Sustaining the Careers of Women in Health Science Research – Keeping Researcher-Moms at the Table

Michelle M. Lamere, Sara Rohde, Jayne A. Fulkerson, David H. Ingbar
Clinical and Translational Science Institute, Minneapolis, MN

INTRODUCTION

Female faculty in CTSI Scholar programs often struggle with combining research and parenting young children.

Response: Piloted “Mothers Leading Science” (MLS) Fall 2018 – Fall 2020.

Program included 1:1 and group coaching, building a network for peer support, and empirically based curricula to teach and enhance resiliency skills.

Goals: eliminate barriers and foster personal, professional growth of participants, and integrate dual roles of scientist and mother.

MLS Cohort 2 will launch December 2020 in collaboration of CTSI; Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women’s Health (BIRCWH) K12 program and the UMN Center for Women in Medicine and Science (CWMS).

METHODS

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

RESULTS

As a pilot program, small sample size prohibited statistical analysis of significant change over time but observed changes in a positive direction show promise for the potential for the MLS program to impact skill building for a personal sense of success in the workplace.

Barriers:
Researcher-moms face significant barriers to become active and productive researchers and institutional leaders. Examples include:

1. Greater demands and expectations for caregiving even with a supportive partner.
2. Challenges in scheduling professional activities early & late in the day.
3. Assumptions about interest and availability for leadership opportunities.
4. Difficulty voicing internal conflict or seeking support without feeling stigmatized.

Benefits of MLS Program:
Each participant reported renewed drive to move forward in research due to a combination of personal development activities, opportunities to re-evaluate success, and normalization of their experiences as mothers.

1. Skills - Gained strategies for making the most of a complex situation.
2. Attitudes - Change from a personal deficits framework to normalizing challenges of “being a mom in academia”.
3. Enhanced network - Diverse membership, (department, fields, race) benefitted group dynamic with variety of perspectives and approaches and access to peers not normally encountered.
4. Advocating for institutional change - Shift from internalizing blame to thinking about systems change for the larger benefit of future researchers who are parents, particularly mothers.

DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

Data suggest MLS provided skills, attitudes, and a support structure that helped participants find “renewed passion” for research, better navigate work-life integration, reduce chances of burnout, utilize their network, and advocate for change.

Researcher-moms face systemic barriers for career advancement in research and leadership.

COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated existing challenges; productivity for women with children has been seriously curtailed.

Without institutional bridges, like Mothers Leading Science, we may “lose an entire cohort of scholars.”

Innovations planned for Cohort 2: year-long program (Béné Brown’s Dare to Lead™ curriculum), annual reunions/retreats with prior cohorts; robust evaluation of impact; and expanding the program size and reach.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health Award Number UL1TR001141, and the Career Development Award KL2TR002492 The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.