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Volunteerism at North Dallas Shared Ministries (NDSM) Baylor College of Dentistry Free Dental Clinic

Alaina Leggette
Engaged learning Project
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Purpose: The purpose of my project, through service with the North Dallas Shared Ministry/Baylor College of Dentistry free dental clinic, is to not only better understand the field of a dentist but also to better grasp the socioeconomic and educational differences in Dallas communities.

Acknowledgements:

To my mentor, Mr. Caleb Marsh, thank you for guiding and encouraging me to explore different fields and for spending countless hours mentoring my journey through the pre-health track.

To the volunteers, doctors, and nurses at the North Dallas Shared Ministries, thank you for providing such an oasis of care to the underserved communities of Dallas. The work you all do is truly inspiring and encouraging. Dallas is a better place because of NDSM's existence.

To SMU and particularly the Engaged Learning Program, thank you for insisting on students' continued learning, not only in the classroom but also outside in the community.

Since most of my Engaged Learning experience was journal entries and self-reflection, the format of my paper will mimic that style. My Engaged Learning experience is one I am incredibly appreciative of, for it helped me accept that the "norm" I thought I had to fit in was fictional and it encouraged me to find a career that encompassed both my interests, passions, and life goals.

PART I: THE START (or so I thought)

First off, I need to explain a few things about myself in order for you to fully understand the story. (1) I am an Economics with Financial Applications major that truly enjoys economic theory, a Biology major that enjoys how complex systems work together as well as a Latin minor who loves tutoring high school students in it—a true liberal arts student as some may see it. (2) I am a planner. I like to have my next stepping-stone planned out well in advance and uncertainty is as big of a fear for me as spiders are for a person with arachnophobia. (3) Out of all my educational investments noted above and the fact that I am a planner, I focused on my Biology degree when deciding on a future career because it had the most stable, set plan after college.

The interesting thing about my project is that I didn't originally plan on volunteering at a free dental clinic here in Dallas. I started my Engaged Learning experience with the idea to document the ins and outs of the medical school application process, which at the time I thought I would be completing at the beginning of my senior year. However, throughout the whole process I started having nagging doubts that this might not be the career I truly wanted. Hoping to settle those doubts, I shadowed a handful of doctors in different fields, but at the end of the day, I still was not 100% convinced this is the career where my talents and interests would flourish. As noted above, this frightened me because I now didn't have a set plan. What was I going to do?! I'm about to start my senior year of college and I don't know what to do after this short year?! My Engaged Learning

project is tanked!! With these thoughts racing through my mind, anxiety and panic set in as I walked into my pre-health advisor and Engaged Learning mentor's office.

PART II: LOST AND THEN FOUND

When I met with my mentor, he quickly reassured me that becoming a doctor was not the only career path for someone who likes biology and helping others. I wasn't so convinced but I tried to accept that it is okay not to choose the career everyone expects you to because of the title of your degree. One thing he suggested was to explore the field of dentistry, which at first, I admit I grossly shrugged off. He gave me the name and number of a free dental clinic that I could volunteer at to gain exposure to the field. I politely smiled but stuck the paper in the back of my planner.

By an uncanny twist of fate, I ended up going to the dentist later that week because of pain in one of my bottom teeth. Turns out that an accident in high school killed the nerve in my tooth, causing it to slowly die and acquire an abscess. That week I had to see a general dentist to diagnose the abscess and start antibiotic treatment, an orthodontist to remove and then replace the bottom retainer that was blocking access to the tooth, and two endodontists, one to perform the root canal and one to bleach the tooth so that the coloring was the same as my other teeth. I was particularly impressed that I was diagnosed with the abscess and had the root canal performed in the same day, for that was one thing I didn't like when I shadowed doctors—waiting for tests, other doctor notes and sometimes weeks to solve your patient's case. I knew, but did not actually grasp, the fact that dentists dealt with such interesting cases, because every other time I had gone to the dentist

it was for a cleaning and checking for cavities. I was also enlightened about the many different specialties there are in the dental field—I had no idea what an endodontist was before I walked into his office! After my root canal experience, I begrudgingly started to think my mentor was right in suggesting I volunteer at the free dental clinic.

