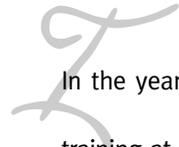


# A Harvard Medical School Student's Reflections on Wellesley

BY HANNAH GALVIN '01



In the year-and-a-half since I graduated from Wellesley and started my medical training at Harvard, I have learned a lot of things: how to do an hour-long neurological exam, how to use a George Foreman grill, and to never mess with the pancreas. But the most significant new understanding has been the true benefit of my Wellesley education and of the community of which I am now a part. I am not writing this at the request of the Admissions Office or the administration. I simply feel compelled to share some thoughts about Wellesley from the perspective of a young alum.

## AS A STUDENT IN THE SCIENCES



On an academic level, I not only gained a great deal of knowledge from the Biological Sciences Department (such that much of my first year of med school consisted of reviewing and reinforcing concepts I had already learned in my undergraduate biology classes), but also realized for the first time that Wellesley teaching—in every department—is unparalleled.

**We are not taught but rather shown how to learn, and challenged to discover and understand more than we ever thought possible.** I was a little overwhelmed by my first science class, Chem 120 with Flick Coleman, in which we were expected not only to learn chemistry, but also to use statistical methods to analyze our data as scientists. It was the first time a professor had expected more of me than I felt capable of accomplishing, but I soon learned that such expectations were not unattainable.

**Throughout my four years, I was constantly amazed that professors treated me less as a student of science and more as a budding scientist.** In Dennis Smith's series of histology classes, we learned more histophysiology than has been presented in my medical school courses. In addition, we were challenged to make discoveries of our own, using advanced laboratory techniques to determine the effects of a specific drug on different mammalian tissues. In Kay Peterman's molecular biology class, we perused the current literature on actin-binding proteins and designed our own experiments to elucidate the function of a novel gene product. In both classes, we worked individually on our specific area of interest, and then had to work as a team to analyze the results, draw conclusions, and present our data in the form of a scientific paper.

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The greatest challenges of all were given by Mary Coyne, affectionately known as “da Chief,” who often sent us off to find answers to physiologic questions that baffled the scientific community at large. This culminated with the final exam for her endocrinology seminar, which essentially consisted of one main question: *We have discussed a couple of theories on the physiological control of the female menstrual cycle and a couple of theories about the role of the protein leptin in feeding behaviors and obesity. There seems to be some connection, but we don't really know what it is. Figure it out.*

It seems impossible—almost unjust—for a professor to expect so much from undergraduates. Yet as I stayed up night after night, reading paper after paper, making chart after chart, engaging in heated discussions with classmate after classmate, and writing page after page (after page after page), I realized that the challenge could be met. My theory may not have been correct, but I generated a plausible hypothesis and proposed experiments, and I graduated from Wellesley as a scientist.

#### AS A STUDENT IN THE HUMANITIES

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Although I spent the majority of my time in the Science Center, I was able to take a great number of humanities classes as well. From Becky Bedell's American painting class to Michèle Respaut's literature and medicine to Michael Cooper's British film seminar to Jay Panetta's history of jazz to Filomina Steady's medical anthropology class, the same philosophy held true: we were not taught, but shown how to learn.

**My humanities professors showed me that language and art and literature and belief systems cannot be confined within the classroom.** We were encouraged to visit art museums and live music venues, to read and write voraciously, to pursue our areas of passion (for example, my paper for an introductory art history class compared American and European graffiti). My professors' words have stayed with me and impel me to find time to explore music and poetry and art even now, in the midst of my medical studies.

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**It was thanks to my biology and chemistry classes that I entered medical school as a scientist, but it was thanks to my humanities classes that I entered ready to learn to be a physician.** These professors prepared both my mind and my heart to receive patients—to listen to their stories, to understand the values of their backgrounds and life experiences, and ultimately to work with them in pursuit of healing. More than that, they taught me how to begin to understand my own story, my own experiences and passions, and how to pursue my own healing, so that I can genuinely identify and empathize with my patients. I guess you could say they truly taught me humanity.

## AS A MEMBER OF THE WELLESLEY COMMUNITY

**The support of the Wellesley community is unrivaled. Faculty members are extraordinarily generous with their time.** Professors like David Haines, for example, would hang around the Science Center until at least 10 PM the night before an organic chemistry exam to answer students' questions. Countless other professors took us out to lunch and invited us to their homes for dinner. In fact, so many professors would invite us over at the end of the semester that we used to joke that they were conspiring to make us fail our exams by packing our schedules full of social activities instead of studying!

