

School Assignment Grows into Career Opportunity

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I would never have thought that a school assignment could amount to a career opportunity. I was shocked, nervous, and excited all at the same time when I received the email. It was just an assignment until then. A real opportunity was knocking at my door, and all I could think of was how it all began, how it all became possible.

Most students, including college students like myself, wonder when or how they will ever use the material they learned during class in their future careers and lives. Many work to increase grade point average rather than increase knowledge. Assignments that were meant to be stepping stones to a successful future are disregarded and unused. It is ironic that when people look back at the years they spent in school, they wish they had tried a little harder or appreciated the opportunities their teachers presented. The very same stepping stones that were disregarded are now unable to be used as stepping stones to a successful future for those who are having trouble attaining it. Yet when students receive this point as a piece of advice, they tend to cast it off as meaningless.

Unfortunately, this is how I would describe myself during my first years of college. I had my mind set on becoming a teacher for a while. I was fortunate to have a handful of engaging, challenging, and effective teachers in high school, yet most of them did not offer the type of meaningful experiences that make students understand how important it is to learn that material. Stones were consistently disregarded. I had my fingers crossed when I entered college, hoping that my professors would be effective at teaching the material, create challenges for me to apply my skills, and be effective at showing me why learning the material was necessary. I was in search for professors who expressed such characteristics so as to emulate them in my future teaching career.

Here, at Lake Forest College, I found such teachers, many of whom had those characteristics and more to supply me with the templates to which I hope to utilize as a teacher. There is one professor in particular who provided me with the challenge that ultimately led to me receiving that email. Dr. Shubhik DebBurman, in his Mechanisms of Brain Dysfunction course, challenged the class with writing a grant. Everyone, especially those in the scientific field, knows that writing a grant takes a great deal of research, team work, writing, editing, and revising until it is ready for submission, which is also a separate checkpoint in itself. Dr. DebBurman wanted his students to experience writing a grant and all that it entails. This assignment was meant to be novel, meaningful, and something that will express our skills as future scientists.

After choosing a partner, I researched a real disease known as Pantothenate Kinase-Associated Neurodegeneration, also referred to as PKAN. I worked as a team to read primary articles and gather information, wrote, edited, and revised a future plan that scientists could take in order to progress the understanding of this disease and develop a future treatment. After all of this hard work, I was proud that I accomplished such tasks that many professionals in the field have not, and all within my junior year of college. It was soon published in Eukaryon,

the undergraduate research journal for the school. Yet even after having such an effective professor with such meaningful challenges, by the summer, I regarded the challenge as simply a past assignment meant to push my college education forward and it became another casted off stone.

Before the summer's end, I received an email from a private company in New York. The founder, and president, of the company was passionate and eager to learning more about PKAN, the same disease my partner and I studied in order to write the grant. He found the grant through the online version of Eukaryon and was instantly intrigued about the future studies we had experimentally described. He shared information about his company and offered us career opportunities based on the challenge I regarded as simply an assignment. I was humbled and honored to receive such a grand opportunity as a junior in college.

All I could think of was how it all began, from having a professor who was dedicated in strengthening student learning and providing students with authentic opportunities and challenges to apply their skills. Dr. DebBurman, as well as many other professors at Lake Forest College, have become my inspiration to teach through the use of challenging, real-world applications. The varieties of experts who teach at the college create an infections environment of learning. The professors believe that all students are capable of succeeding and they model real world science experiences and provide educational opportunities in class, such as the grant proposal my partner and I wrote. Overall, this experience has taught me never to disregard the opportunities I receive as a student and to use past challenges as stepping stones to a more successful future.

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