

From Mentee to Mentor

Dr. Emily Walvoord's Path to Medical Student Education

BY ALLISON YOUNG AND ERIC CHEN



Dr. Emily Walvoord is a Pediatric Endocrinologist, Professor of Clinical Pediatrics and the Associate Dean of Student Affairs. In addition to overseeing medical student education at all nine campuses, she serves an advocate and mentor for students across IUSM.

First off, thank you for joining us today and we really appreciate it! Can you start us off by telling us a little bit about your background and how you got into your field of pediatric endocrinology?

EW: I actually went to college thinking that I would be a veterinarian. I worked for a vet between the summer of my junior and senior year of college and I absolutely loved it. But the vets actually talked me out of it and into human medicine. I changed my mind and took a gap year, which at that time people didn't do. In my year off, I did a lot of volunteer work for the St. Jude's Midwest Affiliate in Peoria, Illinois and I loved it. This is when I first thought that maybe I would want to work in pediatrics.

I ended up going to Northwestern for medical school, and as a 4th year medical student I still wanted to do pediatrics. I decided to do a rotation in Peoria so I could also be home with my parents for a month and I just picked something random, pediatric endocrinology, and it turned out that I absolutely loved it. The people that I worked with were two women, and they were super inspiring and great role models for me. When I went to medical school about ~30% of the students were women and there also weren't a lot of female role models either, so this was a big deal. As I went into residency, I loved being in the hospital, taking care of complicated cases, teaching, and being in an academic environment. By the end of my chief resident year I had decided to do peds endocrinology.

One of the aspects of pediatric endocrinology that I enjoy most are the connections that I have with my patients and their families. I get a lot more time with my them than some other specialties and I see them at the minimum once per year and some patients I see

every 3-4 months, so I get to know them really well. I also love teaching the medical aspects of endocrinology, and how most things in endocrinology are thankfully quite treatable. But what I love most are the patients, watching kids grow up, knowing their family, and the relationships you build. I've been very lucky and have been invited to people's weddings, graduation parties, and get sent baby pictures; it's just wonderful and the best part of my job.

What motivated you to get involved with medical school education?

EW: For sure it started when I was a chief resident. I was always interested in clinical education and teaching, and during that time, Chief Residents were in charge of an inpatient teaching service, so I worked closely with the residents and students. I actually liked the administrative aspects too; I liked thinking about how to change the systems to make things better for people.

It was during my time as the assistant dean in faculty affairs at IU when the school started the process of curriculum reform. I joined one of the curriculum reform teams, then I led a curriculum reform team for the next step in the process, and eventually I was lucky enough to be included in a very small group of faculty and two students who put together the entire curriculum. That was how I met Dr. Allen and in 2017 Dr. Allen approached me for this job, which had been vacant for a few years. I initially said no since I loved my job in faculty affairs and professional development because the people I worked with in that office were amazing, I learned a ton, and was super fun. But he kept at it. I knew that in truth I loved working with students the most, and I was getting ready for a new challenge. I had been in that role for 7 years and I was ready to take on a different challenge to continue to grow and that's what led me to where I am now.

Do you have a feeling or know when it's time for something different?

EW: It's interesting, I think that you just have to listen to your inner voices. It's good to listen and to keep pushing yourself to take on new challenges and not get bored. When you're pushing yourself for something new, you've really got to give your best effort all the time and that's something I really enjoy.

It sounds like mentors have played a significant role in how you got here, could you tell us more about that? And now that you are in this new role, what excites you about mentorship?

EW: I've had so many wonderful people that have invested in me as a person, encouraged me, given me opportunities and wanted to see me

ben Steve Bogdewic, the inaugural EAD of FAPDD who gave me my first assistant dean job, Mary Dankoski the current EAD of FAPDD and Megan Palmer who is also dear friend. She is a great example of a peer mentor but I have learned so much from her since she has a different perspective as a PhD in Higher Education and

positions in medicine. To be a good mentor, you have to put your own interests aside and think of that person and what's right for them; it might even be something that's totally different from something that you would personally do. Lastly, you all are highly intelligent, highly capable, motivated young adults, and I try to role model that everyone needs to treat you as such.

