

Ep138 Student Engagement and Student Life with Dr. Tonya Webb

Neda Frayha: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to the OSA Insider, a podcast about medical student life and the journey to becoming a physician. I'm your producer and host, Dr. Neda Frayha. I'm an internist and a member of the Office of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Today, we're bringing you a wonderful conversation with Dr. Tonya Webb. Dr. Webb has her PhD in microbiology and immunology. Her work focuses on cancer immunology and immunotherapy in specific, and she's also the Assistant Dean for Student Engagement and Student Life in our OSA. What does this role mean? How does her office engage medical students? And how does she know when a project or an idea is working?

In this episode, we will get to know Dr. Webb as a person, about all the different hats that she wears, and how she approaches getting to know our students and how she wants to help them. The advice that she shares with [00:01:00] our students is so relevant and so wise that I have been taking it to heart ever since our conversation.

I first asked her to tell us a little bit about herself.

Tonya Webb: Hi, so my name is Tonya Webb. I'm originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, and I conducted post-doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins, and afterwards I joined the faculty in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology.

Neda Frayha: And then how did you get to work in the Office of Student Affairs at the School of Medicine?

Tell us about that journey.

Tonya Webb: Well, I've been at the School of Medicine for a while, uh, 17 years actually. And so what initially drew me was the strong commitment to scientific discovery and education. But over time, I felt that I was able to make really strong connections with the community, uh, with the investigators here, the collaborative environment, and the [00:02:00] opportunity to contribute in many ways.

And so I participated in a leadership conference, and they asked about your life story, and if it was a chapter, where did you see the next phase? And I thought that the biggest impact that I had was with working with students. And because I remember my days as a student, I thought that being able to engage in that way and help foster a sense of community and belonging and help them be successful would be the best way to move forward in my career.

Neda Frayha: What a wonderful exercise to think about if your life were a, a book, what would the next chapter look like? That sounds beautiful at lots of different times of life. And then how did you get connected to the folks in the Student Affairs Office at the med school in particular?

Tonya Webb: So actually I saw the ad, the posting, which is very traditional and most things don't happen that way.

But for me throughout my [00:03:00] career it's been being able to see an opportunity and jump o- onto it and so that was it. I saw the, um, assistant dean role and I applied and was able to get the opportunity.

Neda Frayha: That's so great. Well, one of your roles is Assistant Dean of Student Engagement and Student Life. What does that role involve?

What does that mean?

Tonya Webb: So at its core, this role is about making sure that students feel a sense of community, they feel connected, supported, and seen. And so as part of my role, um, I'm involved in developing programs that foster community, working closely with student organizations and creating opportunities for mentorship and advocating for student needs.

And so I've recently developed a task force for first-gen [00:04:00] students. And so part of this role is also about being proactive and thinking about how we can create an environment where students don't just succeed academically, but also feel like they're part of our community here and foster a sense of wellness and wellbeing.

Neda Frayha: Can you tell us a little bit more about the task force for first-gen students? What does that mean? What does that look like?

Tonya Webb: So it's really exciting. It's a brand-new initiative and we just had our first meeting and so I have a cohort of about 10 students who are helping me develop programming that we will be able to implement in the fall.

And so I'm working with Dr. Morales on this, and we have ideas about what could be helpful. And as you know, the Office of Student Affairs already has so many different programs, but I think that having the students contribute and having a voice will really help us give them what they need or meet them where they are.

And so [00:05:00] we want to develop a programming that will start with orientation and then follow them throughout their journey. And so we will talk about the hidden curriculum. We'll talk about different expectations, um, that students may feel that they weren't aware of and how to address that, and then they can also have really, um, informative interactions with residents and talk about what it looks like after medical school.

Neda Frayha: And what does first-gen mean specifically?

Tonya Webb: So actually, we were able to get first-gen, um, information from the AMC, from MCAS, but we're not actually using the first-gen, like the first in your family to go to college or the first to go to medicine. We're being very broad and all-inclusive. And so if you identify as first-gen, we're welcoming you.

So if you're first-gen or, um, or first in your family to go to college, if you're [00:06:00] first in your family to attend medical school, if you're the first person in your family to attend medical school in this country, uh, we're being, again, all-inclusive. And then we also welcome allies because we feel that allyship is very important, and sometimes that can be the best person to advocate for you in a difficult situation.

Neda Frayha: Lifting up even a level above that, what does the, the term student engagement mean to you, and why is it so important?

Tonya Webb: So to me, student engagement goes beyond attending events and participating in activities. It really is at the center of having the students feel like they're part of a community where they are valued and supported.

Because you go to an academic institution, and you know the medical school is going to be hard, and there's a level of expectation there, but we [00:07:00] don't want you to feel that you're just coming here to get your education. We want you to feel like you're part of the institution, and you are what make it successful, and so then we have to contribute to your success so that you can help further develop our institution and what it means to be at the University of Maryland.

Neda Frayha: You want it to be a two-way conversation rather than just, here's an event, and someone shows up to it and goes home and doesn't engage again.

Tonya Webb: Yes. I really want you to feel like you are a vital part of what makes us successful because I feel that when people have a personal stake and they feel that sense of belonging and community, then they will go above and beyond.

