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MEDSCHOOLCOACH GUIDE TO THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

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Welcome from the MedSchoolCoach Team

Dear Applicant,

Ah, the personal statement. Years of trials and tribulation have been attributed to this one-page document. You are likely nervous, and you may have already hit writer's block before the first words are typed. Do not worry, you are not alone! Almost everyone who has applied to a college, a graduate school or a residency knows the feeling.

The personal statement is often the most difficult part of any application. You will claw at your brain figuring out a way to write something, anything about the person you stare at in the mirror every morning. You will wonder how anyone could write a piece about themselves, yet come across as modest and likeable. You will struggle, and you will falter. But, with the help of others, you will succeed in the end.

This short book will guide you through the steps needed to write a great personal statement. There are many variations on the subjects and techniques covered here, but we hope you can use this as a starting point. Follow the points in this book and you will be on your way to writing a great medical school personal statement.

Best of luck,

Sahil Mehta, MD

www.medschoolcoach.com

INTRODUCTION TO PERSONAL STATEMENT

Here at MedSchoolCoach we understand that it's important to consider both the point of view of the admissions committee *and* the student so we took care to write this section with dual perspectives in mind. Similarly, as an essay writer, you should take into account the admission committee's perspective as well as your own when writing your essay.

How is the Personal Statement Used by Admissions Committees?

The personal statement is just one part of your entire medical school application, with GPA, MCAT, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation and interview making up the rest.

Keep in mind that this statement will be read multiple times during the admissions process and that having it word-perfect is vital.

The Separator

Your personal statement can make the difference between an acceptance or a rejection from medical school. A great personal statement serves to show the admissions committee that you are the kind of person who has the potential to be an excellent physician and an asset to their school. It also helps to personalize your application and set you apart from the many other applicants coming in with similar MCAT scores and GPAs (see figure below).

Similarly, a poor personal statement can eliminate you from the group of contenders. When a medical school committee has a few hundred applicants, a personal statement that is poorly written, with typos, spelling mistakes or bad content is a potentially irreparable. A blunder like this will quickly move you to the bottom of the pile. The personal statement is a quick way to “weed out” similar applicants. In other words, with many similar applications, the personal statement can decide who gets an interview and who does not. And as schools only accept students who have been interviewed, getting to this step in the process is a very big deal.

Percentage of accepted applicants (2016-2017)

- *As an example, for an MCAT score between 510-513 and a GPA between 3.40 – 3.59, the acceptance rate was 50.0%*
- *What separated the half that was accepted from the half that was not? The personal statement plays a large part in this. Applicants with similar stats are differentiated by the personal statement.*

The Interview Starting Point

Apart from serving as a means to weed out medical school candidates, the personal statement is also important because it provides the starting point for many interview discussions and questions. When committee members sit down to interview an applicant, they often have just a few minutes to skim the application. The personal statement provides the perfect amount of information for them. They can pick out a few key points and use it as the starting ground for your interview. If this is the only part of the application that they may read, you need to make it perfect.

Summary



- *The personal statement is read multiple times by multiple people during the admissions process.*
- *The personal statement separates applicants with similar statistics.*
- *The personal statement is used as a spring board for your interview.*



Goals for the Personal Statement

Now that you understand just how significant the personal statement is to admissions committees, we will look at what some of your goals for the personal statement should be.

Sell Yourself



There is a balance to be struck in your medical school application: you want to present yourself in the best light possible without coming off as arrogant or conceited. The mistake people often make is that they think selling themselves involves listing grades and honors. It does not (see Section 1). Rather, it involves telling the reader about who you are as a person. Remember, the admissions committee already knows how you look on paper; they now want to look beyond those statistics at what makes you stand out from the crowd. This is the place in your application where you have freedom. You can be humorous, serious or philosophical. The key is to *be yourself*. Let your personality shine through!

Tell Them Why You Want to Go into Medicine



The second goal of the personal statement is to give the admissions committee a sense of why you want to go into medicine in the first place. It is not an easy career to prepare for, after all. Doctors keep long hours and must learn to deal with highly stressful situations regardless of specialty. In short, a career in medicine is not right for everyone – so it is your job, through your personal statement, to convince the committee that being a doctor is right for *you*. The committee needs to see your passion for medicine.

