



Evalina Burger van der Walt (Burger), MD, FAAOS

AAOS Now

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Diversity

One of Just Four Female Orthopaedic Department Chairs Discusses Leadership Best Practices

There are currently four women serving as chairs of orthopaedic surgery departments with residency programs.

AAOS Now

has recently featured articles on two of the chairs: Leesa Galatz, MD, FAAOS, chair at Mount Sinai in New York (September 2020, “

[First Female System Chair at Mount Sinai Excels by Focusing on Being ‘the Best You Can Possibly Be’](#)

”), and Lisa Lattanza, MD, FAAOS, chair at Yale (July 2020, “

[Orthopaedic Leader Becomes PPE Supply Chain Expert and Unifier During the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

”). In addition, Susan Bukata, MD, was recently named chair of the Department of Orthopaedics at the University of California, San Diego.

Evalina Burger van der Walt (Burger), MD, FAAOS, is chair of the Department of Orthopaedics at the University of Colorado. She is a spine surgeon with particular interest in complex spinal surgery, adult deformity, and scoliosis. She is committed to the education of future medical professionals and active in mentorship of medical students, residents, and spine fellows at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, and she provides many research opportunities. She was trained in South Africa at Pretoria Academic Hospital (University of Pretoria) and has been at the University of Colorado since being recruited from Louisiana State University in 2006. Dr. Burger was named chair in 2018. Lisa K. Cannada, MD, FAAOS, interviewed Dr. Burger “COVID-19-style” on a weekend night, right after Dr. Burger had a phone call to speak with a prospective faculty member.

Dr. Cannada: Female chairs are more common in general surgery. Can you share with us your perspective as one of four female chairs in orthopaedic surgery?

Dr. Burger:

My No. 1 rule is I consider myself an orthopaedic surgeon first. In addition, I lead by example by being in the trenches and taking call. My journey has been amazing. It has been built on strong relationships and building trust. I still find some of the male chairs will try to take advantage of me being a woman, insinuating that I cannot do the job. But there are seven other female chairs at our School of Medicine, so there is a supportive network. Prior to COVID-19, when I was at social events, I loved the surprise when people would walk up to my husband assuming he is the chair. I really enjoy being a role model for women who contact me from everywhere.

You have been at Colorado for the majority of your career. What are the advantages to hiring a chair from within?

A big advantage is that you know the players and cannot be beat around the bush! Because I was familiar with the department and university, there was a quick ramp-up when I started. In addition, I had unanimous support from the faculty within, so we were all ready to go when I started.

There obviously were qualified candidates at Colorado. When do you feel the chair should be from the outside?

I believe there should be a chair from the outside when the “inside” candidate is not respected by local faculty. Other examples of when it is best to search and hire from the outside include when there are unsolvable problems, a need to “clean the house,” or perhaps the institution needs to grow financially with a prominent recruit.

Is there any particular training you found helpful to prepare you to be chair?

Having a mentor is invaluable. I believe there are many experiences you can learn from by following basic principles: “look, listen, and learn.” Discussing these with a mentor is invaluable. There are multiple leadership programs through orthopaedic and nonorthopaedic organizations. I found my year spent in Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) was particularly helpful. ELAM is a one-year program through Drexel Medicine offering leadership training to prepare women for leadership positions in academic medicine.

There are multiple additional degrees one can obtain, including a master’s degree in medical education and master of business administration (MBA). What are your thoughts on the necessity of an MBA for a chair?

My opinion is that it does not help at all. You need emotional intelligence to be in the role of chair and to surround yourself with those with expertise for the financial aspects of the practice. A coach to deal with the conflicts and decision making is helpful to provide another perspective on situations.

Little is taught or learned about the business of medicine during orthopaedic residency programs in the United States. How did you gain the necessary business experience to run a department?

I grew up in a household where nothing was in abundance and was taught by my parents how to make do with what we had. During my years on faculty and involvement in multiple organizations, I volunteered for any opportunity I could get to serve on finance committees and learned. Books can be helpful, including “Finance for Dummies.” I took away a lot from the ELAM program on the business aspects of running a department.

How do you recruit new faculty, and what do you look for?

When I recruit a new faculty member, I do so through honesty and transparency. I am enthusiastic about adding new faculty, and I try to show them what our program has to offer and, more importantly, create a vision for them. During the recruiting process, I look for “fit,” considering their personality and contribution to the culture of the department.

An area of increasing interest for success as a leader is conflict resolution and management. There is always “the other side” to every story. How do you manage disagreements—both when staff members disagree with you and when you must arbitrate disagreements between your staff?

I believe in total transparency with conflicts. I listen to both sides. I get the facts from a third party. Then I sit down and mediate. I try to get them to evaluate from the other’s perspective by switching roles. I advise, “You can have everything in life as long as you take what comes with it.”

We all know the importance of diversity and the increased emphasis on improving diversity in orthopaedics. What are you doing to improve diversity at Colorado?

We have a vice chair of diversity: Robert D’Ambrosia, MD. He was the former chair for the Department of Orthopaedics at the University of Colorado. We have a prominent annual diversity lectureship. We constantly make faculty aware of inherent bias. I believe we must create an environment where everyone can thrive without prejudice. In our department, we work on “remodeling.” We have transgender and several same-sex couples on faculty. The female faculty we have are strong women. In the state of Colorado, people of color are less than 5 percent of the population. Yet, in our 2020 class, 33 percent (n = 2/6) of our graduating residents were individuals of color, and two were women.

What do you want your legacy at Colorado to be?

I want to be known for making a difference in education, science, and patient care. In addition, I want to be remembered for my fairness and creating equal opportunity.

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