

Study Abroad for Pre-Med Students:

How a Course in Traditional Chinese Medicine Can Prepare a Student for a Medical Career

Christopher A. Hall
Berry College

To the delight of their parents, many college freshmen come in declaring themselves to be “pre-med.” In truth only a small percentage of these students will actually realize this goal. The student that is ultimately successful in matriculating into medical school is usually a model of perseverance and focus. My five years as the pre-medical advisor at a school known for its high success rate for medical school admission has brought me into contact with many such students. These individuals are far more likely to sacrifice nights out with friends to study. They spend weekends and summers volunteering in emergency rooms, participating in directed research projects, and studying for the MCAT, the notoriously difficult medical school entrance exam. In short these students are highly motivated to succeed. Some might say they are at times too driven.

Many people argue that a student’s undergraduate years should be a time for exploration and discovery. That is the basis of a liberal arts education. But such an education shouldn’t be simply about academic exploration, but rather a time to examine one’s own place in the world and come to terms with the responsibilities of being an adult. It is also important to provide opportunities to explore how other people live, an exercise that often brings a new gratitude and appreciation for one’s own situation. Simply attending college, especially if it means being away from home, is often perceived to provide all the new freedom and worldly insights any student should require to make the transition from being dependent to independent. Many of those students motivated to more fully explore the world find these eye-opening opportunities through study abroad programs.

“I’m Pre-Med. I Can’t Study Abroad”

In contrast, for those driven to attend medical school, the academic experience frequently becomes an extension of high school, with the student rarely considering activities beyond those perceived to be

steps toward medical school admission. Unfortunately they fail to realize that their time for exploring the world from the emotional perspective of a young adult is fleeting. Once in medical school free time is hard to find, a situation that only gets worse in a medical residency program. After that time has to be invested in

establishing a practice, and from that point on, they are largely at the mercy of the appointment book. What is frequently lacking for these students is that singular experience that they look back on and say, “That changed the way I saw the world.”

To realign their focus to considering studying abroad is often difficult. The suggestion frequently elicits a response that amounts to “I don’t want to get distracted from getting into medical school.” It’s at this point that I begin running through the list of reasons that they actually need to participate in study abroad as a way to stand out from the plethora of other outstanding students competing for those coveted spots. Here I’ll briefly outline the advantages gained by the pre-medical students when

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they participate in study abroad programs. This will be followed by a specific focus on the additional benefits of the SIT study abroad program focused on traditional Chinese medicine and public health.

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The medical schools are awash in applications from gifted students. Grade point averages between 3.8 and 4.0 are expected, and MCAT scores above 30 are certainly common. Once these criteria have demonstrated the applicant’s scholastic aptitude there only remains the “extras” embedded within the application to make one stand out from all the other motivated people. Physician shadowing, volunteer work, and glowing letters of recommendation are all expected to be in there as well. What are considered extraordinary are those voluntary experiences that demonstrate a broader cultural education and interest in the lives of others. The astute reviewer of such applications knows that a student that has participated in study abroad programs is far more likely to be an independent thinker, someone that goes beyond convention and wants to experience something outside the confines of the United States pop culture. This translates into a practicing physician who likely thinks “outside the box” of a traditional medical education, openly considering alternative avenues for care and treatment. This is especially true if the travel experience takes the student to a country where healthcare is considered adequate even in the absence of the technology that physicians in the U. S. so heavily rely upon. Despite the arrogance most medical students demonstrate in believing the only real physicians are practicing in the United States, the most outstanding diagnosticians I have ever witnessed were those in developing countries where ordering a battery of laboratory tests was out of the



Learning massage techniques

question. If the television character featured in the series “House” were real, I would suspect he was trained and/or practiced in Ecuador or Vietnam, not in the United States.

With only their perspective from the spoiled perch of privilege to draw on, the conditions and challenges dictating healthcare in developing countries are always eye opening for students from the U. S. Few forget the sight of a small child carrying a five-gallon bucket of muddy water up a steep hill to their home. This always seems to lead to a more empathetic view of those that have to awake each morning to face these challenges. Many students that have participated in such study abroad programs come home with a greater sense of charity and desire to reach out. Inevitably the impact of these experiences finds its way into the essays required by all medical school applicants.

An Ideal Program: Chinese Traditional Medicine

When it comes to suggesting a specific study abroad experience to a pre-medical student there are few choices that combine the more general life changing experiences of exploration of a truly foreign culture while providing a program that examines a healthcare system that has been distilled through 2000 years of experience. The course on Public Health and Traditional Chinese Medicine through the School for International Training (SIT) is one such offering. Based at the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the city of Kunming in Yunnan Province, China, this course immerses the student in an intensive exploration of arguably the oldest culture and healthcare system on earth. The participant receives lessons in the Mandarin language and Chinese culture

(2 credits/30 classroom hours) and more importantly to the medically inclined, 90 hours (6 credits) of instruction and training on TCM techniques and the healthcare system.

There are several reasons why the study of TCM should be high on the “to-do” list of any practicing or future physician. First is the recognized success the Chinese have historically enjoyed in maintaining a relatively healthy populace by stressing a philosophy toward health maintenance rather than treating symptoms and pathology. The success of the Chinese has been recognized in the West, as evidenced through the adoption of many basic TCM techniques. For example, the idea that diet and exercise are fundamental to good health has been a long recognized foundation of TCM. This is an idea that is relatively new in the West, where the dominant strategy had been to wait until sick and then treat the symptoms.

Techniques such as acupuncture and deep tissue massage are increasingly accepted by Western medicine as offering genuine therapeutic value. Indeed the holistic approach to medicine, one that looks at the whole person rather than simply treating a particular symptom, launched the concept of osteopathic medicine, and as such has its roots in TCM. The contributions of TCM to the field of pharmacology also deserves acknowledgement from the West. The health benefits of green tea, artemisin, and quinine, all historically associated with TCM, have been scientifically demonstrated.¹

Integration of Chinese and Western Medicine

Another unique approach to the SIT course is the examination of the way Western medicine is being incorporated into the traditional Chinese system. Indeed many of the lecturers for the course hold dual degrees, one in TCM and another from a “western” medical school. It is revealing that the medical degree in TCM requires a longer course of study than that of a

traditional western medical degree. The program highlights the blending of these two very different, but ultimately cooperative approaches to healthcare. The instructors offer examples of when they might apply the TCM techniques to a patient, and when they feel the more Western approach is warranted. The students are also taken to various rural areas where they meet and learn from “Barefoot” doctors, the traditional rural healers; and participate in conducting health surveys and epidemiologic studies. Finally the program provides insights into the way the Communist government manages the massive logistical challenge of providing healthcare. All this is structured around an immersion into the Chinese culture, with various exercises designed to build student confidence in coping with challenges, invaluable lessons to a future physician.

Typical pre-medical student are normally highly focused and driven toward success. What they may be ultimately missing, though, are those experiences that make them unique candidates in a field of

accomplished scholars. Study abroad courses that allow a pre-medical student to study a successful, albeit different, approach to medicine, while gaining cultural insights and self-confidence, are opportunities that should be presented and hopefully utilized. In addition to standing out on a medical school application the experience almost certainly will provide a lifetime of benefits.



Lecture on medicinal plants by a TCM pharmacist

References

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