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continue to grow. And there are a lot of different kinds of mentors. There are people who help you with projects, and others who encourage you, introduce you to the right people, sponsor you, and share opportunities with you. And there are peer mentors, people who I call friends that are peers, and we share back and forth and encourage each other, and they have helped me to grow.

My biggest mentor when I was starting out was Dr. Ora Pescovitz, who was the head of pediatric endocrinology at the time. She was the reason I came to IU so that I could work with her. When I met her at the interview for Fellowship, I drove back to Chicago and told my husband about the interview; I was going on and on about her and he said, “so it looks like we’re moving to Indiana”. She was amazing, so encouraging, so brilliant, so warm, and she believes in you and pushes you to be your best. She’s role modeled for me how to be a mentor and how to care for people—how to help and encourage them.

My other important mentors have

has taught me so much about faculty affairs and student affairs. I’m always nervous that I’ll leave someone out, but there are so many more individuals who have been a mentor along the way. So many people who I’ve worked with in Peds endo, when I was a resident, when I was doing research as a fellow, from faculty affairs, my peer mentors, Dr. Allen, and many, many others.

What excites you most about working with students and being a mentor?

EW: YES! The other side, I love that. I can never say no when students want to meet with me. It’s super fun just to be encouraging and to help people. One of the things that I enjoy most is helping people make connections with someone that they want to do research with, for a shadowing experience, or just to talk to. I also see being a mentor as part of my role as a woman in medicine. Now that half the class are women in medicine, it maybe doesn’t seem that big of a deal, but there still is a huge dearth of women in leadership

Besides all the work roles that you do, is there anything that you do to promote your own wellness or hobbies that you have?

EW: I like to exercise, I run, and I go to the gym sometimes (pre Covid-19!). I actually run with my best friend in the early mornings and it’s like double-dipping, I get exercise and we get to chat. I also have two children that I adore, one’s in college and one is a senior in high school and they’re always a big focus for me. And I love to read – that’s why I have a little free lending library outside my office. I love being social and going out with my husband and friends or with my girlfriends. It’s important to keep those connections and friendships; they are a part of who I am. I love my friends, and we’re always there for each other when we need it. I promised myself early on in my medical journey that I never wanted to be so absorbed in my career that I don’t have time for my family or friends or don’t know what’s really going on with my family.

If there’s one piece of advice that you could leave with your medical school self, what would that be?

EW: Don’t underestimate yourself! I was waitlisted to Northwestern and I had this feeling that I wasn’t as smart as everyone else. My two best friends in medical school went to Ivy Leagues and my classmates were from all these high-powered undergrads. I knew I was smart and I knew I would work hard and become a doctor, but I had decided up front I wasn’t going to be top of the class or even had it in my

sights. And that was stupid; not that it would have made a difference but why didn't I try for it? I should have pushed myself a little more, had a little more confidence and told myself that I could accomplish that. Don't sell yourself short, you never know what you can accomplish.

Is there one thing you wanted to leave us with?

EW: There's so many people that are here to help you. Don't ever feel like you can't reach out. If you reach out and if it isn't what you expected, reach out to someone else - there's plenty of people to click with. Don't think your problem is too small or that you don't matter. People care; we are all here, and we want to help you.

This year has been difficult for many students for a multitude of reasons. Are there any words of encouragement that you would like to give?

EW: These are incredibly challenging times. COVID-19 has taken a huge toll on the lives of people across the globe, including family and friends. I feel quite down myself intermittently and super frustrated with what I consider to be a travesty in the national response to this crisis. At the same time, I am also sad about personal "losses" - not being able to have a live IUSM match day or graduation, my daughter's high school graduation, etc. but then think that I am being small and ridiculous when people are losing their lives. But, I have realized that it is OK to grieve lost plans and things that I have looked forward to, even if it feels small within all that is going on, as long as you keep the big picture in mind. I am also incredibly sad and mad about what has been going on in the US for years in terms of systemic racism. At the same time, I am mad and upset with myself for not seeing this more clearly and doing more. I am truly hopeful that this unrest and current spotlight on these issues

will result in real change. I am recommitting myself to exploring my own white fragility so that I can contribute positively to making our school a more safe and equitable place for everyone.

So—I guess my words of encouragement are that turbulent times can bring out the best in us. Give yourself some grace, but at the same time, commit to being part of solutions. We can get through this. "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together." – Vincent Van Gogh

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