An Impactful Foundation for Translational Research Careers: Exit Interviews with Georgia CTSA KL2 Scholars

Eric J. Nehl, PhD, Rachel Hardison, MA, Igho Ofotokun, MD, MSc, Dawn L. Comeau, PhD, & Henry M. Blumberg, MD

Emory University Schools of Medicine and Public Health; Georgia CTSA Research Education Program

BACKGROUND

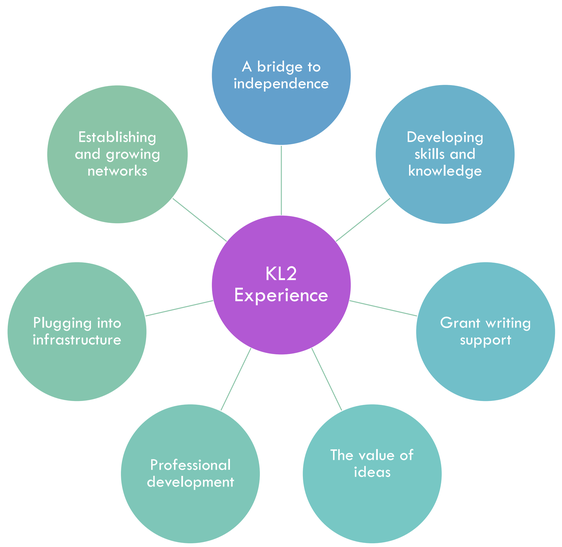
- The Georgia Clinical & Translational Science Alliance (Georgia CTSA) KL2 Program supports career development for junior faculty committed to careers in clinical and translational science (CTS) through didactic and mentored research training.
- Didactic research training is provided through the Master of Science in Clinical Research (MSCR), the Certificate Program in Translational Science (CPTS), or a menu option of selected courses.
- Mentored research training includes the KL2 scholar carrying out a clinical and/or translational research project under the direction of an established, federally funded CTS investigator at one of the Georgia CTSA institutions.
- ***OBJECTIVE**: Using qualitative program exit interviews, this study evaluates how CTSA support has resulted in providing a foundation and direction for research careers in CTS.*

EVALUATION PROCESS & METHODS

- Between 2018 – 2024, using a semi-structured interview guide, exit interviews were conducted with KL2 scholars as they exited the 2-year program.
- Twenty-three of 32 KL2 scholars participated in an interview.
- Key themes from these interviews are summarized, combined across years to assess consistency and emerging themes.
- Results are shared with the Georgia CTSA Research Education Executive Committee.

FINDINGS

Themes emerging from KL2 scholar exit interviews:



Georgia CTSA KL2 Scholar Demographics (Sept. 2018-2024):

N = 33 scholars (30 KL2, 3 UL1 DS)

64% women | 54% non-white | 27% URiM

39% MD | 52% PhD | 6% MD/PhD | 3% PharmD

Scholars reported several benefits of the KL2 Program.

- Protected time afforded by the program enabled scholars the opportunity to focus on research, research training and publications.
- Didactic and mentored research training helped develop CTS research skills. Courses mentioned as most beneficial included scientific and grant writing, biostatistics, epidemiology, and a colloquium (seminar style course focused on practical issues in CTS).
- Workshops and professional development opportunities such as Team Science, Leadership, and Mentor Training workshops as well as the opportunity to serve on an NIH style study section.
- The infrastructure of the KL2 program including guidance from the KL2 program directors, planning tools, classes, and grant writing support were often mentioned as benefits to their knowledge and skills to become successful, independent CTS investigators.

FINDINGS

Establishing and growing networks: The infrastructure of the program provides the opportunity for scholars to build collaborations for future work and meet peers from other departments. This key benefit of the program, to grow their networks, was mentioned by most scholars. The development of these networks started for many scholars with the formal establishment of a team of mentors to support their KL2 applications. Then, with the time afforded by the program, along with the structure of the program, they were able to continue to develop these relationships into strong and influential mentoring relationships. For instance, one scholar noted that the program helped them get *"better at working with my mentoring team."* Overall, scholars were very complementary of the mentoring they received. As one scholar noted, it was the best part of their work: *"I am unbelievably grateful for my mentor. The most satisfying aspect of my job at Emory has been working with my mentor."*

Professional development: In addition to formal coursework and focusing on grant writing, KL2 scholars reflected on the value of workshops and other professional development opportunities. These included the TL1 review panel and workshops on Team Science and Mentoring.

Plugging into infrastructure: The infrastructure of the program, including guidance from the program directors, planning tools, classes, grant writing support, and others were mentioned by scholars as benefits to their developing knowledge and skills to become successful and independent clinical translational researchers. The program provided scholars the opportunity to learn about Georgia CTSA-wide resources and opportunities as well. One scholar shared, *"it also plugged me into a lot of cool resources that are offered through the Georgia CTSA that I probably wouldn't have otherwise had access to."*

The value of research ideas: Scholars recognized a number of benefits of the KL2 award. Many noted the prestige of being awarded a '*super competitive grant*' and how including the KL2 training on grant applications is '*viewed favorably*' on grant summary statements. Similarly, scholars described how receiving the KL2 provided '*leverage*' to focus on research and '*a level of credibility*' to their research ideas.

Developing skills and knowledge: Scholars shared numerous ways that the training they received helped develop or bolster clinical and translational research skills. Some of the courses mentioned as most beneficial included grant writing, biostatistics, epidemiology, and the colloquium. Their participation in the coursework and journal clubs helped develop their ability to critique the literature.

A bridge to independence: The protected time afforded by the KL2 program enabled scholars the opportunity to focus on research and work on publications. For those with clinical responsibilities, it helped to '*balance*' the time with more focus on research. Scholars described how the KL2 time period offered the opportunity to '*gain momentum*' and '*develop a foundation*' for a research career. Many cited the KL2 as a '*bridge*' to their next funding opportunity by providing a '*framework*'.

Grant writing support: One of the biggest benefits noted by scholars is the grant writing support offered by the program. Scholars shared various ways in which the program facilitated their grant writing skill development and the numerous opportunities to continue developing skills.

IMPLICATIONS

- **The KL2 scholars were highly satisfied with the KL2 program and credited their participation with changing career trajectories or solidifying their direction toward a successful clinical and translational research career.**
- **Our findings showcase the impact that CTSA support has had on KL2 scholars.**

CONTACT: ENEHL@EMORY.EDU

Supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number UL1TR002378, KL2TR002381 and TL1TR002382. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

Georgia CTSA
Georgia Clinical & Translational Science Alliance

EMORY UNIVERSITY

Georgia Institute of Technology

MOREHOUSE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
1785