Keep It Readable



When writing your personal statement, be mindful of keeping it a readable length and using an engaging style. Trying to use large words and convoluted sentences to make the personal sound more impressive will only lead the reader to put the paper down. That doesn't mean you don't want to be somewhat creative in your writing (in fact, many often think of the personal statement as a creative writing piece), but you want to try to stay away from anything incomprehensible!

Make It Interesting



Perhaps the most important goal of all though is to keep the personal statement interesting. It should capture the attention of the reader from the very first sentence and hold that attention throughout the entire piece. Remember, medical school admission committees are reading thousands of these essays. You want yours to stand out in a good way. Writing a generic personal statement may not get your rejected, but it certainly will not make it any easier to get an acceptance letter.

What Makes a Bad Personal Statement?

You now know how important the personal statement is in your medical school application and what your goals are in writing one. So, what exactly makes a good personal statement? There is no definite answer to this question, but there are many features that all good statements have in common. Before we discuss these, however, it might be helpful to think about makes for a *bad* personal statement. If you know what the common pitfalls are and avoid them, your personal statement will already be better than many other applicants.

Absolute Contraindications

- *Mentioning your MCAT score*
- *Mentioning your GPA*
- *Typos*
- *Spelling mistakes*
- *Name dropping*
- *Making up stories*

Relative Contraindications

- *Mentioning awards you won years ago*
- *Listing anything (i.e. extracurricular activities)*
- *I want to go into medicine because I want to "help others"*
- *Writing in the third person*

Try to Avoid

- *Mentioning how you wanted to be a doctor since preschool*
- *Talking about your second cousin who suffered a broken toe*
- *Talking about that one bad grade*

Here is a quick medical lesson for all the pre-meds out there. Sometimes certain drugs are absolutely contraindicated, meaning if a patient has condition X, then you never give them drug 1 (for example, if a patient has a head bleed, you never start them on heparin which is a blood thinner). Sometimes, things are relatively contraindicated, meaning that a patient has condition Y, you probably should not start them on drug 2, but you can do it if you absolutely need to. This is a good metaphor when thinking about your personal statement. There are a few absolute contraindications in the personal statement – in other words, things you should avoid at all costs. If any of these do end up in your personal statement, you will likely automatically be rejected. There are also a few relative contraindications – these are things you should try your hardest to avoid unless they serve a specific point in your essay. Finally, there are some points that are trite; applicants have made them for years and admissions committees are bored of reading about them. You will want to try to avoid these as well. Refer to the figure above for a summary of these points.

What Makes a Good Personal Statement?

There are several features that define a good personal statement and we will discuss each of them below. These features should all be included at an absolute minimum if you are aiming for a winning piece.

What Makes an Interesting Writing Style?

Your writing style will set the tone of your personal statement, so it is extremely important to get it right. You want to show the committee what kind of person you are, but this does not have to be explicit: Rather, let your personality be revealed through the way you write. See the figure to the right to understand how two sentences that essentially give the same amount of information can vary. Try not to go overboard though. As we talked about earlier, a good personal statement is not meant to be convoluted and confusing. A reader should never have to read a sentence twice to figure out the meaning of it.

Show the admissions committee who you are through interesting writing



- **Boring:** *"I went to Columbia University and majored in Biomedical Engineering"*
- **Interesting:** *" x equals negative b plus or minus the square root... these were the formulas that dominated my life for many years."*

Personal Stories

They call it a "personal statement" for a reason: it should be essentially about you – not about the doctor you saw on TV or the one who you shadowed. The best statements are the ones that tell your own story in a unique way. The goal is that, after reading the personal statement, the reader should be able to feel like they know more about you as a person.

A Great Introduction

The first lines of your essay are sometimes all that might be read, so you want them to be perfect. The point of a good introduction is to engage your reader immediately and hold this interest through the rest of the piece. Even if your statement as a whole is good, if the introduction is dull it will likely not be read.

