



Five Essays on the Trail to Medical School

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Five Essays on the Trail to Medical School

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Abstract

This collection of essays provide advice and guidance to students, especially Peer Leaders (PLs), seeking to apply to graduate or professional schools. These essays were inspired by my experiences as a leader and helped me craft my medical school applications. These essays exemplify how journaling the opportunities encountered as a PL proves to be of extreme value. In addition to the essays, my PL experiences helped to provide meaningful insights which I could share and reflect on throughout the interview process. When faced with provocative questions (e.g., Describe a challenge you have faced; discuss the importance of diversity; tell us about a time you failed), I continuously found myself able to rely on lessons learned from working as a Peer Leader. I am pleased to describe a variety of special experiences that enabled me to present different aspects of my character to interviewers and to clearly personify the traits that appealed to them in my written application.

“Working as a peer leader stands as one of my most treasured undergraduate experiences! Sharing my experiences as a peer leader throughout the interview trail reaffirmed everything I enjoyed about being part of the program, and I look forward to taking what I learned and applying it to my future at Columbia University, Vagelos College of Physicians & Surgeons.”

Keywords: Leadership, Training, Medical School Application, Professional School Application, Professional Growth, Peer-Led Team Learning, Diversity, Confidence Building

Introduction

Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) aims at improving student learning while simultaneously empowering Peer Leaders to develop critical interpersonal and professional skills. Multiple studies have explored the benefits that undergraduate Peer Leaders may reap from their leading experience (Chase et al., 2020; Guden & Bellen, 2020; Johnson et al., 2015). Skills, such as problem-solving, communication, leadership, and self-confidence, are longitudinally transferable to other fields and may help Peer Leaders succeed in future endeavors (Chase et al., 2020). Journaling can provide leaders with an important outlet to reflect upon their experiences and document their own growth. PLs may later draw upon these reflections for further discussion during applications or interviews.

The practice of reflective journaling has also been implemented in some PLTL programs in part to encourage leaders to learn from their experiences (Johnson et al., 2015). Our PLTL program at the University of Texas at El Paso asks PLs to craft reflective essays at the conclusion of each semester (Marin, 2021) and the following essays were based on my prized experiences. In compiling this collection, it was very helpful to look back on past writings and remember how I felt during that time in my life. I would highly recommend for PLs to "journal" throughout their time on the PL team, especially if a gap will exist between their semester(s) working as PLs and the year they intend to apply to graduate or professional school. There were instances I regret not documenting, such as the challenges Edna Tepezano, Chelsea Moreno, Paulina Torres, and I faced while translating the *Facilitation Guide* into Spanish (McWilliams, et al., 2020). Although I recognized that the project had been a formative exposure to new difficulties, the details became blurry with time. Once it came to writing my application, it was harder to reflect upon the process and articulate its importance. Not only does journaling help with personal enrichment, but it is also invaluable while writing graduate or professional school applications! The essays below were inspired by the journals I maintained as a PL. Background information, prior to each essay, provides context for the listed prompt or the inspiration behind each writing.

Essay A

This essay was written at the conclusion of the application cycle. It did not form part of my applications, but rather stands as a personal reflection on how my perception of peer leading changed throughout the cycle. Ultimately, I found that in trying to communicate my experiences, I was able to articulate their importance to me. I wrote this in hopes of giving readers a view into how I incorporated PLTL into my applications.

The medical school admission's prompt I've been laboring over for hours echoes uselessly in my mind for the umpteenth time: *Tell us about one of your most rewarding experiences.* I don't have to search for an answer. It comes unbidden. Since first reading the prompt, I knew I would write about my time working as a General Chemistry Peer Leader (Marin, 2021). But I type out a few words, delete them, and stare at the blinking cursor once again.

Many discarded drafts later there I was, staring at an almost empty screen and struggling to articulate what exactly I loved so much about peer leading. My reasons were easy to outline. I enjoyed working with students to demystify chemistry and make it more accessible. I liked the challenge that came with that, such as the creative demands of crafting different activities and tailoring my communication to meet the educational needs of a diverse array of students (McWilliams, et al., 2020). And while I could recognize the truth of these statements, they felt lacking, void of the special substance that made the work so rewarding.