And as you know, the sum is better than each of its parts, and so again, I want that collective unit to work together, and you feel like you're a part of something. And so this is an important time in your life, and when you look back on it, I want you to feel like, "Oh, I was [00:08:00] there, and I was a part of something big."

Neda Frayha: Hmm. I recently went to my reunion, my medical school reunion, and it really did bring back so many very vivid and very powerful memories of being part of a place and being part of a group. And it allowed me to reflect on how these four years in medical school are really such a unique time of one's life, and they feel interminable when you're going through it, but then before you know it, it's over, and then you're looking back on it.

And so I love how you're describing it. It's a special time in your life. You may as well get the most out of the experience and give to your community, too, in the meantime, and I love the idea of the sum-- I love the idea of the total being greater than the sum of its parts. I think that's really beautiful.

Where do your ideas for student life and engagement come from?

Tonya Webb: So [00:09:00] as I mentioned, the students are a strong motivational force, and so the best ideas actually come from them. I have an idea of what could be helpful, but I, as I keep reiterating to them, make sure that this really will work for you. And so a lot of what I do is listen and try to hear what their needs are so that the activities that we plan will really benefit them.

And so we can have conversations after events, informal check-ins, and I think about my own experiences and try to fill in that gap and say, "Oh, I wish that I would have had this," and talk to the students and see if it's applicable to this generation, and it will suit their needs.

Neda Frayha: I like what you mentioned about trying to understand what the real desire behind a particular request might [00:10:00] be because a request

might be, let's have a, a lunch with a certain attending to get to know them, and that can be fantastic.

But also, what else is underneath that? What else, what other kind of connection or community is that student craving, and how else can you meet that need?

Tonya Webb: Yes, it's so true. Getting that feedback from the students is important, and you could say, what is the rationale behind that request? And just meeting the resident, is that-- will that suffice?

Should they-- would they benefit from a group of residents? Or, um, is there a question about the pathway that could be better addressed by other information? And so there are things that they will get out of that request that are tangible and some that aren't so tangible

Neda Frayha: On that exact note of, of feedback, how do you [00:11:00] know if a particular initiative or a form of outreach from your office has been successful?

How do you know if something's working or not?

Tonya Webb: I think it can be from feedback in terms of vocal response, like, "That was a great event," or you can see the response afterwards. Like, are the students coming back? Are they coming to visit? Are they bringing other students with them? Are they continuing the conversation?

Are they asking about what's next, or are they ready to move on?

Neda Frayha: I bet you get very direct feedback from students. I bet they'll tell you if something didn't really meet their needs. It's true,

Tonya Webb: and you can f- kind of feel the energy and- Yeah ... the eye contact, or there are a lot of subtle cues that let you know that this is informative or it's useful or, um, we could move or [00:12:00] pivot in a certain direction.

And so it's important to be responsive to that feedback. And, uh, so again, I'm learning how to listen and then move- Right ... right and be very intentional.

Neda Frayha: That's hard all the time.

Tonya Webb: It's never easy. It is. It is, but, uh, you find that it's what speaks the most, right? Because when you listen and then the students feel and they're like, "Oh, I feel heard," or, "Just hearing you say that statement resonated with me."

And so to get that kind of feedback makes you feel like, okay.

Neda Frayha: Yeah. You know? It, it makes- Mm-hmm ... it so clear that the, the intention behind everything is so good, that you're coming at this from such a good and helpful place, and then figuring out the logistics along the way.

Tonya Webb: I think it's important to stay relevant for this generation.

I [00:13:00] feel like they've been so, been through so much with the pandemic and with the advances in AI and machine learning, and just the amount of information that's publicly available. And so they've learned how to tune things out, but they're used to having constant information. And so it's really important to develop programming that's relevant, but really stays true and authentic and brings that connection.

And so it can be a learning experience for both of us. How do you

Neda Frayha: achieve that authenticity in your programming? How do you make it real?

Tonya Webb: I think that the students will let you know, because when they stay engaged and they follow up and they make sure that you're ready for the next step- And it's not you reaching out, you know, with those emails or, [00:14:00] um, looking for them.

When they're looking for you and they're saying, "Okay, you said you were going to do this." And the follow-through is important, so I make sure to follow through. If you say you're going to do it, you should do it. But again, when they stay engaged and they comment that they feel that this would be beneficial, and they are willing to contribute their time and energy to it, and then that's when I feel like I know that it's, you know, really true and authentic and this is a good path.

Neda Frayha: Can you give me an example of a program where that exact thing happened?

Tonya Webb: Well, I mentioned the task force, and I'll go back to it because actually I've received really great advice from colleagues to go in after or at the beginning of small groups and just introduce myself and say that I'm starting this task force.

And so I went in and met with [00:15:00] the first years and second years before their small groups, and the students said in the session, "Just hearing you say that you're going to start this task force makes me feel seen. I feel heard right now." And so getting that immediate impression was great. And then I developed a application process, and so those who were really interested and committed took the time to go through the page and a half and really put in responses to show their commitment.