The key to a great introduction is to be as original as possible without overdoing it. The reader should want to continue reading after glancing at the first few lines. How can you make him or her do that? There are a variety of ways and as you write, be sure that this introduction is going to segue into something you want to readers to learn about you is important or significant. Take a look at some examples of interesting and boring introductory sentences below. This will help you get a feel of what works and what does not.

Interesting Introductions

- *"I am a geek..."*
- *"As I stared out the window, I saw a city that was as foreign as any I had ever been to..."*
- *"I grew up on a tomato farm..."*

Boring Introductions

- *"Ever since I was born, I loved science"*
- *"I knew I wanted to be a doctor since I was young"*
- *"I always wanted to help people"*
- *"The human body is very interesting to me"*

An Introduction to the AMCAS Personal Statement

For the majority of applicants, the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) will be the first application they fill out for med school, and so it is important to point out that the application essay has specific requirements that need to be met. Keep in mind that your personal statement will go to all schools, so avoid mentioning any particular school in this piece. For the DO application, please see the figure below.

Differences of a DO Personal Statement

- *A good personal statement tells the admissions committee why you want to be a doctor, not why you want to be an MD. Therefore, the DO and MD personal statements can be identical.*
- *However, you may want to expand on why you feel osteopathic medicine is for you in your personal statement to DO schools. This does not have to be explicit, but it is something to add subtly.*
- *AMCAS has a character limit of 5,300 characters. The DO application has a limit of 4,500 characters.*

The AMCAS Question

Let's take a look at the way the statement question appears on the AMCAS application:

"Use the personal comments essays as an opportunity to distinguish you from other applicants. Some questions you may want to consider while writing this essay are:

Why have you selected the field of medicine?

What motivates you to learn more about medicine?

What do you want medical schools to know about you that hasn't been disclosed in another section of the application?

In addition, you may wish to include information such as: special hardships, challenges or obstacles that may have influenced your educational pursuits. Commentary on significant fluctuations in your academic record that are not explained elsewhere in your application"

As you can see, the topic is vague, but includes instructions to basically write anything you want. Unless you have something dire that needs explaining, you should stick with the instructions given elsewhere in this guide to set you on the right course for your personal statement.

The Length

The AMCAS application requires your personal statement to be no more than 5,300 characters. This constitutes about one and a quarter page of single spaced, text with a size 12 font. The reality is that most essays should not even be this long and actually one page is ideal. This is a good enough length that a person sitting down to read it will not get bogged down by details at the end of the paper.

Formatting Issues

The AMCAS still uses just a plain text box. You should NOT type directly into this text box. Instead, type the essay into Microsoft Word, but save the file as a *.rtf. This will allow you to avoid formatting issues later on, while still having the advantage of Word's grammar and spelling check to avoid spelling and other usage errors that can count against you with the admissions committee. Once you have your final essay, you can copy paste it into the text box. See the box for special points to look out for when it comes to formatting.

Proofing Via the PDF

Once you upload your text, you can see the PDF that AMCAS creates. This is the PDF that interviewers will have in front of them. Make sure to read over your essay on the PDF file for any formatting mistakes.

Common Formatting Errors

- *Apostrophes come out wrong. Reread your essay in the text box multiple times and correct all mistranslated apostrophes.*
- *Quotations frequently are misplaced.*
- *Line breaks misformat. Make sure whenever you want a new line, it is a distinct line in the text box.*

How to Go About the Task of Writing the Personal Statement

Now you understand more about what the goals of your personal statement should be, pitfalls to avoid, and what to include in your essay. Armed with the knowledge, it is time to actually begin the writing process!

The First Steps

Before you write anything down, think about the point you want to make with your statement. What exactly is it that you want to tell the admissions committee about yourself? Once you have answered this question, think of the stories and anecdotes you will use as examples. Will it be the story about being in the OR with a surgeon or the one about helping the elderly lady who was in the hospital? Perhaps it will not be in the healthcare setting, but rather something you have done that has solidified your interest in medicine. Or maybe it will be your research interest. Jot these supporting stories down, then pick two of them to write about in your personal statement. Boggling the reader down with tons of examples will not prove your point. Show passion through a few examples. Once you know what you are going to talk about, start writing!