I mulled over the prompt again, hoping that if I did it enough times, more appropriate words would spring forth. I searched the dusty alcoves of my brain hoping to grasp at ideas, but what I brought forth was not prose. They were images, snapshots of memories of my most treasured times as a Peer Leader. In them, I saw my students hollering at a demonstration, watching a chemical reaction play out with rapt attention, or talking among themselves before nodding in understanding. At first, it was difficult to identify why it was that these memories stood out to me, but the more I reflected upon them, the more I understood their significance. I realized that the value I found in peer leading was something intangible. I had glimpsed it countless times through my students and experienced it every time I saw the wonder I felt for chemistry reflected in their eyes. Other times, it came in the subtle nod of a head or the unfurrowing of brows as confusion gave way to understanding. Because, while the students were not always perfectly behaved, and there certainly were times when getting them to participate felt like pulling teeth, there were also those instances when things came together, and I could see a change within them. The expressions varied, but the sentiment remained the same. *That* was the joy I found in peer leading, in seeing my students grow and take pride in their own learning. These breakthrough moments allowed me to see the impact of my work in real time. My reward came when I could share the wonder of chemistry and help my students engage with the material.

Throughout the medical school application process, I encountered more prompts for essays and questions. Through them, I realized that there is a universal human aspect underlying all education and as an extension, peer leading. In my interviews, whenever I was asked about peer leading, I made sure to give a concise run-down on PLTL's education model (Gosser, et al., 2001; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2008; Roth, et al., 2001) and the role I played within it. However, I found myself focusing most on the human aspect of education. Most of my interviewers were students, physicians, or researchers who had themselves adopted the role of mentor or educator in different capacities throughout their careers, so many were able to relate to the core of my experiences as a Peer Leader. I remember one instance in which I spoke about how great it was to witness students grow week-by-week. Sometimes, when I would see students talking among themselves as friends and teammates, I would remember they had been a group of timid strangers not so long ago and marveled at their progress. One of my interviewers, an attending physician at a teaching hospital, then relayed her own joy at seeing her residents' rapid growth in the first few months of their training. She spoke warmly about seeing them progress from inexperienced and nervous interns to independent and fully realized residents. Despite the great difference between our circumstances, we were able to trade stories of the students we had worked with. As similar interactions repeated themselves throughout the interview cycle, I came to see that what I enjoyed so much about peer leading was a universal aspect of education and mentorship that resonated with others as well.

Sometimes, when interview questions took me by surprise, I found that I could fall back on my experiences as a Peer Leader. For example, I was asked multiple times throughout the cycle to describe a challenge I had faced, and I was able to talk about instances ranging from having to navigate difficult workshop situations to even resolving disputes between friends and collaborators as we argued over the wording of our PLTL-based abstracts (Marin, et al., 2019a; Marin, et al., 2019b). At another time, an interviewer asked me to describe how I viewed my own diversity and that of others. I began by talking about my background as a Mexican national and first-generation immigrant attending a Hispanic-serving institution. Initially, I believed that as part of the "majority" student population, I could not significantly contribute to our campus' diversity. However, as a Peer Leader, I came to realize that my familiarity with life in both Mexico and the United States granted me a better understanding of the challenges faced by international students, many of whom hailed from our sister-city, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. I believe that this, in turn, helped me build equity within my workshop, as I was able to better respond to their educational needs. As I continued to work with students, I came to see just how varied everyone's

personal and professional circumstances were. My work with students helped me see that my view on diversity had been very limited and superficial, as true diversity extends beyond ethnicity or culture to encompass the multitude of factors, such as class, experiences, interests, and skills, that make each individual unique.

As I was speaking to my interviewer about diversity, I was inspired. I knew what my view on diversity was prior to being asked to describe it, but in communicating my position, I came to realize just how much it had been shaped by my work with students. I always looked back on peer leading fondly as something that helped me grow both personally and professionally. However, it was only in that moment, with the perspective afforded by hindsight, that I fully appreciated my diverse experiences as a Peer Leader. The application cycle, with its seemingly endless prompts and questions, truly forced me to reflect on what I learned as a Peer Leader and how this helped me grow into the person I am today. Ultimately, I was able to communicate this throughout my interviews because every story told of a lesson learned, a challenge that was overcome, or even a funny moment illustrating my personal values and character.

