



R. Kevin Grigsby, DSW

Senior Director of Organizational Leadership Development, AAMC

R. Kevin Grigsby, DSW, recently assumed the role of Senior Director of Organizational Leadership Development for the AAMC, where he will design and oversee organizational development and leadership programs for faculty, deans, department chairs, and division chiefs. Previously, Dr. Grigsby served as Chair of the AAMC Group on Faculty Affairs, and has contributed to both *Academic Medicine* and *Academic Physician & Scientist*.

Please tell us a little bit about your background.

I have a somewhat unusual background for someone in academic medicine. I am trained professionally as a social worker. I have a master's degree in social work from Florida State and a doctoral degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania. My undergraduate degree—I went to Georgia—is in philosophy, and initially, upon my leaving college, I worked in a wilderness camping environment for emotionally disturbed kids. It was a time where I was introduced to the world of mental health. I went on to work at a private psychiatric hospital in Atlanta and learned a lot about what mental health professionals did. That led me to a degree in social work.

After going to Florida State, I worked in the interface of mental health and the corrections field. I did a lot of crisis intervention in a county jail and became an expert witness in the area of competence to stand trial. After I did that, I had a lot of questions about family and social support programs that I really wanted to answer, so I decided to go back for doctoral study. That led me to the University of Pennsylvania. A lot of the work I did there was related to communications; ethnography, the way anthropologists study culture; and the history of family and social support in the US.

When I finished my course work at Penn I took a faculty position at Yale Child Study Center, and I did typical clinical social work,



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but I also worked with inventing new family and social support programs. One of those was a program where we worked with kids in shelter care. We eventually published about using this ethnographic model to change the way mental health consultation was provided in shelters for homeless kids. I began to apply that model to other places—group homes and the like—and ended up doing things that were related to improving organizations.

After several years at Yale, I got married, and we started a family. We moved to Georgia, and I was at the Medical College of Georgia in the Department of Psychiatry and Health

Behavior. I was doing a lot of the same work, related to improving organizational capacity. Eventually I became the Vice Dean for Research and Administration at MCG. An opportunity opened up at Penn State, where I did another brief ethnographic study of the organization. One thing led to another, and I joined Penn State in a vice-dean role. For the past 10 years, I've been very active with the AAMC in the Group on Faculty Affairs (GFA), one of the newest groups created at the AAMC. A lot of the work we did in GFA was related not just to looking at improving and developing faculty members, but really looking at improving and developing our organizations.

What do you seek to accomplish in this new position?

What I would like to focus on immediately is orienting the goals not away from individual professional development, but toward both professional and organizational development. It's not enough just to train people to go back into a culture with a set of skills if you can also work on helping them to change the culture in a positive direction.

Even though we have done a really good job of teaching clinical and research skills, one of the areas we're still working on is in developing better interpersonal skills. Some of the articles that I've written for *Academic Physician & Scientist* have been well received because of that. I also addressed pitfalls for junior faculty after my experience as a vice dean led me to look over the promotion and

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tenure process, where I noticed patterns of behavior that seemed to thwart success for some people. I try to help people understand those areas where they might need to be vigilant to prevent finding themselves within one or more of those “pits.” I try to help people in organizations—especially leaders—shape behaviors in ways that will improve the performance not only of the individual, but also of the entire organization.

I just did a book chapter on faculty health and well-being, titled “Organizational Culture and Its Consequences.” We can look at our organizations and find that there are some that seem to do a pretty good job promoting health and well-being of faculty, and others, even though we’re in the health care field, seem to detract from the health and well-being of our faculty. How do we find balance? How do we help people to do good science, good medicine, good education, but also to maintain their own sense of vitality? I think the concept of vitality is one that’s been on a lot of people’s minds. We know recently that Herschel Alexander and some other folks at AAMC looked at long-term turnover of medical faculty and found

that over a 10-year period, there’s about a 60% retention rate—so four out of 10 people who started in academic medicine are no longer in academic medicine at all.

We know some things about how people work together. When people work as teams, they tend to make better decisions, do a better job with better outcomes, better products. Shifting our thinking away from every person being independent and finding autonomous success, nowadays we have to help our faculty learn to be interdependent, rather than independent. I think one of the advantages I have coming to the AAMC is that I’ve worked in academic health centers for just under 24 years. A lot of what I saw there were areas where team approaches are probably going to be more effective than an approach stressing the traditional individual, autonomous professional perspective.

Do you have any tips to avoid burnout?

We literally are in over our heads, and we’re bombarded by tons and tons of information—one has to learn how to filter

that so you act with intent. If you don’t, you will get swept along like everyone else in this stream of information and activity. Taking the time to be forthright and really focus on just exactly what you want to do—to be deliberate about that—is important. If people are beginning to find that balance, [they will] recognize that conflict is inevitable, and that learning how to resolve, reduce, or manage conflict will help us all to have a better quality of workplace life. Making a commitment to problem solving is a very positive thing.

What I would come back to more than anything is balance. How do you balance your career and your family? What’s really important to you, and how do you make sure you carve out the time to meet the important needs that you have? One of the ways leaders can be helpful is they can model some of this, but the other way they can be helpful is through creating organizational cultures that promote, rather than detract from, people being able to meet their own needs for professional fulfillment. I see my new role as one of helping leaders in these efforts. ❖