

Cliff Ching: Additional Preparation with a Medical Postbaccalaureate Program¹

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Cliff Ching took a sip of coffee as he paused mid-sentence and thought about what to write about next in his personal statement. Although medical school admissions committees relied heavily on MCAT scores and a student's GPA to make their decisions, the required personal statement also made an impact.² With the essay, a student could describe more intangible aspects about their desire to go to medical school and try to give the admissions committee an idea of who they were as a person and what kind of doctor they would become. Creating a compelling statement was an important part of the application and for Cliff it was particularly significant because he wanted to convey the very unexpected course of his life and his deep passion for working in medicine.

Cliff had been thinking about a medical career since his senior year in high school. His aunt was a doctor and he had discussed his interest with her and received a lot of encouragement. He made a choice to leave the familiarity of Northern California to attend UCLA, and majored in physiological sciences because he liked the focus on the whole body. During his undergraduate years, he participated in campus activities and spent a great deal of his time volunteering with the UCLA mobile clinic, an outreach medical effort that served the West Hollywood area. Although his first application to medical school in 2013 hadn't met with success, Cliff was fairly confident that the completion of his post-baccalaureate degree at UC Davis would result in an acceptance. He had excelled in his science classes and been advised to submit the MCAT score he had received when he applied previously as a senior.

Post-baccalaureate programs are one to two year programs that allow students to prepare for a more advanced degree, usually in the health or allied health science fields. Some

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² The standardized test that all medical school applicants is the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT).

programs are focused on helping educationally or socio-economically disadvantaged students become better prepared to apply to medical school.³ Other programs are more generally oriented towards helping students who may not have majored in a science during their undergraduate years complete a required course of academic prerequisites for a medical, dental or veterinary degree.⁴

Cliff had enjoyed the classes in his program and had welcomed the advice and counsel he had received about the rigorous medical school application process. First he had to submit a general application using AMCAS, the American Medical College Application Service and then he needed to complete secondary applications to schools that took an interest in him as a candidate. Finally, if all went well, there would be in-person interviews at schools in which he had an interest. During his post-bac, Cliff had participated in mock interviews and received advice about writing his essays. Now it was time to put what he had learned to work. He wanted to clearly state how important it was for him to attend medical school and show how dedicated he was to a career serving others. Cliff was prepared to keep working on the essay until he got it right.

Early years and Foster Care

Cliff and his siblings entered the foster care system when their mother could no longer care for them. After living in four different homes, Cliff was eventually taken in by foster parents who were familiar with his background and had known him for several years. Cliff came to see their guardianship as a ‘second chance’ in life as they provided an environment in which he was encouraged to set goals and work hard to reach them. Yet despite his successes and comfort with his new family, Cliff did not always find sharing his story to be an easy thing to do. “It was a long story that just brought up a lot of questions that I didn’t always want to answer,” he said.

UCLA and the Guardian Scholars Program

Throughout his high school years, Cliff dreamed about a career in medicine, inspired by an aunt who was a doctor in general surgery. “She motivated me to say to myself, *I can do it*”, he said. His interest lay in having an impact on his community. Applying to many of the UCs, Cliff was accepted to UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, and UCLA. Wanting a change from the Bay Area, Cliff decided on UCLA, enrolling with an undeclared major and then following his interests in the life sciences with a major in the physiological sciences.

In his first year at the university, Cliff had a part-time job in the dining hall and also participated in tennis club and worked as a tennis instructor. In his sophomore year he reached out to the Bruin Guardian Scholars with a desire to be more open about his background and experiences.⁵ “Up until that point, I hadn’t really told any of my friends

³ See UC Davis postbaccalaureate website:

<http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/diversity/postbac.html>

⁴ See the website for the Columbia University Postbaccalaureate premed program:

<https://gs.columbia.edu/postbac/program-overview>

⁵ See their website: <http://www.guardianscholars.ucla.edu>

and when I did, they were both amazed and inspired by what I had already been able to achieve,” he said. Once he began to be more open about his experiences, Cliff began to realize that he could positively impact other young adults and students who had a background like his. “I realized I could be motivational if I talked about how I got through things,” he said, adding, “If I kept hiding my stories I could not really inspire people around me.”

