

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation**  
**Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 3**  
**Interview with Brenessa Lindeman**

Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP (HJH):

Welcome back to [Vital Voices](#), a podcast from the [Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation](#). I am Dr. Holly Humphrey, president of the Foundation. Our third season of Vital Voices focuses on the [2023 cohort of Macy Faculty Scholars](#), six individuals chosen to participate in a two-year [Macy Faculty Scholars](#) career development program because of their demonstrated potential as future leaders in medical and nursing education. I am delighted to have the opportunity to share our scholars' stories with you, as I think you will find their work to advance health professions education and their own personal experiences and perspectives to be inspiring.

Today's interview is with [Dr. Brenessa Lindeman](#), Associate Professor of Surgery and Medical Education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Dr. Lindeman is also the Assistant Dean for Graduate Medical Education, as well as Section Chief and Fellowship Director for Endocrine Surgery. Beyond her numerous leadership roles at the University of Alabama, Dr. Lindeman has held significant positions of leadership nationally as well. During residency, she spent four years on the board of directors for the Association of American Medical Colleges. And she currently serves on national committees for the Association for Academic Surgery, the Association for Surgical Education, the American Board of Surgery, and the American College of Surgeons.

In her Macy Faculty Scholars Project, Dr. Lindeman will use Entrustable Professional Activities, or EPAs, to define gaps in general surgery training. Dr. Lindeman is in an ideal position to carry out this work, as she was on the Association of American Medical Colleges' drafting panel for core EPAs upon entering residency and she chaired the panel on endocrine surgery EPAs. And now, here is my conversation with Dr. Brenessa Lindeman.

Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP (HJH):

Brenessa, thank you so much for joining me today and wow, what an incredible list of accomplishments I just summarized in your introduction.

Brenessa Lindeman, MD, MEHP (BL):

Well, thank you. I think as you have probably experienced, there's almost nothing in medicine done in isolation, that everything's a team sport. But it is certainly a true pleasure to be with you today.

HJH:

Great. Well, listen, I'd like to start off by asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself. What brought you to the field of medicine and specifically to your work as a medical educator?

BL:

Yes. Well, I grew up in a very tiny town in rural eastern Kentucky. And I actually come from a long line of educators, so much to the effect that my mother told me that if I went into education, she would disown me. So with that in mind, as a good daughter who loved science and enjoyed working with people, I absconded off to medical school. But it was really that things came full circle during the course of medical school.

There was the most wonderful individual who turned out to also be a surgeon, who was the Associate Dean for Education at Vanderbilt. And we were undergoing a curriculum revision. And it was her approach, the way that she broke down the issues, the way that she ensured that everyone was included and elevated all voices around the table. It was so inspirational to me, and I knew, from that work

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation**  
**Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 3**  
**Interview with Brenessa Lindeman**

forward, I wanted to devote my life to improving education. Then I got bit by the surgery bug and tweaked that mission just a bit to think about improving surgical education and training in the US and beyond.

HJH:

Well, I am glad that you brought up the issue of a surgeon and your career as a surgeon. Because I think you know that you are actually one of only a few surgeons in our Macy Faculty Scholars. And that's something we are actively looking to try—to invite more surgeons to apply to the program, and to be able to support as they themselves devote their career to surgical education. So, tell us a little bit more about what led you to apply to the Macy Faculty Scholars Program as a young surgical educator.

BL:

Well, thank you for using the word young to describe me, but this program is actually something that I had been hoping to be able to apply to for a very long time. I learned about it first, actually, during my residency training, as there were individuals on the faculty at Johns Hopkins that had been part of the Macy Faculty Scholars Program. I saw those announcements, and there are relatively few programs that provide intensive, meaningful funding to support education-related projects. And so, I had been biding my time to wait to when I had finished five years on the faculty, so that one day I could also apply to the Macy Faculty Scholars Program.

To take that just a bit further, as I learned more about the program, I think the mission of the Foundation and the type of work that it supports really resonated with me. Through work that I had done with organizations in the past, I've come to believe strongly in trying to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion to be able to think more critically about the ways that we critically examine and assess the processes that we have in place in the medical education system. And so, I certainly was so heartened to find a program like this that seeks not only to support incredible projects, but also to connect the individual Scholars to be part of a community. And help them to advance their career in support of advancing the entirety of the medical education enterprise.

HJH:

Well, I hope it goes without saying that we are so glad that you applied to the Macy Faculty Scholars Program. And as I already mentioned in your introduction, you have already demonstrated a far-reaching impact through your work with national organizations such as the Association of American Medical Colleges, the American Board of Surgery. And as you reflect on what you've already accomplished with those organizations, can you help us learn the steps that you took or the efforts that you made to position yourself as a leader, not only at your own institution, but nationally?

BL:

That's an interesting question because I think that it maybe belies intentionality on my part. I think that I'm just the type of person that has an innate desire to be involved in things, particularly things about which I am passionate. And I feel so fortunate to have been able to be involved in the work of the AAMC, which was mostly back when I was a resident. But that introduced me to the notion of competency-based assessment and education, and really ignited that passion within me that I could then translate to the work I've done with the American Board of Surgery.

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation**  
**Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 3**  
**Interview with Brenessa Lindeman**

But so much of that was someone acting as a mentor or a sponsor. And really not even knowing where it would lead, but just asking if I would be interested in getting involved in this particular organization and staying open to the possibilities. So when I first began working with the AAMC, I was part of the Organization of Resident Representatives. And I had no idea what that group did. It primarily was a constituent body that represents the voice of resident physicians back to the amalgamation of constituent bodies that is the AAMC. And I really wanted to just be able to move the work of that group forward.

