



Joseph E. Kerschner, MD

Making Human and Social Differences Our Source of Strength

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According to author Simon Sinek in *The Infinite Game*, leaders who embrace an infinite mindset – where there are no winners or losers, but only “ahead” and “behind” – build stronger, more innovative, and more inspiring organizations. Many industries, including health care and academic institutions, are embracing this “infinite game.” Their people trust each other and their leaders, and have the resilience to thrive in an ever-changing world while their competitors fall by the wayside.¹

Sinek lays down five essential practices necessary for leaders to have an infinite mindset, including advancing a “Just Cause.” As he notes, “a Just Cause is linked to our WHY, our noble purpose for being. Our WHY comes from our past – it is our origin story and it is who we are. Our Just Cause is our WHY projected into the future. It describes a future state in which our WHY has been realized. It is a forward-looking statement that is so inspiring and compelling that people are willing to sacrifice to see that vision advanced.”²

The “Just Cause” of the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) is to improve health for

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As leaders, we have committed ourselves to gender equity, to be an anti-racist institution, and to build inclusion across multiple dimensions of difference. We are acting to advance economic equity, which is a critical driver of the social determinants of health, by further establishing ourselves as an anchor institution through the ThriveOn Collaboration³ (a joint vision for a Milwaukee that is equitable, healthy, and thriving for all), implementing a supplier diversity strategy and taking a critical look at our recruiting and hiring practices to ensure that we are hiring talented Black, Indigenous, and people of color across all of our campuses. Further, we are committed to advancing policy changes that bring healthier communities and create improvements based on the political determinants of health.

To achieve our vision, we are making our human and social differences a source of strength. Social identities are the result of constructs shaped by social norms. There are many dimensions of difference, but diversity scholars suggest key dimensions of human and social

difference,⁴ called the “Big 8,” present persisting challenges and opportunities to organizations. The dimensions found among MCW’s people and stakeholders include race/ethnicity, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic origin/nationality, mental/physical (dis)ability status, religion, age, and role and functional/military background.

Finding strength from the interaction of these critical differences provides the best opportunities to build a high-performing organization and contribute to a thriving society. Making our human differences a strength requires inclusion. Inclusion requires intentional, strategic action across multiple domains that MCW terms “Inclusive Excellence.” Inclusive excellence provides the strategic framework for identifying and achieving the

goals to ensure that MCW is a thriving institution in a thriving community across Wisconsin for decades to come.

For MCW, inclusive excellence begins within. At its foundation, people learn to engage constructively around differences and grow in their ability to adapt to change and embrace diversity in a complex environment. It advances when people can perform and be recognized as inclusive leaders at all levels. Inclusive excellence gives us the ability to attract, build, and retain a 21st-century knowledge force that reflects diverse identities, backgrounds, and abilities and recognizes people's potential. MCW's rooted position in our community allows us to invest in and partner with our community and other organizations as an anchor institution to catalyze access to the outstanding talent and strong community partnerships that cultivate a healthy and thriving community.

One such pillar in our vision for equity, diversity, and inclusion is MCW's Center for the Advancement of Women in Science and Medicine⁵ (AWSM), built on the collective work of women and men to promote gender equity. The work of AWSM, and its linked Council for Women's Advocacy, has resulted in salary equity as a core institutional compliance competency and annual report; development of an institutional policy on full professional effort; backup care benefits; grants to examine

gender in promotion and retention, tracking, support, and recognition of the development of women as full professors at MCW; and the creation of an Associate Dean for Women's Leadership in 2013.

Our vision is that MCW will be a destination for women leaders, cultivating an inclusive and vibrant culture that supports all genders to grow and thrive in the health sciences. Our mission is to advance the careers of women at MCW through data-informed strategic projects that enhance opportunity and improve workplace climate.

An additional highlight of the work through AWSM has been the IWill 1.0 and 2.0 Campaigns, which have created shared language, provided education and understanding and positive action through pledges of more than 1,400 staff, students, and faculty. Along with equity enhancements, MCW has made great strides in increasing the diversity of our incoming medical student class as we seek to train a 21st-century knowledge force that reflects diverse identities, backgrounds, and abilities and recognizes people's potential. For fall 2021, we matriculated 265 medical students at our three campuses (Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Central Wisconsin), 25% of whom (66 individuals) are from underrepresented in medicine (URiM) backgrounds, including Black/African American, Mexican, Native American, Hmong,

Puerto Rican, and mixed race. This percentage is the result of intentional efforts through pipeline programs and a holistic admission process with diversity training for all involved in these efforts. Importantly, these numbers compare closely to the demographics for the communities that we serve. And given that MCW trains 50% of the physicians who currently practice medicine in Wisconsin, this bodes well for enhanced diversity of the Wisconsin workforce in years to come.

Our differences make us better, stronger, and more innovative in a complex world of disruptive change. We believe that MCW can raise the bar and close the gaps in health across our community by striving for inclusive excellence at MCW and within our communities.

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