

Chapter 26

Training to Be an MD/PhD: An Exercise in Futility/Humility

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ABSTRACT

The most influential assignment of the author's career was the first assignment in his first undergraduate class: take a picture and describe it in a thousand words. From there, the author found a way to spend each semester of college writing about the photo essays by Robert Frank and Brassai, exploring surrealistic works by Jorge Luis Borges and Federico Garcia Lorca, or pursuing artistic musings. Given the author's enthusiasm for creative pursuits, his standing as an MD/PhD student may come as a surprise. However, creative courses served as outlets from his medical school prerequisite-heavy course load. The author craved their self-guided and exploratory approach. This craving grew to incorporate an interest in research. What follows is the tortuous route that led the author to join an MD/PhD program.

Fall of Freshman Year – Undergraduate

Mostly chaos.

February of Freshman Year – Undergraduate

Scheduling conflicts land me in a physics discussion section for honors students. I am not an honors student. Our first assignment is to write a one-page review of a scientific article. I have never read a scientific article. I must now share the review with the other members of the discussion section.

How does the assignment go? Imagine being told to make a meal from scratch using instructions from a cookbook. Then imagine you have no understanding of how ingredients and kitchen appliances interact. My review is an inedible mash of scientific jargon.

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End of Freshman Year – Undergraduate

Despite my previous foray into scientific literature, I'm pre-med so I decide to join a research lab.

Summer After Freshman Year – Undergraduate

I join a lab that uses pig and sheep disease models. The technician that hired me jokingly defines two types of students in the lab: those smart enough to contribute academically to further the study and those strong enough to contribute physically to move the animals. As a 6'2" corn-fed midwestern boy, I know how I'll be contributing.

Sophomore Year – Undergraduate

Still, mostly chaos.

Sophomore Year – Undergraduate

I am studying abroad in Bilbao, a northern Spanish city. It is commonly referred to as the Pittsburgh of Spain. Early during my studies, I need a haircut. Having to do everything in Spanish, I am terrified I will end up with a sheared head. The experience ends up being as mundane as any haircut. I make an appointment with the stylist. I show up on time the next day and make menial small talk. Navigating foreign territory suddenly seems quite manageable.

Junior Year – Undergraduate

"I think you should consider an alternate career path," Dr. B, my pre-med advisor, says to me as he turns away from the computer screen displaying my less-than-stellar undergraduate transcript. My MCAT and my GPA are not in the realm of a competitive applicant. I want to resent him and feel compelled to say some smug words of defiance to him. Instead, I sigh and resign myself to the hallway. I never visit his office again.

End of Senior Year – Undergraduate

Advising be damned, I am applying to medical school. Senior year has been a good year academically and I feel some momentum. There are some poster presentations and a publication with my name on them, and I think I've got a legitimate shot.

The lies we tell ourselves to feel better.

Fall Gap Year

That physical contribution in the lab has paid off. I am a full-time tech contributing in academic ways. They still use me to lift the animals onto the table.

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