

Advancing Health Equity

An Interview with Dr. Marla J. Keller, Executive Dean, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Montefiore Einstein

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Marla Keller is a tenured Professor of Medicine, Obstetrics & Gynecology and Women's Health, named holder of the Jacob and Jeanne Barkey Chair in Medicine, and Executive Dean. She previously served as the director of the Harold and Muriel Block Institute for Clinical and Translational Research at Einstein and Montefiore, which is funded by a Clinical and Translational Award (CTSA) from NIH; as Vice Chair for Research for the Department of Medicine; and as Interim Senior Associate Dean for Clinical and Translational Research. Dr. Keller received a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from Cornell University and a medical degree from New York University School of Medicine. She completed residency training in Internal Medicine at Beth Israel Hospital and fellowship in the combined Infectious Diseases training program at Beth Israel Hospital and Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. She completed the Clinical Research Training Program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine and was on the faculty at Mount Sinai for nine years before arriving at Einstein and Montefiore in 2007.



Dr. Marla J. Keller

that might describe a lot of institutions, what sets Einstein apart is our dedication to advancing health equity and our long-demonstrated commitment to actively engage with our community. Based in the Bronx, the poorest urban congressional district in the country, we train students to care for a truly diverse population, to understand the social determinants of health, and to advocate for their patients and their needs. We find that our students, faculty, and staff choose Einstein because of

our strong education and research environment and deep commitment to service. For example, for more than three decades, Einstein has supported New York City students from historically marginalized groups by offering pathway and mentoring programs as a way for them to learn about, and successfully pursue, careers in health and medicine. And I should note that our mission to equity is truly a part of

our DNA. When our namesake, Albert Einstein, agreed to lend his name to our institution in 1951, he did so because we would “welcome all creeds and races” – a radical statement at the time, and one we continue to build on.

Will you discuss your new role as Executive Dean at Albert Einstein College of Medicine?

As Executive Dean, I am Einstein's second most senior officer and am responsible for supporting research – from basic science to clinical trials to community and population health studies – as well as educational and academic operations. I direct the research enterprise, provide guidance and resources for research education and training, foster new and interdisciplinary research initiatives and collaborations, and implement all regulations and policies. I work closely with department chairs and center directors to fund and spur new research, strategically recruit, retain, and mentor faculty, and expand opportunities for scientific discovery. I and other executive leaders

INSTITUTION BRIEF Montefiore Einstein (montefioreeinstein.org) is the umbrella organization overseeing both Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Albert Einstein College of Medicine (einsteinmed.edu) is one of the nation's premier centers for research, medical education, and clinical investigation. During the 2024-25 academic year, Einstein is home to 712 MD students – who attend tuition-free – 226 PhD students, 112 students in the combined MD/PhD program, and approximately 225 postdoctoral research fellows. The College of Medicine has more than 1,900 full-time faculty members located on the main campus and at its clinical affiliates. In 2024, Einstein received \$192 million in awards from the National Institutes of Health.

How do you define Albert Einstein College of Medicine's mission?

Einstein's mission is to drive scientific discovery and educate compassionate and diverse leaders in health and science. While



Michael F. Price Center for Genetic and Translational Medicine and Harold and Muriel Block Research Pavilion

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at Montefiore Einstein, the umbrella organization for Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, are committed to transforming health in the Bronx and beyond through scientific breakthroughs, educational innovation, high-quality clinical care, and community partnerships. I am truly honored to be in a position to enact change and advance health in our borough, our country, and around the world.

You began your medical career as an infectious disease physician. Will you highlight your professional journey to Executive Dean?

I loved learning about infectious diseases as a medical student and internal medicine resident. I chose a career in infectious diseases because I wanted to care for patients with HIV infection. Protease inhibitors were discovered during my fellowship training in the late 1990s and completely changed the landscape of HIV treatment. My dying patients came back to life, went back to work, and enjoyed more time with their friends and families.

