An Indispensable Academic Home

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(Fam Med 2013;45(5):359-60.)

We seem to hear a lot about homes these days, both literally and figuratively. Almost every day, there are news stories about people who have lost their homes due to natural or financial disasters. Their faces stare at us from the television or the newspaper. We listen to their stories, and we are moved by their plight. Becoming homeless exposes a primal human fear because home is an emotional state as much as it is a place. We long for home even when we are not sure why. Perhaps we seek refuge from a world that inundates us with information about products we do not want to buy and with threats, real or perceived, that seem designed to shock and frighten us. Our longing to feel safe and to know we belong is so strong that “home” has become a metaphor for safety and security. In part, this is why we chose the term “medical home” for our new model of practice, seeking to provide our patients and staff with a sense of security in an insecure world. On a professional level, we hope our departments and residencies can be academic homes where we can relate to our students and colleagues as a professional family. We have established criteria by which to judge medical homes, but what are the characteristics of an academic home? Certainly our academic home should not replace the homes we share with our families—most of us do not want to live in our jobs! But an academic home should have the characteristics of a home. It should be secure and welcoming. It needs to make us feel safe and to be a place where we feel both appreciated and challenged. Faculty work requires creativity, and we cannot be creative without security.

As your new president, I have been giving a lot of thought about the notion of an academic home because STFM’s vision statement is to “become the indispensable academic home for every family medicine educator.” While our mission is a statement of the organization’s purpose, our vision is supposed to define our highest aspiration. What does it mean for our organization to be a home? Maybe we want STFM to be a place where we connect with our extended professional family. For many of us, it has been exactly that. But the vision states that we aspire to be an indispensable (not optional) academic home for every family medicine educator—not just some of us. In fact, our organization is just not there yet. Although some of us have been coming to meetings and building relationships with friends from around the world for years, others are isolated in their work and find little time to think beyond the day-to-day struggle of seeing patients and teaching students. For some, reading journals, writing papers, creating new curricula, and improving our discipline are simply beyond reach. While we might teach our students, we too often fail to inspire them. I say this not to assign blame but simply to acknowledge how things are.

STFM now has over 4,500 members, not to mention the many faculty members and preceptors who have not yet joined us. We work in over 120 departments and 450 residencies around the nation, and we have colleagues in almost every nation in the world. Perhaps it is simply too hard to imagine how we might connect with everyone in such a large and diverse constituency. Can we really expect to be an indispensable home for all of them? Although our vision is intended to be aspirational, I do not think it is impossible. I know too many people whose professional lives have been enriched.
by the social and intellectual interactions that occur at our meetings and in the pages of our publications. My own career is just one example. When things have gone well, STFM is where I share the good news. When things are tough, STFM reminds me that I am not alone. But it is not enough that STFM is a home for some of us just as it is not enough that some people have access to good health care while others are left out. The dream only works if there is room for everyone.

To become the indispensable academic home for every family medicine educator, STFM has to connect with every faculty member in every program, large and small, urban and rural. Our indispensable academic home must include at least the following characteristics:

1. It must be accessible and feel safe, welcoming, and nurturing.
2. It must promote and insist on excellence.
3. It must advocate for our patients and students and for our profession.
4. It must be a place where faculty members learn new skills across the career lifecycle.
5. It must foster a learning community that rigorously studies new ideas.
6. It must facilitate professional relationships among peers and between mentors and mentees.
7. It must collaborate with and influence other organizations within and beyond family medicine.
8. It must help all of its members to build successful careers.
9. It must celebrate success and learn from failure.

I have been a family medicine teacher for more than 30 years, and I believe our challenges have never been greater. There has never been a time when we more desperately need a shared academic home. So I intend to devote all 10 of the president’s columns during my year as president to outlining a blueprint to make this happen. I have no illusion that STFM can ever be perfect, but we should aspire to perfection nonetheless. That is what a vision statement is about. The legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said, “Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.” Excellent organizations inspire great dreams; being an academic home for every family medicine educator is such a dream. Every student deserves to see family medicine at its best—no exceptions. The strengths of our best programs are not more important than the problems of our weakest. We cannot rest content that some students are doing well if all students are not doing well. We are in this together. We always have been. That is how we have survived against the odds for over 40 years and how we will build the workforce for a better health care system.

References

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