Alternatives to Medical School Panel

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Michelle Henry, C ’01 (History of Sociology & Science)
Research Associate, at Public Health Management Corporation
Michelle began her research career as an undergraduate research assistant at Penn’s Institute on Aging, assisting on bioethics projects pertaining to end-of-life-care. With a degree in the History and Sociology of Science, she then joined Penn’s Center for Bioethics from 2001-2004 as a Research Specialist on a federal grant examining the effects of gene patents on clinical testing and research. She has been in her current position as a Research Associate with Public Health Management Corporation’s Research & Evaluation Group since 2004, where she has had the opportunity to evaluate a wide range of local and statewide public health programs, conduct community needs assessments, provide technical assistance, and serve as a core leader of Philadelphia’s fatality review teams. Her areas of specialty and interest include violence prevention, criminal justice, and substance abuse.

As a student, Michelle didn’t know what to do when she first got to Penn. She tried Chemistry, Biology, and English but they weren’t for her so she focused on History and Sociology of Science. She worked in a coffee shop her first 3 years. She looked around for a fun summer job and she got two research jobs through the Penn Center for Bioethics and learned many research skills including statistics and quantitative research skills. She even learned how to write journal articles and was even published as an undergrad. During one of her research stints, she studied the effects of gene patterns in biological research and got to learn much more about genetics through this position. At her current job she has worked on a number of projects, including Pennsylvania’s tobacco prevention and control program.

Michael Mittelman, C ’03 (Biological Basis of Behavior)
QED Fellow for the University City Science Center and
Graduate Assistant in Health Economics at Temple University
Michael Mittelman is second year MBA student at the Fox School of Business studying Healthcare Management. He is also currently a Fellow with the University City Science Center, and a Graduate Assistant in Health Economics. His previous career was spent working as a molecular biologist. In his spare time, he is working on two entrepreneurial ventures.

Michael was on the strict path toward medical school. At the beginning of his senior year, though, realized he wasn’t 100% ready for it. He worked in translational research and had the opportunity to write articles and pursue grants. He thought about grad school for his PhDs as well, but he realized this also wasn’t for him. He realized he had more of a passion for healthcare management which is why he is working toward a grad business degree in healthcare management. He worked in business development in clinical research, and now he is doing life sciences strategy and consulting. He is working on two early stage ventures.

Roger Viola, C ’81 (Religious Studies)
Senior Vice President, Strategic Client Partnerships, at MedErgy HealthGroup
Roger graduated from Penn over 28 years ago in 1981 with a major in Religious Studies and a minor in Psychology, after having begun his undergraduate studies in the sciences with a pre-med orientation. After graduation, due to continued interest in things medical, he became an orderly on the busy cardiac step-down unit, and then a psychiatric technician on the locked psych unit, at Lankenau Hospital in Philadelphia. This led to a position in pharmaceutical sales, where he earned the CMR designation from the Certified Medical Representatives Institute. Subsequent roles in global and domestic marketing with Wyeth, and in client service and executive management at local medical communication agencies, culminated in his present position as Senior Vice President, Strategic Client Partnerships, at MedErgy HealthGroup in Yardley, PA. In this role he is responsible for creating and sustaining strategic relationships with clients, providing input and direction to maximize value to them, and providing leadership to internal teams to meet or exceed client objectives.

He was on the Premed path since he was six years old and took all the related courses. However, he found that the straight sciences didn’t work for him and found interesting religious studies courses and made that his major. After graduation, he was still was interested in the medical field and became orderly and then sight technician. Economic reality showed him he couldn’t live on those wages and he got a position in sales and marketing within the pharmacology field. If he could do it all again, what he would do differently is shorten the time it took to find current role.

Christopher Wilson, GAS MPh Organizational Development (current)
Healthcare Consultant, at PharmaCOM (former)
Chris grew up in Swarthmore, PA a suburb just 20 minutes outside Philadelphia. He attended Penn State for undergrad where he started out as a Pre-Med major. That lasted until he took his first psychology & sociology classes to which he quickly changed my major(s). Upon graduating, he decided to move to Manhattan to experience NYC and test out the world of finance. After 2 years in New York, the call of the school bell rang again. This was his first experience at Penn in their Post-Baccalaureate Pre-Med program. Rather quickly, he found himself gravitating towards psychology again. After a year in Penn's program, he moved to Pepperdine University in California where he earned a master’s in Clinical Psychology with an emphasis in marriage and family therapy. At this time, he made my way back to Penn to do clinical research in the Department of Psychiatry. After a couple of years doing research at Penn and CHOP, he found himself missing school again. He applied and was accepted to Penn's Organizational Dynamics program where he is now working to complete another master’s degree. Almost 2 years ago, he left his research position to join a healthcare consulting start-up company. Due in large part to the recession, that company has since gone out of business which brings us very nearly to the present.

Questions

At which point did you decide med school wasn’t for you?

Michelle: I figured it out freshman year in college when my labs didn’t work out. I also learned by working in a hospice marketing department after my junior year that direct service provision to patients was not for me.
Michael: For one year after college I did an externship with a surgeon and then realized I didn’t want to be a surgeon anymore because of the lifestyle (not eating or sleeping much and not seeing family often).

Roger: My parents expected me to continue their physician legacy. I didn’t necessarily turn away from medical school but studied other more interesting things that made my interest in medical school fade. I found that there were many more opportunities out there than traditional pre-professional careers.

Christopher: Most people make a decision at some point and build around that decision so it is hard to un-make that decision and drastically change your life plan. I sometimes still tell myself I am still going to go to med school at some point because it’s hard to break away from it completely. The reality is that some people won’t make the grade to get into med school so all you have built up is toppled and you have to start again.

Did you ever regret not going to med school?

Michael: Yes, sometimes, but there are other ways besides being a doctor to help people and still be in the science and healthcare field.

Roger: I never regretted it.

Michelle: I never regretted it because my current job is fulfilling in its own way and still allows me to help people in a more global sense. I really like the openness in my career path.

Christopher: I agree.

How did making a living affect your decision?

Christopher: I worked on Wall Street but then went to live with my parents when I decided to go back to school. Sometimes you can’t afford it and it requires sacrifice.

Roger: I went for an orderly job that I knew wouldn’t pay well, but when applying for a later job the employer liked the invaluable experience it provided.

Michael: A paycheck is important, but you should pursue what you like to do because you could be miserable doing something you don’t like. Do what you love and the money will follow.

Michelle: I spent senior year working three jobs. The money does follow eventually, to some extent, if you are passionate about something and build up you skills. And if your passion lies in a field where there may not be much money to be had, you will find a way to make it work.

Additional Tips
Roger: Talk to people who have pursued different types of careers as well as advising staff. If you decide to leave the med school path do it in a smart way by talking to people who have experience in fields that interest you. Have a passion for what you do and don’t doubt your abilities.

Michael: Don’t romanticize something until you know what it is. You think you know about something until you experience it through extern/internships. I recommend getting a broad background in your field in a broader sense, especially through research experience.

Christopher: At your age you don’t know what you want so don’t feel bad about changing your mind, and you can always switch paths even though it’s harder the more you go down the path.

Michelle: Explore what you’re into. Even though a job might not exist for what you want to do, maybe you can create one.