My fascination with the significant scientific progress in HIV research led me to pursue training in clinical research. My interest was in the prevention and treatment of HIV in women. I led clinical trials of vaginal products designed to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. I enjoyed caring for patients, teaching trainees, conducting research, and mentoring junior faculty.

I was very fortunate because I had outstanding role models and mentors who supported and guided me. Since 2007, I have held several leadership positions at Einstein and Montefiore, including clinical research center director, vice chair for research in the department of medicine, and director of the Institute for Clinical and Translational Research. Serving as a member of the NIH COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel was a highlight of my career. For four years, I had the privilege of working with esteemed and dedicated clinicians and researchers from across the country to help clinicians provide optimal care to patients during the pandemic. My journey to Executive Dean included opportunities to work with strong leaders who taught me the importance of listening and how to strategize, resolve conflicts, and execute change.

You have spent over 17 years at Montefiore Einstein. What has made the experience so special for you?

I and others often say that the “special sauce” of Montefiore Einstein is the people. I have had the opportunity to work with kind, intelligent and compassionate clinicians, educators, researchers, trainees, and staff. There is a shared commitment among all of us to educate, accelerate science, and improve the health of our patients. What has made the experience so special for me is our highly collaborative environment and the emphasis on learning from others with different perspectives. I have always felt supported by my colleagues and mentors. There are many opportunities at Montefiore Einstein to learn new skills, advance one’s career, and to collaborate on exciting clinical, educational, quality improvement, and research initiatives. I often say that the ability to collaborate at Montefiore Einstein is like nowhere else I have ever been in my career.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in leadership roles in the industry, and more specifically at Einstein?

Absolutely. It has been shown that women in healthcare leadership positions strengthen their organizations. Although there’s still a long way to go to achieve gender parity, the representation of women in CEO positions at healthcare organizations and as medical school deans has been increasing. Women currently account for 28 percent of U.S. medical school deans. Training to reduce gender bias prior to searches and hiring can help us improve further. And I only see greater opportunity on the horizon. Most medical students in the U.S. are now women. Remarkably, more than 60 percent of Einstein medical students in the Class of 2028 identify as women. It’s important for them to find female role models who are leaders and mentors who can help them advance.

At Einstein, our Dean, Dr. Yaron Tomer, has appointed several women to important new leadership roles since assuming leadership in October 2023. In addition to myself, the vast majority of new leadership hires have been women – including our vice dean for education, three senior associate deans, and a department chair.

Einstein is now tuition free for its medical students. How do you see this impacting the College of Medicine?

From its inception, Albert Einstein College of Medicine has provided world-class education and cutting-edge research experiences to medical and graduate students and, as I mentioned earlier, a strong commitment to equity. The recent transformational gift ensuring free tuition for medical students in perpetuity will have a profound impact on our students and their families. Students who never had the option – or felt they didn’t have the option – of pursuing a medical degree because of finances can now consider Einstein. Freed from crushing debt, students at Einstein have the freedom to choose their career path based on passion rather than financial necessity. They can pursue their interests in research, global health, and community engagement, or consider additional training to obtain a second degree at Einstein – such as our master’s degree programs in public health, clinical research, or bioethics – without the stress or burden of how their tuition will be paid. Several students have told me that they no longer need to work during medical school to feed or house themselves and their families. Others have told me they are thrilled that they can start their families sooner. And more have shared the immense burden lifted from their parents’ shoulders. The gift has been truly transformational on many levels.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in medicine?

I often tell them that it is a true privilege to care for patients. People put a lot of trust in their doctors, and as a physician, you often see people when they are at their most vulnerable. It’s important for people to understand that it is a career based on service. I also like to emphasize that there are so many opportunities in medicine. You can pursue a career in clinical practice, research, public health, education, health policy, administration, community advocacy, and more. No matter what path, I stress the importance of knowledge, attention to detail, compassion, tenacity, and resilience. I emphasize that collaboration, teamwork, and professionalism are needed to succeed. Most importantly, I tell young people interested in medicine that it is a deeply fulfilling career in which there is life-long learning. I can’t imagine anything better. ●