AANS/ACS Health Policy Scholarship Preliminary Report

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Wow! That was my initial reaction as we started the week long Executive Leadership Program in Health Policy and Management run by the Heller School for Social Policy and Management of Brandeis University. This is a unique opportunity to learn about health care economics and leadership styles/techniques in a classroom setting. I am surrounded by a wonderfully talented group of individuals in all surgical fields…I have often felt like an innocent bystander amongst my classmates. There are pediatric surgeons, cardiac surgeons, thoracic surgeons, urologist, urogynecologist, otolaryngologists, trauma surgeons, transplant surgeons, colorectal surgeons, and general surgeons.

We are all gathered to learn more about areas of medicine that we are largely not naturally exposed to in training or in practice…things such as strategic thinking and decision making, health care economics, advocacy, managing clinics, and evaluating bottlenecks in patient flow. These are all topics that we have learned about in depth over this week.

The course is run by Dr. Jon Chilingerian who is our extremely knowledgeable, energetic and personable course director. We started the course on Sunday night with a great talk by Dr. John Armstrong, the former Florida Surgeon General. He outlined the importance of advocacy and the role that surgical leaders have a responsibility to play. This reminded me of how lucky we are in neurosurgery to have people such as Katie Orrico, Alex Valadka, Ann Stroink, and Jon Davis to advocate for us and to encourage us to advocate for ourselves.

We have also been very fortunate to learn about health care economics and physician payment models from Dr. Stuart Altman, professor of national health policy at Brandeis. Dr. Altman provides an interactive fun way to learn this topic that many of us in the audience have minimal knowledge to begin the course.

For the first time in many years, all of us participants have also had homework!! We read case studies written by Dr. Chilingerian every night in preparation for interactive group exercises the following day.

The second half of the week introduced several topics that were very pertinent to healthcare, both in managing teams and in the financial language of healthcare. These again are things that some in the audience knew some about, but others (myself included) really learned a very systematic way of thinking about managing teams, building consensus, and being able to interact with those in the financial division of the hospital or department where we work.

With programs such as QOD already here and quality driven payment schemes likely coming soon (or already here in some places), understanding how quality is measured, how performance metrics are utilized and how payment may be linked to these two was a very valuable session.

We also had the chance to do a very interesting small group simulation in which we were tasked with the goal of getting a team of 24 people (the CEO, 4 vice-presidents, and a group of section managers) in a company to adopt a new idea. This was an EXCELLENT exercise that highlighted the importance of
consensus building, social networks, strategic thinking and persuasion. Doing this in a small group was also a great way to pool different ways of thinking about achieving the same goal...getting all 24 people to buy in to a new idea. This would be similar to leading a group in our departments, medical schools, or hospitals and working towards identifying every individual’s interests and aligning them with the overall team’s goal...this was an excellent exercise that we don’t typically get “practice” doing in real life.

We were then spoiled with a dinner cruise on the Boston harbor on a beautiful evening to be on the water. This gave all of us students a chance to get to know each other better and relax together. This event was also a truly unique experience!

The course concluded with an outstanding session on negotiations and how to approach the idea of getting what is necessary for your department/group/self in terms of salary, staff, budget and other things vital to a physician or group’s well-being. This was a primer on a topic that we could have likely spent the whole week learning.

I hope my enthusiasm for this course comes thru in this summary. It was an excellent experience in learning more about leadership, healthcare economics, performance measure, quality metrics, strategic thinking, consensus building, and negotiation...all in 6 days! It is certainly something I would recommend to any neurosurgeon interested in these topics. The program, thru the Heller School of Management at Brandeis University, also offers a 16 month physician only executive MBA that expands on all of the topics above. This consists of 4 10-day onsite sessions at Brandeis which are scheduled around 4 semesters of online learning...another unique opportunity available by application to any interested physician.

This has truly been a great experience which far exceeded my high expectations! I cannot thank the AANS and ACS enough for affording me this opportunity!!