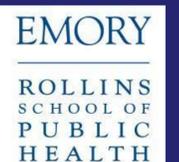


Suturing the Gender Gap Through Sponsorship: The role of sponsorship in female entry and advancement through their surgical careers

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Abstract

Objective: To evaluate facilitators and barriers of sponsorship for women at various levels of their surgical training and careers.

Design & Setting: Qualitative study at a single academic institution.

Participants: 35 women in surgery, including 14 surgeons, 11 residents, and 10 fourth-year medical students applying to a surgical residency were interviewed from July 30, 2021 to August 18, 2021. Ten surgical specialties were represented.

Results: All participants had provided or received sponsorship. Main themes across three professional groups included: (1) Evolving needs of sponsorship, (2) Decreased Access to Mentorship as Career Level Advances, (3) Evolving importance of sponsorship, (4) Perceived limitations of receiving sponsorship, and (5) Perceived limitations of providing sponsorship. Although sponsorship played an important role for each participants' career to date, barriers to both receiving and providing sponsorship were reported most frequently among faculty members. Without sponsorship, faculty were limited in their ability to sponsor others.

Conclusion: Sponsorship plays a pivotal role in career advancement for women as they progress within their career. Despite this, there is a lack of sponsorship available for female surgeons which limits their ability to rise to leadership in their respective organizations and, consequently, be in a position to sponsor others. Increasing access to sponsorship for female surgeons can continue to bridge the gender gap and increase diversity in the surgical field

Introduction

- Although the proportion of women in surgery has increased to constitute 37% of residents and 21% of faculty, gender inequity persists in the surgical field.^{1,2}
- Currently, 20% of chairs of surgical departments in the United States are women, of which only 1.7% are women of color.³⁻⁵
- An important means to supporting female representation and advancement in the surgical career is through sponsorship.⁶⁻¹⁰
 - Sponsorship is transactional in nature and involves a senior mentor who advocates on behalf of a protégé to advance their protégé's career

Methods

- Participants were recruited across three separate stages of their surgical careers: fourth year female medical students applying into a surgical residency (n= 10), female surgical residents (n=11), and female faculty (n=14).
- Three interview guides were developed for medical students, residents, and surgeons to reflect their sponsorship needs and experiences.
- Interviews were conducted from July 30, 2021 to August 18, 2021.
- All manuscripts were conducted virtually, transcribed, and coded by GNM
- A second author, MB reviewed coding to ensure reliable application of codes
- Themes related to sponsorship were compared across each professional level: medical students, surgical residents, and faculty

Results

Table 1. Summary of Interviewee Demographics (n=35)

Level of Training	No. (%)
Medical Student	10 (28.5)
Resident	11 (31.4)
Faculty	14 (40.0)
Surgical Specialty	
General Surgery	6 (17.1)
Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery	5 (14.3)
Neurosurgery	4 (11.4)
Orthopedic Surgery	4 (11.4)
Obstetrics & Gynecology	4 (11.4)
Vascular Surgery	3 (8.6)
Plastic Surgery	3 (8.6)
Ophthalmic Surgery	2 (5.7)
Urology	2 (5.7)
Pediatric Surgery	1 (2.9)
Race	
White	20 (57.1)
Asian	7 (20.0)
Black	6 (17.1)
Other	2 (5.7)

Discussion

- This study highlights the increasing need for sponsorship with increasing career level, juxtaposed with the decreased access to sponsorship as women in surgery advance within their career.
- Decreased access to sponsorship for women in higher-level positions has been attributed to gendered difference in seeking sponsorship
- Limited access to sponsorship for female faculty in surgery may also be attributed to the practices of sponsors themselves.
- Sponsorship can increase both gender and racial diversity within the surgical field.

Conclusions

Sponsorship plays a pivotal role in career advancement for women as they progress within their career. Despite this, there is a lack of sponsorship available for female surgeons which limits their ability to rise to leadership in their respective organizations and, consequently, be in a position to sponsor others. Increasing access to sponsorship for female surgeons can continue to bridge the gender gap and increase diversity in the surgical field.

Table 2. Summary of Themes Related to Sponsorship and Selected Illustrative Quotations by Career Level

Theme	Medical Student	Resident	Faculty
Access to Sponsorship	Medical students felt that their mentors served as sponsors	Residents felt that their mentors served as sponsors	Faculty noted difficulty in finding sponsors
	"It's honestly one of the biggest aspects of applying into neurosurgery—having a mentor who sponsors you"	"And now as my PI, and mentor, we meet multiple times a week, like if I go to a conference it's going to be with him, where he can introduce me to everyone, where he will help me to network. It's really cool"	"But as faculty, I really did have to seek people out, no one came up to me and said, 'Hey, I'm gonna automatically magically make sure you have this pathway forward.' You know, there has to be a little bit of self-advocacy there."
Types of Sponsorship	Medical students received sponsorship in applying to residency	Residents received sponsorship in committee, research, and networking opportunities	Surgeons receive sponsorship in promotion to committees, research, and leadership
	"So much of where you end up in residency really feeds back to who is writing your letters of recommendation and who is picking up the phone"	"One of my mentors, runs one of the national ortho societies and she put me on a panel...they put me in situations where they bring me to the table, they actively try to include me with everything they do"	"And if your academic faculty, when you want to progress with promotion, you really have to start getting yourself involved in societies. So really, specifically, what I needed at that time was, you know, people who would get me on some committees so I could start getting work done academically, people who would start involving me in projects that encouraged me towards writing"
Perceived Importance of Sponsorship	Medical students noted limited appreciation for sponsorship at their career level	Residents felt that sponsorship becomes more important as you move up in career level	Faculty felt that sponsorship was most important for them than any prior career level
	"I think sometimes I am very naive and I think that it [sponsorship] doesn't matter. But I think sponsorship plays a bigger role"	"I think sponsorship probably is the most important during residency and like early years of attending hood, because at that point, you're still in training."	"For me, personally, it was much more important on the faculty front than anywhere else."
Perceived Limitation of Receiving Sponsorship	Medical students felt the need to seek out senior faculty to sponsor them	Residents felt the need to seek out senior faculty to sponsor them	Faculty felt there were fewer people available to sponsor them
	"I think sponsorship is like a huge deal. I think, just with how many women faculty are in like junior faculty positions versus chair positions, sponsors have been more my, like, male mentors"	"In order to sponsor someone, you have to be in a position of influence to speak on their [protégé's] behalf"	"I mean, honestly, it's hard...I'm the Chief of my division, like some people would consider that to be the top of the like, the top of Administrative pyramid and but I'm like, I want to figure out what's next"
Perceived Limitations of Providing Sponsorship	Medical students were not asked about providing sponsorship	Residents felt their junior position limited them from sponsoring others	Faculty cited junior faculty position, not holding a leadership position, tendency to sponsor those that look like us, and sponsoring those that we know well as limitations
		"And I think that with internship, you're just too close to medical school to be able to, you know, provide that sponsorship, because when you're thinking about emailing somebody on that student's behalf, you really got to create trust between you and the program, before you can start advocating for somebody"	"But I haven't been in a position where I've been asked to do something or I feel like I can't I'm not in a position to help...But I will be limited. I'm still a junior attending." "We're really good at sponsoring those that look like us." "I think it is easier to sponsor someone the better you know them, their strengths, their interests."

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