Essay B

This excerpt from an essay describes a rewarding experience.

The lithium chip smoked as it skated across the petri dish. I looked at my students' faces. They looked unimpressed. I picked up a bit of sodium metal and dropped it into the water. It moved vigorously before momentarily sparking. My students were engaged now, watching the mini-explosion happening before them with wide eyes. I held up a new bottle of metal chips and asked, "What do you think is going to happen if I add potassium to water?"

Although many had memorized the periodic trends, my students were struggling conceptually with them. As a Peer Leader (PL), it was one of my favorite units to go over. I always found it fascinating how predictable trends underline chemical reactions, and I labored over ways to share that wonder with my students. I remembered a lab demonstration discussed with PLs, where one could drop Group 1 metals in water to demonstrate periodic trends. The metals with a larger atomic radius, like potassium, reacted more vigorously due to their subsequently lower ionization energies. I asked one of the senior PLs to teach me the demonstration so that I could show my students.

That is how I ended up holding a bottle of highly reactive potassium chips in front of 15 students. One student said it would react more vigorously. I nodded, "But why?" Cricket chirps followed. "Which reacted more in water? Sodium or lithium?" I pressed on.

“Sodium,” they murmured. “But they have the same number of valence electrons,” I said, “So what makes them different?” I saw the pieces begin to click in their minds, in the way they nodded in understanding and turned to each other to confirm their theories. “Is it because sodium is bigger, and its electrons are further from the positive nucleus?”, a student asked cautiously. Yes! “And potassium is even bigger,” another said. Yes, yes, yes!

These breakthrough moments highlighted the joy I found in peer leading, as they allowed me to see the impact of my work in real time. I dropped the potassium chip into the water, and my students hollered as the metal piece crackled and burst into a tiny flame. This is when I saw the wonder I felt for the subject reflected in their eyes. This is why I loved peer leading. I could help demystify chemistry and make it engaging for students. Through it all, I found a love for education that I hope to carry into my future as a physician.

Essay C

This is a short narrative I wrote to explain why peer leading was one of my most meaningful experiences.

Few things remained constant in my time as a Peer Leader, but nothing prepared me for the shift to online learning in Spring 2020. Silence proved to be one of the most glaring issues. My questions were greeted by blank screens or half-baked responses in the chatbox. Friend groups that had formed earlier in the semester dissolved in the face of distance learning, as did my students' confidence to participate in workshop. Realizing I needed to change my approach, I pushed aside chemistry and started the session by asking my students how they were doing in lockdown. The first few answers were timid, but one student went on an energetic rant, elaborating about the number of customers coming in to buy toilet paper. Soon enough, we found out that a large number of the students attending my workshop worked at the same supermarket chain. They laughed and traded work stories. The conversation turned to the new outfits they hoped to wear once they could go out safely again. I stayed quiet throughout this, secretly overjoyed to hear them speak so merrily. Thereafter, my students spoke more freely again and appeared more comfortable operating under the new format. I was reminded that education requires approaches that appeal to both head and heart. I recognized then that my hope as an educator is to go beyond books and lectures to reach the hearts of my students through a holistic approach.

Essay D

In response to a question asking me to describe an instance in which I made a mistake or acted immorally, I wrote this essay. It has been edited to include additional context not included in the original text.

As a Peer Leader (PL) in college, my job was to make class materials accessible, and this required me to personalize my approach to meet the educational needs of my students. I always tried to maintain open lines of communication with students, so that I could structure my workshop in ways that best suited them. My goal was ultimately to put individuals at the forefront of my work and personalize my approach. However, I did not always successfully honor this mission.

