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Financial disclosures: None declared.

Funding/support: None declared.

Sponsorship: A Vital Leadership Strategy for Career Advancement in Academic Medicine

To the Editor:

Faculty development plays a vital role in satisfaction, retention, and career growth in academic medicine. It is commonly built around 4 pillars: mentorship, scholarship, sponsorship, and collaboration. While mentorship is well established in academic culture, sponsorship remains a less visible and underused strategy for faculty development.

Although mentorship and sponsorship are closely related, they serve distinct roles. Mentors provide guidance, advice, and support based on experience to help faculty navigate challenges and develop skills. Sponsorship, by contrast, is an intentional leadership practice that advances careers through the use of influence, credibility, and positional authority. Sponsors recommend individuals for leadership roles, nominate them for awards and committees, secure invited speaking opportunities, and expand access to professional networks.¹ Through these actions, sponsors open doors that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Core elements of sponsorship include recognizing talent, providing sustained support, increasing visibility, and advocating for opportunities that enable growth.¹⁻³

This distinction is important because career advancement in academic medicine depends not only on productivity and merit but also on access

to opportunity, visibility, and recognition. Access to leadership roles and professional networks is often uneven, and sponsorship can play a critical role in bridging these gaps. For faculty from underrepresented groups, sponsorship may be particularly impactful, helping to counter structural and implicit biases and ensuring that excellence is recognized rather than overlooked.^{1,4-6}

Effective sponsorship can also be understood through the “ABCDs” framework: Amplifying achievements, Boosting credibility, Connecting to influential networks, and Defending against bias—actions that actively advance a mentee’s career.⁷

At the individual level, sponsorship can accelerate promotion, facilitate leadership appointments, and expand recognition beyond one’s home institution. At the organizational level, it contributes to stronger and more diverse leadership pipelines. Importantly, effective sponsorship does not require extraordinary resources. Rather, it depends on an intentional and proactive approach to recognizing both current strengths and future potential and acting on that recognition.

One of the most tangible expressions of sponsorship is the nomination of faculty for awards, committees, editorial boards, and leadership positions. These acts confer credibility and visibility that often compound over time. Sponsorship is not a single event but a longitudinal commitment that includes feedback, advocacy, and follow-through as careers evolve.^{1,5}

Faculty awards represent a particularly powerful and often underrecognized form of sponsorship. Although awards are frequently viewed as symbolic, they function as strategic career accelerators. Awards support promotion, increase professional visibility, and create opportunities for leadership and collaboration. They also shape institutional narratives of excellence by signaling which contributions are valued.^{1,3} In this way, recognition becomes more than acknowledgment; it becomes a mechanism through which equity can be advanced. Collective recognition benefits not only individuals but also teams and institutions.^{4,6}

Sponsorship ultimately extends beyond individual career development and reflects a broader leadership responsibility. Leaders who engage in sponsorship actively shape the future of academic medicine by determining who is seen, supported, and advanced. By embracing sponsorship and using recognition thoughtfully, academic leaders can cultivate the next generation of leaders while building a more inclusive and supportive professional community.^{1,4-6}

—Pinky Jha, MD; Sanjay Bhandari, MD

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Financial disclosures: None declared.

Funding/support: None declared.

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WMJ

WMJ (ISSN 2379-3961) is published through a collaboration between The Medical College of Wisconsin and The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. The mission of *WMJ* is to provide an opportunity to publish original research, case reports, review articles, and essays about current medical and public health issues.

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