And so when we met, I knew that everything was in good alignment. Everyone had a sense of purpose. They were willing to spend their time and energy and dedication towards this, and so it was great. And we've already received follow-up, and our, uh, session was on Friday, and we've already had really, really nice responses, and so that's great.

Neda Frayha: And we're recording on a Monday, so we're talking about a matter of just days. [00:16:00] Yes. It makes... What are some of the most surprising things you've learned in this role of assistant dean of student engagement and student life?

Tonya Webb: I think one of the most surprising things that I've learned is that, um, to just be present in the moment.

Uh, uh, instead of I'm used to planning things, and I thought having different activities, having snacks available, um- And being involved with programming, developing seminars, things like that, retreats were going to take up m- most of the time. But what I've learned is just sitting here and telling the students, "I am here if you want to come in, if you want to talk, if you want to send a text, I'm available."

Uh, I think that that was one of the most surprising things is that was what they responded to more than [00:17:00] the individual, um, programming needs. I thought if I developed seminars and workshops and different things like that, that would be the key part of this position in helping to develop their careers.

But there's so many things already available that, again, just being very intentional with your time and respecting their needs as an individual and saying, "Okay, I hear you, and what works for this person may not work for

you, but let's talk about it and see what could work for you and help you be successful in this space."

Neda Frayha: Isn't that so funny that having just that open door, both literally and figuratively, turned out to be one of the best things that you could do for students? It's so true. Yes. What excites you about student engagement and student life in the future? What are you really looking forward to? [00:18:00]

Tonya Webb: So I'm really excited about the opportunity to be more intentional and personalized in how we support the students.

And so collectively, there's a growing recognition about the importance of wellness, of mental health, of community, and how your identity shapes your experience. And so it's great to have the initiatives like the First Gen programming and to do work that supports mentorship and leadership development and, again, being very intentional with your time and saying, "Okay, I'm here.

Tell me what you need, and let's see how we can best provide that." And so I think that that's really exciting. It's a new way of, of providing for the students instead of trying to figure out what they need and provide it, really listening and developing it in real time so that we can change it and personalize it.

I think that's really important. [00:19:00]

Neda Frayha: It's like the whole era of personalized medicine, but in the form of mentorship for students. Now, you also have the title of associate director for workforce excellence and development. Just so that the students can get to know you better, what does that role entail?

Tonya Webb: So that role is within the cancer center and it focuses on helping individuals not just get jobs.

I've developed programming for onboarding and off-boarding, but we want them to feel that they are building meaningful and sustainable careers. And so if you are involved in clinical trials, what would be the next step in your career? If you're a clinical trial nurse or you help with patient recruitment, some people may feel that they are stuck in that position and may not know what other opportunities or training is out there and [00:20:00] available.

And so I want them to have a sense of enrichment in their jobs, and again, be part of the collective unit and see the next step and not feel that there's this glass ceiling.

Neda Frayha: How do you balance all of these different roles and responsibilities? So you were just describing the workforce development work that you do in the cancer center.

You are the assistant dean of student engagement and student life in the med school's office of student affairs. You're also a professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology. I mean, you are a scientist every day. How do you do it all?

Tonya Webb: So balance is definitely a work in progress. Um, and so one thing that can help is staying focused on my purpose.

So I prioritize things that really matter to me, and I make sure I'm investing my time in [00:21:00] what really matters. And so I tell the students that it's easy to over-commit and say yes to a lot of things that sound good, but just because you can doesn't mean you should. And so... And people can tell when you are trying to please everyone but you're only able to give like 80%.

If you're not 100% present and in that moment and engaged, then it's not the best that you can give. And so the things that matter the most to me, I will make sure that I'm able to give the energy and be very intentional in that time and in that space and do my best for those things. And so that means not saying yes to everything.

I do say yes to a lot. But, uh, not saying yes to everything and prioritizing, setting boundaries and making space for things that are really important.

Neda Frayha: Dr. Webb, what closing advice do [00:22:00] you have for our students who are listening?

Tonya Webb: So I have a couple of pieces. I think that the first advice I would give would be to not let anyone steal your joy.

I feel that people will make comments, and you will take it in, and they will go on about their day and not realize what impact it had on you. And so the way that you can deal with that is to not internalize it because you may not know what their intent. They may have just said something in passing, and again, we have the ability to just pull it in and, like, let it ruminate and let it sit.

And I'm like, "Don't let that happen. Don't let someone steal your joy." Take it for what it was meant, or if it has a positive impact- impact on the way you move forward, great, but if not, just let it go because you don't have to have everything figured out right now. Every day is an opportunity to learn and grow.

That's what I tell myself. So [00:23:00] use that as you move forward. And so just stay curious and open to opportunities because you never know what that next conversation or that next experience will lead you into doing. And build your community. Surround yourself with people who uplift you and support you, just so that you can be happy at this time in this space that you're in, right?

Build those relationships that support you and help you grow, your peers, your mentors, and your support system, because that's what really matters.

Neda Frayha: That's beautiful advice. Dr. Tonya Webb, thank you so much for your time. It has been a joy to get to know you.

Tonya Webb: You as well. Thanks so much.