Membership in the Bruin GSP offered Cliff an opportunity to engage in leadership experiences and participate in the planning and coordinating of outreach activities. In his junior year, he was elected President of the Bruin Guardian Scholars and worked to establish a structure for different activities so that the group could sponsor one academic, one social, and one outreach event to increase student’s participation per quarter. Gaining traction with students was a slow process but it yielded positive results. “We did a lot of study halls and game nights,” Cliff said. “We also collaborated with Project Mac which is a student group initiative to help abused and mistreated children. UCLA students visit families nearby in LA and offer mentoring and tutoring.”

The Mobile Clinic⁶

In his sophomore year Cliff signed up to participate in the UCLA Mobile Clinic, a student run enterprise that provided care to underserved clients in the West Hollywood and Santa Monica communities. The clinic served the dual purpose of providing services to the homeless and allowing students to get field experience. Medical students were able to hone clinical and doctoring skills while undergraduates acted as caseworkers and advocates for clients, assisting with medically related tasks when they could and also finding referrals for social services.

After a few weeks, Cliff began to realize that his involvement in this work was helpful to thinking through his professional pathway. In the middle of checking vital signs, diagnosing and treating wounds, and filling prescriptions, Cliff found himself at ease exchanging his life experiences with many of the clients. He noticed he could impact their lives by sharing how he had found motivation to continue on, even during the hardships and turning points in his life. Cliff reflected on the fact that it was a chance encounter in his own childhood that had set him on a pathway to well being. Perhaps he could create a similar impact on other individuals neglected by their biological families and by society at large. Working with the Mobile Clinic helped Cliff reach the decision to become a primary care physician for the underserved.

Applying to Medical School

After browsing through a couple of websites that helped students prepare for the medical school application, Cliff realized the importance of planning ahead, being prepared, and knowing the exact deadlines that governed the entire year-long process. Cliff knew there were a number of pre-health advisors on the UCLA campus, but he was reserved about his medical school ambitions and decided he could figure out what to do on his own. In

⁶ <http://www.mobileclinicproject.org/#!about-us/csgz>

January of his junior year he began to prepare by taking an online class to prepare for the MCAT which included online lectures, homework and practice tests that covered a basic review of the life sciences. In May he took the test itself and by the end of June had submitted his primary applications, selecting fourteen schools. Ten schools requested secondary applications and he quickly completed these by the end of October.

Cliff knew that the personal statement was a key part of the primary application. The open-ended essay prompt simply asked the applicant to use the space provided to explain why they wanted to go to medical school. The only constraint was a character count of 5300 (basically equal to about 1.5 single spaced pages using a 12 point font). Cliff worked steadily on his drafts and was nervous about asking for help. "I didn't want to raise anyone's expectations for me and I'm very independent," he said.

Excited to be waitlisted at UC Davis Medical School, Cliff was disappointed when the final answer of 'no' came in March. It had been nearly a year since he had submitted his original application and the news forced him to reconsider his career pathway. Searching for a Plan B, Cliff browsed numerous job descriptions as well as graduate programs in the life sciences, ultimately concluding after sincere reflection that his true passion was still medicine. Thinking to himself, "I'll just start over," Cliff researched what others did when their first application to medical school was not accepted. That is when he learned about the medical postbaccalaureate programs.

The Medical Postbaccalaureate Program at UC Davis

Cliff submitted an application to the UC Postbaccalaureate Program Consortium very close to the deadline for students who had already applied to medical school.⁷ Shortly after, he received a call and an email from the program coordinator at UC Davis with an invitation for an interview. With the help of his advisors from the Bruin GSP, Cliff prepared well, knowing the interview was opportunity to show others that his potential to become an MD came from a profound conviction that he could positively impact people's lives.

When he received a call two days after the interview with the news he had been accepted, Cliff was overjoyed. "Now I had a plan and new motivation to pursue what I really wanted," he said. Cliff also realized this was not a time to be shy about asking for help. He decided to really take advantage of all the input people could offer him in terms of how to prioritize what schools he should apply to and how to create an application package that was appealing to admissions review committees. Knowing that there were schools of medicine that focus on primary care and others on basic research, and that some schools were more open to applicants from diverse backgrounds helped Cliff decide how to spend his time. "If a candidate neglects these nuances, the application process is kind of like shooting in the dark," he acknowledged. Even though Cliff was able to obtain

⁷ The consortium application allows student to submit one application and select among the different consortium members: UCLA, UC Irvine, UC Davis, UC Riverside and UC San Francisco.

fee waivers for some schools, having clarity about where to apply was also useful in order to prioritize the resources available to cover the costs of submitting his applications.