And so, that's the advice that I give to the students and residents that I have the privilege of mentoring now. That it's all about when an opportunity presents itself, when a door opens, going through it and giving it everything that you've got, or at least to follow your interests along that line, especially because you never know what may develop. I had no idea that competency-based assessment and education would be the issue and effort that I focus my attention and really my career's work around. But there's nothing else that makes me more excited to think about when I get up in the morning, save may be a very technically excellent thyroidectomy.

HJH:

Oh my, I could only wish to be in the operating room watching you in action during one of those technically challenging thyroidectomies. But it's pretty clear to those of us who know you, that you have a lot of interests. And you have worked on projects ranging from competency-based education and Entrustable Professional Activities, along with issues related to resident well being in the clinical learning environment. And that's a topic that I have spent a good portion of my career thinking about and working to improve. So, what are some of the most important steps that an institution can take today to support the wellness of their residents?

BL:

Yeah, that's a difficult question. And I think if any of us had the answer, we would be much better off than we are now. I think I've come to learn after overseeing this at my home institution for the past six and a half years, that there's not a one-size-fits-all solution.

When I first started, we were really on the hunt for what was the thing that we could do—institute-wide—that was going to make *the* big impact. And what I think I've come away from, after many years of surveys and focus groups and some initiatives that succeeded and some initiatives that failed, are a couple of realizations. The first is that institutions need to recognize that it's a two-pronged effort that is needed. And what I mean by that is that there are individual targeted interventions, things to improve wellbeing, things to enhance personal fitness or knowledge about finance or mindfulness, things that are targeted to the individual that are necessary that help people become the best versions of themselves. Those are necessary and important, yet they are not sufficient.

So, the second prong are institution-level efforts. Unfortunately, those often can be resource-intensive that help to lessen the burden and the work compression that people have been suffering from that also contribute to burnout. Those are harder to tackle, but I think the institution taking a serious look and examining for what the underlying issues are within the broader institution, within individual training programs. And then being transparent about the rationale—why things can't be changed, if that is true. But also being able to set aside some resources—time, money—to be able to chip away and make small impacts. I think those small wins over time translate into larger wins because they help people feel as though they're being listened to and that they matter.

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation**  
**Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 3**  
**Interview with Brenessa Lindeman**

HJH:

Brenessa, I'm so glad you mentioned that the issues related to wellbeing are really multifactorial. In listening to you describe just a few of the ways in which an institution might think about this, it makes me think we could do an entire podcast series just on that topic alone. But of course, that is not our purpose today. So I want to move on, even though I hope you and I will continue that conversation over the course of the next many months and years. But as you think about the years ahead for yourself, how would you like to see your work impact medical education?

BL:

Yeah, I've thought some about this, although certainly these are just hopes. And some may say that they're pie in the sky, although I do consider myself to be an optimist. But I really do believe that competency-based education is an important frame that will move medical education into the next set of advances that it needs to take. And so my hope is that the work that I'm privileged to be part of — and in no way is it solely my own work — but the work that we are doing within the discipline of surgery as well as the work that others in pediatrics and family medicine and orthopedic surgery are doing — to really move competency-based assessment, at least, out of the realm of theory and into practice. And into practice in such a way that it becomes a requirement for an important phase in the transition from training to practice, that of certification for a specialty.

I believe that that's going to begin to move the needle to help us understand the heterogeneity that we currently have in our product of training, and where the opportunities are to address that. I personally believe that that will require us to layer on competency-based education efforts on top of the assessments that we're doing. But I just get very excited to think about it, because I think the work we're doing now is really the foundation for what's to come. And there are so many possibilities that will open up and allow other scholars to come along and help us to figure this out in service of creation of the physician of the future that is best matched to meet the needs of the populations we serve.

HJH:

That's really a beautiful summary and a wonderful way to move forward. And I know that you have so many demands on your time. I just want you to know how much I appreciate you making the time to talk with me today about just a few of the highlights of the things that you've been working on. Your accomplishments are obviously very impressive, but in listening to you on more than one occasion during this conversation, you have really emphasized it's not just the outcome, it's the process, and the way in which you have achieved what you've achieved to date. Your numerous teaching awards, leadership positions, successful scholarship, are all indicative of someone who really invites collaboration and supports the next generation of healthcare providers. And we are so honored to have you on the Macy Foundation's team as one of our Macy Foundation Scholars. And we cannot wait to see what you are going to accomplish over the course of the next few years and over the course of your career as an academic surgeon.

BL:

Well, I am just extremely grateful to the Macy Foundation and to you for allowing me to be part of what I have come to learn is an incredible community of like-minded individuals dedicated to the pursuit of making medical education even better than it is. So, thank you for that opportunity and for the opportunity to sit down and chat a little bit more.

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation**  
**Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 3**  
**Interview with Brenessa Lindeman**

HJH:

Well, I look forward to all that lies ahead, Brenessa. Thank you.

BL:

Thank you.

HJH:

Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll share this conversation with others. You can find this and all episodes of the Vital Voices podcast on the [Macy Foundation website](#). We hope you will subscribe to the series so that you won't miss my upcoming conversations with the 2023 Scholars.

We are now accepting applications for the [2025 cohort of Macy Faculty Scholars](#). You can learn more, and apply, via our website, [www.macyfoundation.org](http://www.macyfoundation.org). The application portal will close on September 15th, 2024.