New Frontiers in Healthcare Education

The field of healthcare is ever evolving thanks to scientific advances and cutting-edge technologies that drive it forward at a breathtaking pace. It’s often only in academia that the pace slows, hindered by old ways of teaching in clinical environments.

Within that disconnect, Elizabeth Armstrong, Ph.D., saw an opportunity for infusing healthcare education with new curricula based on a modern understanding of the cognitive sciences. Harvard University, her employer, was keen to take part in such an initiative. So, in 1994, Dr. Armstrong launched what would become the Harvard Macy Institute, a program that supports leaders and educators within the healthcare sphere through an intensive curriculum and global professional network.

“Our program reflects what we know through research about the value of learning in small groups and raising questions,” says Dr. Armstrong, the institute’s director. “The intention is to build habits of learning that will promote future providers around the world to examine the data in front of them and, ultimately, to innovate.”

Small Groups, Big Changes

To inspire big changes within the healthcare environment, the Harvard Macy Institute program starts small—very small, actually. Every day, participants meet in groups of four or five to discuss an innovation project that they intend to work on throughout the course. This intimate arrangement exposes each person to intraprofessional and international peers who are interested in their work and who can offer fresh perspectives. “This small, collaborative environment helps people devise better solutions for implementing their projects back home,” says Dr. Armstrong. “Participants come with a project, and they leave with a refined action plan.”

There are also micro-teaching courses for healthcare educators, smaller journal clubs where participants discuss academic articles, and design-thinking courses for healthcare industry leaders.

Meanwhile, the institute continues to keep pace with current trends, technologies, and imperatives in the healthcare field, offering courses on virtual teaching, AI, and telemedicine. “Here at Harvard, people get to see the latest innovations in healthcare,” says Dr. Armstrong.

While the program’s duration varies, the institute’s impact lives well beyond enrollment. Alumni often use course materials back home and continue practicing habits of questioning; some even return to teach in the program. “We’re building a community of proud Harvard Macy scholars who form lifelong bonds and stay in touch with one another,” Dr. Armstrong says.

Timely Innovation

The Harvard Macy Institute’s brand of design-thinking and knowledge-sharing proved essential during the global pandemic, when healthcare industries around the world rolled out new practices and disruptive innovations. As Dr. Armstrong sees it, the challenge for current and future scholars is figuring out how to sustain that pace of progress.

For now, however, she is pleased to see the momentum generated by the Harvard Macy Institute community. “The success of this institute belongs to the extraordinary individuals who have sustained and expanded its mission,” she says. “I’m eternally grateful for that.”