The UC Davis Postbaccalaureate program is one year long and Cliff excelled in all his postbac classes. He also enthusiastically embraced the advice he was offered and meticulously prepared all his new applications —fifteen for the primary. This time his personal statement was enriched by comments from peers and faculty and clearly demonstrated that his passion for medicine went beyond what grades and scores can convey. **(See Exhibit A)**

Exhibit A: Personal Statement

Jonathan was cold and tired the Wednesday night I treated him at the UCLA Mobile Clinic in West Hollywood, CA. A middle-aged gentleman, who was homeless and hadn't eaten for days, he let me take his vital signs as we sat on the sidewalk and I got some of his history. When I empathized with his difficulties and shared my own story, his posture changed, showing more interest in finding out what motivates me. Thankfully I connected him to resources for obtaining food stamps and General Relief from county social services, potentially putting him on a path of hope to get clean and contribute to society.

During the three years I worked with the Mobile Clinic, I met many homeless people like Jonathan, individuals that came from broken homes where they often only knew one parent or were neglected. I don't know what happened after Jonathan left the clinic, but I have faith in the fact that our meeting, a chance encounter, was a turning point in his life. I have this confidence because my own life was fundamentally changed by a chance encounter at an age when I was almost too young to remember. That meeting put me on a road to well-being and a successful life beyond what my mother could have provided. It has also ensured that my mission in life is certain--to work with the underserved as a primary care physician.

Until the age of four, I lived with my biological mother and two sisters in Berkeley, CA, spending many days and nights on the streets panhandling for money. One day, a young man stopped and offered to buy us pizza, and he continued to come back to provide groceries, clothing, and other necessities for my family. Later, when my mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and deemed mentally unstable, my sisters and I were placed in foster care, passing through four foster homes within the year. But by a miraculous chain of events, the caring 24 year-old man from the street found us, and we were taken in by his family, the Moeckelmanns.

In my pursuit of a career in medicine I have seen the importance of trust between a doctor and patient. Trusting other people has been a growing process for me. I am guarded by nature due to my upbringing, so I didn't share my background in foster care with many people growing up and into college. This strategy led to isolation and seclusion. I began to realize that in order to make a difference in society that I would need to build honest relationships. I reached out to the UCLA Bruin Guardian Scholars program, which became a new family for me within the larger UCLA community. I was able to comfortably share my story with those who could relate and gain more confidence in my identity. I found that there are a lot of organizations and people in this world that are trustworthy and want to see you succeed.

I applied and was rejected to medical school in 2012 and my confidence took a blow. The dejection that I felt was heavy, forcing me to question my commitment to medicine. I looked into other helping professions, but eventually realized that I am certain the medical field is where my skillset fits. I found the UC Davis School of Medicine Postbaccalaureate program, which provided me with another diverse family. Within the

cohort I shared my story, my goals, and my struggles freely and my confidence flourished. I completed the year with an exceptional 4.0 GPA and the belief that I can succeed academically in medical school when surrounded by a strong support network. I am a unique fit to work with the urban underserved and foster youth because of a fundamental trust that is rooted in our shared experiences. I can build on that foundation of trust and not only diagnose and treat, but provide friendship and inspiration to those in need.

At each stage of my life I will need to create small families within large communities. I am not designed to go through life's peaks and valleys alone and neither are those who are homeless or in foster care who feel isolated. If I can reach out as a physician, building small families within large cities, where people can trust me and each other, I can have a major impact on the health of the urban underserved.

Life, at its core, is merely a birth certificate and a death certificate. The relationships made with people and the lives you change between those two certificates are what give life meaning. The experiences I've had have given me a unique perspective on the value and fleeting nature of life. I will not settle on being average, I want to be extraordinary. A doctor has the most noble and fulfilling occupation a person can have because of their ability to build countless positive relationships and improve the quality of, or even extend, a person's life. I am no more special than any other applicant, but I am unique in that I have overcome adversity and possess a unique perspective that will benefit others. I'm most proud of surmounting the numerous odds against my success as a former foster youth. I believe my experiences will allow me to persevere into and through medical school. This is my life's desire: to obtain the knowledge and skills of a doctor in order to reciprocate all I have been given to the people in my community and beyond.