailed
individual letters and phone calls and now
we have email and other far more time
efficient methods to connect with women
faculty.

GWIMS: What is one characteristic that
you believe every leader should possess?

SA: To understand they can’t lead alone;
the complex world of academic medicine
has too many moving targets, so don’t
be a solo leader. Solo leadership is not
desirable or effective.

MW: The ability to see anything
from every perspective.

We want to thank these two amazing
women leaders for sharing their time,
energy, and expertise with our GWIMS
Watch readers. Congratulations to Dr.
Stephanie Abbuhl, the recipient of the
2012 AAMC Women in Medicine and
Science Leadership Development Award.
She is in the esteemed company of
women who are changing the landscape
of academic medicine.