

Weill Cornell dean/doc gets high marks

We have it on good authority—her own—that there are things that Dr. Laurie Glimcher does less than expertly. If she's set adrift in a city with a complicated layout, she will get lost. If she's asked to take a turn on karaoke night, she promises that audience members "will not enjoy themselves."

Glimcher conveys these supposed shortcomings wryly, as part of a discussion about how, in her four years as dean of Weill Cornell Medicine, she has elevated an already supremely well-regarded institution by recruiting individuals who are smarter than she is. "If you are an A-grade type and you surround yourself with Bs, it'll have a cascading effect. The Bs will surround themselves with Cs and you'll end up with a mediocre enterprise," she says.

Glimcher ranks among the As, a rare individual who's both admired and respected by a broad range of constituencies. In her case that comprises the research community (she led a team identifying the master regulator protein that controls components of the immune system), academia (prior to arriving at Weill Cornell, she was a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard Medical School) and medicine (she is board-certified in internal medicine and rheumatology). And as the leader of Weill Cornell, she has had the opportunity to work in and around these groups and others, increasingly including Big Pharma.

She numbers among the vocal supporters, in fact, of research alliances between academia and industry. She's had a hand in the growth of the Tri-Institutional Therapeutics Discovery Institute, pairing Weill Cornell with Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Rockefeller University and Takeda to up the pace of drug discovery and therapy development. "The relationship between academic scientists and pharma companies is a marriage made in heaven," she says. "Partnering up—and doing it with complete transparency—is the best possible scenario for patients."

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Dr. Laurie Glimcher

Jan. 2012–present
Stephen and Suzanne Weiss Dean, Weill Cornell Medicine

1999–2012 Senior Physician and Rheumatologist, Brigham and Women's Hospital

1991–2011 Irene Heinz Given Professor of Immunology, Harvard School of Public Health

That mix of patient focus and pragmatism is what distinguishes Glimcher from others in similar posts. While Glimcher's role is expansive—we haven't even touched upon the med-school or fund-raising components yet—she remains very much grounded in her training as a physician.

"It's the perfect background for a leadership position," she explains. "You have a huge responsibility on your shoulders and you have to be able to deal with the weight of that. You also have to be able to make decisions on what might sometimes be imperfect or limited data."

That's why Glimcher has sought to empower those beneath her and mentor the next generation of leaders. In particular, she has made a concerted effort to identify and promote women who hadn't previously been recognized for their ability. While Glimcher is quick to add that she's "done the same thing with talented men," she rightly notes that "women have a harder time assuming positions of leadership. There's an inadequate number of role models for women."

Complacency isn't likely to set in anytime soon. She recently oversaw a rebranding effort that resulted in a name change (from Weill Cornell Medical College) and newly articulated defining principles ("Care. Discover. Teach."). Indeed, Glimcher characterizes herself as a "natural risk-taker," which dates back to her days heading a lab. When working on the project involving the regulator protein, she and her team isolated a key gene using what Glimcher calls "kind of a crazy approach. My postdoctoral fellow was skeptical, but I said, 'Look, if this doesn't work, we'll try something else.' We were fortunate."

Not surprisingly, then, she presses Weill Cornell researchers (she has recruited more than 50 A-listers since her arrival) to aim high. "If you're a scientist and you're not taking big risks, you're never going to do anything transformative in your field."

For all the transformations she has effected, Glimcher remains warm and grounded. She credits her three children for this. "The day I received the news that I'd been elected to the National Academy of Sciences, I got home and my youngest son asked, 'How was your day?' I told him that, well, I got this pretty great phone call," she recalls. "He looked at me and said, 'That's nice, Mom. I'm hungry.' It brought me right back to what really matters." —Larry Dobrow