This kind of dedication extended into the non-academic realm. Professors would attend plays and concerts and sporting events, and they would show genuine concern for our outside interests and overall well-being. I don't know of any student who did not at some point receive emotional support from a professor in a time of distress.

Even in the past year, Becky Bedell, my art history professor, has met up with me to tour a new exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Michèle Respaut has called me from France where she was running the Wellesley-in-Aix program, and Mary Coyne picks me up at my dorm to take me to dinner or to get groceries at BJ's.

Wellesley's support of students and alums extends into the monetary realm as well. I am so grateful for the financial provisions I was given to pursue clinical research for two summers, and especially for the graduate school fellowship that funded my entire first year of medical school.

**Resources also abound through the alumnae network. Wellesley alums are more committed to one another, to current students, and to the school, than any other institution I have encountered.** The kinship is matchless. In the 18 months since graduating, I have met countless alums and current students with whom I feel an instant camaraderie.

On a professional level, I find that I trust the opinions, guidance, and suggestions of Wellesley alums above those of any of my other esteemed colleagues. On a personal level, I have sent my fair share of e-mails to classmates still in the Boston area, pleading that I've got to escape HMS. Don't get me wrong: I love med school, but I often find that I need some time with Wellesley sisters to feel their support and to help me refocus on what is really important.

I also find myself experiencing the inescapable desire to serve future classes (*non ministrari sed ministrare*, the Wellesley motto). For now, the most I can do is try to advise premed students, but I dream of someday returning to campus with my MD to design a course or lecture series that would give students greater exposure to clinical medicine. **The spirit of service is contagious, and it would be difficult to imagine not giving back in the same way that I have been so greatly served by the Wellesley community.**

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## AS A RECENT WELLESLEY ALUM LOOKING BACK

“Academically speaking, I frankly feel that I got a much better education and much better preparation for medical school than my counterparts from the Ivy League, who admit that most of their professors did not even know their names.”

I don't mean to idealize my time at Wellesley. There were hard times, just as there are for any college student. I had my fair share of emotional crises, relationship problems, frustrations with extracurricular activities and campus jobs, sleep deprivation, short-lived outrages with faculty or the administration, and fears that I would never get into medical school (or graduate, or pass physics for that matter).

But after only a few weeks at Harvard, I was able to see a clear distinction in my undergraduate experience compared to that of my peers. Academically speaking, I frankly feel that I got a much better education and much better preparation for medical school than my counterparts from the Ivy League, who admit that most of their professors did not even know their names. This advantage consists not only in knowledge base (which is not as easy to compare, given different majors and interests), but also really shows itself in terms of depth of scientific understanding and knowledge of how to pursue learning.

**In addition, there is a noticeable difference in confidence. Whereas most of my peers came from schools at which premed students were encouraged to compete with one another, Wellesley encouraged us to work together.** I felt much more camaraderie than competition with my fellow premeds. This breeds a different kind of confidence than just having a long CV or a wall full of diplomas. It is a confidence that does not have to declare itself, but is simply the quiet knowledge that you have been given the strength and the ability—in yourself and in your network of resources—to pursue your dreams and to make a difference in the world. There is no need to enter into competitive games, to manipulate, or to feel threatened by others' successes, because you know that you can rise to meet challenges that seem impossible . . . and you know you don't have to do so on your own because you always have the support of a community of incredible women. It is this kind of confidence that makes great leaders in any field.

“I think of Wellesley as the place where I grew up—and where I learned how to continually grow—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. I think of it as the community that nurtured me and continues to support me. And in many ways, I will always think of it as home.”

When I am asked why I chose Wellesley, I remember the movie *Dead Poets Society*, which I first saw when I was ten years old, and it is sitting in DVD form on my bookshelf as I write this. I was enamored with the dedicated professor who teaches his class to pursue their passions, to think for themselves, to “seize the day!” I wanted to go to a college with professors like John Keating. I visited Wellesley, I saw those professors, I applied Early Decision, and I was not disappointed.

I don't just think of Wellesley as a phenomenal women's college or as a highly ranked liberal arts institution, or as a stunningly beautiful campus in the midst of a yuppie town, although it is all of those things. I think of Wellesley as the place where I grew up—and where I learned how to continually grow—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. I think of it as the community that nurtured me and continues to support me. And in many ways, I will always think of it as home.