PART III: EXPERIENCE

I took out the slip of paper I placed in the back of my planner that Mr. Marsh had given me and decided to give volunteering at the North Dallas Shared Ministries (NDSM) free dental clinic a try. NDSM is truly a gem in the area. The organization offers a variety of free clinics, classes, and necessity handouts to those who otherwise couldn't afford it. I specifically worked in the free dental clinic in which Baylor College of Dentistry dentists and students treat roughly 15 patients a day five days a week.

On my first day of volunteering I was late because the North Dallas Shared Ministry Clinic was in an area of town I wasn't used to. As I rushed into the parking lot I stopped in amazement; there were people waiting in lines that wrapped around the building in all directions. They were waiting in line for food, clothing, vaccines, dental care, and medical care – commodities that to me, were so readily available. When I made my way to the dental clinic, the office manager quickly put me to work, which I loved. Every time I volunteered we started our days at 8AM the same way. We made the charts for each patient with the paperwork they filled out, assisting those who might struggle with literacy, then we logged everything into the

computer system, and finally we created the doctors schedules noting chief complaints and prevailing medical conditions, such as pregnancy or diabetes. I loved this part of the day as it was very busy and there was a lot of interaction with wonderful people. On the days I didn't have class, I got to stay when patients finally got into the dental chairs. I would pull up the X-rays on the computer and the dentists and dental school students would explain what everything in the images meant. There were so many things I enjoyed about the work but the two main things I took away were that I loved the people and I loved the diagnostics.

PART IV: LEARNING

I learned more from this experience than words can even do justice. I learned a lot about myself – what I like, what I dislike – and I also learned about reality, perception, and the world. Escaping the SMU bubble and immersing myself into the realities and challenges that face those in the same community as me was awakening. I couldn't deny the distance of poverty anymore; it wasn't in a foreign country, it was down the road. I also learned a great deal from the patients. I learned patience in its most raw form. Each day we could only see 15 patients. The 16th person in line had to try again the next day to receive care, and that 16th person never angered or complained. Those who were clearly learning English always tried to communicate with me and would stop me from getting the girl in the office who knew Spanish to test his or her English—their learning and drive were infectious. I love reading my magazines, but I quickly learned that the dentists, dental students, volunteers, and staff who kept the clinic running five days a week to provide care for

those who otherwise could not afford it were the real celebrities who should grace the cover of newsstands. I went into the experience thinking that I would lend a hand, but in reality I was the hand was lent to me.

I also learned a lot about the field of dentistry, a career path that was never on my radar before Engaged Learning. I started to understand the importance of not pigeonholing yourself into a career because that is what is expected, common, or usual with an associated major/degree. Likewise, I learned how valuable shadowing, internships, and work force experience are to collegians when deciding what direction to take for the future. Up until the point of college graduation everything had pretty much been planned out for me by either state requirements or my parents insistence – I graduated kindergarten, then middle school, then high school, and then went to college. But in college, for the first time, it was my choice what to do next –is it graduate school? medical school? law school? dental school? join the work force?—deciding what to do after college is a huge adult decision that can only be made by the student. I didn't realize this until my senior year of college and it is frightening, but I am appreciative that I explored options and did not end up doing something I might have disliked because it was the norm.

PART IV: GRATITUDE & CONCLUSIONS

I'm very appreciative of the guidance I received from my mentor and the Engaged Learning office. A time when I felt lost, many people expressed to me that

my situation was normal. I thought all my classmates knew their next stepping stone, but I quickly realized this was farthest from the truth.

A message I hope others can take away from my Engaged Learning experience is that it is perfectly normal to not know what you want to do when you are 21 years old. Instead of trying to fit a mold based off of a major, make your own mold—combine the subject you like, with the people you enjoy working with, with the free time that allows you to do the other things that bring you enjoyment. A great way to make that mold is through Engaged Learning. I'm very grateful of SMU and Engaged Learning for promoting and encouraging me to make my own mold, be creative, and explore. Through my project I realized I truly enjoy working with underserved communities, I surprisingly like teeth, and that a variety of future career options is not a scary thing but a blessing—these are things I might have never known had I not engaged in this project.

I am also too beyond grateful for the North Dallas Shared Ministries and all the incredible work that they do. The wisdom, compassion, and amount of knowledge capable of being gained inside those walls, rival mighty libraries.