One semester, late in the term a student was transferred into my workshop. She approached me at the end of workshop and asked for clarification on a few points. I had a midterm in my next class and was in a hurry to leave, so I only provided her with quick, generic answers. I could tell from her expression that she had more points to address, but with my impending midterm worries, I told the student to schedule an appointment or come during my office hours for additional help. The memory of the encounter bothered me for the rest of the day. I mulled over our conversation and felt that I, invested in my own interests, had not responded appropriately to her concerns. When the student did not come, I decided to send her an email apologizing for my abruptness and asking if she had any additional questions for me. In her response, the student revealed to me that she suffered from an invisible disability and had hoped to discuss class accommodations with me (Note: Word limit prevented me from expanding upon the situation. This student was hard of hearing and was unable to hear me unless I wore a microphone linked to an earpiece she wore. The student wanted to speak to me about her accommodations and ask me to address the workshop, so they could be aware of her condition as well.) She waited to approach me until after the workshop, as she was shy and did not want others to overhear. She could not hear me very well and struggled to read my lips due to my position as we conversed.

I was very disappointed in myself. I had clearly failed to uphold the values and standards I had set for myself. As a PL, I had the responsibility to make myself accessible to students, but in focusing on my own needs, I failed to give someone who was seeking help the time, empathy, and support they required. I apologized to the student again, assured her I was here to help, and set up a meeting for us to discuss the matter.

The experience reminded me of the importance of maintaining open lines of communication. I was reminded that I had to make a conscious effort to understand my students so that I could best help them. I also learned the value of acknowledging my

mistakes and seeking to quickly address them. This encounter convinced me to practice mindfulness in my daily life and work so that my own worries would not be a detriment to my ability to communicate with and support others. I realized that despite my own interests, or how big my problems may feel, I want to consciously set aside the time to listen to and assist others.

Essay E

I wrote this essay in response to a prompt asking me to describe a moment in which I witnessed or experienced discrimination. This is not directly related to peer leading but volunteering at this conference is an opportunity I would not have had if not for my involvement in peer leading (one of our chemistry professors asked for volunteers during our biweekly meetings). This interaction took place at the American Chemical Society Southwest and Rocky Mountain regional conference hosted in El Paso in 2019. I was able to recycle this experience various times to different extents when asked about how the harmful effects of bias, the importance of representation/diversity in medicine/academia, etc.

I am lucky to have experienced very few instances of discrimination in my life, but there was one event that made me acutely aware of how others may perceive me. While volunteering at a conference hosted in El Paso, Texas, I had the opportunity to converse with a professor from Arizona. I asked him how he was enjoying our city, and he responded, "It's nice, but it's a scary little town. You just don't know who might be from Juarez."

His tone of voice was light as if we were two friends sharing a joke, but I was horrified. In his words, there lay an implication that those from Mexico were somehow inherently dangerous. I hesitated to respond. Our conversation had been warm and polite. I believed that by disclosing that I was originally from Juarez, I could put a face to his fears and humanize his view of Mexican people. However, I worried of the opinion that he, a likely accomplished professor with influence, could form solely based on my ethnic background. Ultimately, I decided to tell him I was from Juarez with the hope that our interaction could change his perspective. He responded with gleeful surprise and assurances that, based on my accent, he never would have guessed.

Upon reflection, I grew disappointed in my reaction. I believe I did not do enough to dismantle this man's prejudices. In that moment, I felt the weight of acting as a representative not only for myself, but for every other Hispanic individual. That feeling dictated my actions. I was afraid of being too direct in addressing his comments and somehow confirming his negative view of people from Mexico. For me, saying I was from Juarez felt heavy with meaning, but I recognize that I could have addressed the comments in a direct manner. It is possible that the man was simply unaware of the weight of his words,

and I could have explained the situation in a meaningful way that brought attention to the impact of his remarks, regardless of their intent. I feel that in seeking to influence his perception of a whole people through my actions, I missed the opportunity to truly make the invisible damage of his views visible.

Although I do hope to be a good representative of the groups I identify with, I now understand that I cannot control whether my actions will be viewed through the lens of my identity. Equipped with the knowledge that I alone have agency over myself, I hope that by leading with civility and respect, I can be the best representation of all that I am.

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