Writing as Brainstorming

It is important to write as much as possible. Sometimes people think and brainstorm for too long. Brainstorming is very helpful, but if you think you have an idea for your personal statement, get out your computer and just start typing. It is oftentimes easier to delete material, but relatively harder to add. Even if your idea is completely different from the one you had before or what your earlier personal statement was about, just type. You can always combine ideas into one final draft.

How Many Drafts?

Do not start with the expectation that you will sit down at the computer and immediately write a Pulitzer prize-winning personal statement! Getting the polished piece you want will take many revisions. We suggest writing a draft, thinking about it for a few days, and then writing a completely new, fresh draft. This will basically give you two personal statements to work with. You can then combine the best of both. Often you'll look back at your first draft and wonder what you were thinking when you were writing it. A minimum of two distinctly different drafts will give you a great starting place. The more drafts you write, the better your final essay will be.

Avoiding Writer's Block

Writer's block is a common problem, especially if you are writing under stress. If you get to the place where you just can't think of anything to write, take a break. You may have to do this a dozen times during your initial draft. That is okay. Taking a break will help you clear your mind. Come back to the personal statement after you've worked on something completely different for a while. As you may have noticed, this can be a time-consuming process, which is why it is important to start on your statement as early as possible.

Getting the Right Proofreaders and Reviewers

They say it takes a village to raise a child: it arguably also takes a village to write a spectacular personal statement. This is one piece of work you do not want to do alone. Have multiple people review the essay. You want your reviewer to look at it not just for grammar, spelling and typos, but for content as well. We recommend having the following people look at your essay:

1. **A family member** – they know you best and can often provide great insight.
2. **A friend** – again, someone who knows you well and can help you develop your thoughts.
3. **A professional editor** (not an English major or a PhD, but someone who has sat on the admissions committee and knows what to look for) – the editor can help you really nail down the content of the essay. Here are some things to keep in mind when you are choosing an editor:
 - a. Of course, we recommend you hire MedSchoolCoach to look over your essay. Whether you do or not is your prerogative, but the important thing is not to hire someone who does not know about medical school admissions. An English major, for instance, may know about grammar and content, but may not understand what it is like to be a doctor. Find someone who knows about medicine, has sat on admissions committees and has gone through the process themselves.
 - b. Do not hire grammar services. Grammar is important and your essay does need to be grammatically correct, but a really good editor will consider the content and overall style of your essay first.
 - c. Avoid paying per edit. You do not want your essay to be edited twice and then left alone: this amount of editing is just not adequate. MedSchoolCoach offers unlimited edits with our advisors. We work with you until the essay is where it needs to be.

Who should look over your personal statement



- *A family member*
- *A friend*
- *A trusted professor*
- *MedSchoolCoach.com or another professional editor who is an M.D.*

Final Thoughts on the Personal Statement

Writing the personal statement is stressful – but don't come off as stressed! Relax. Be yourself. Have fun. An essay that you've written with these three points in mind will be far superior to the one that you have written under duress. You really can make personal statement writing fun. For some, it involves using humor in their writing. For others, this may not work well. The key is to find out who you are and translate that to paper. If you are the guy who cracks jokes all day, then let that come across. Or maybe you are the type of person who likes to pontificate about problems in modern day medicine – go for that. There is no one right way to write a personal statement. Whoever you are, make sure your writing reflects that. If you do this, you will write an essay that will get you into medical school.

See the appendix for examples of some personal statements that we think are great, and really stand out!

About the Authors

Brian Wu, PhD

Brian graduated from the University of Maryland with a Bachelor's of Science in Physiology and Neurobiology, and graduated from Keck School of Medicine (University of Southern California, USC). He is currently a psychiatry resident at USC. He holds a PhD in integrative biology and disease for his research in exercise physiology and rehabilitation. He hopes to integrate holistic healthcare with the capabilities of social media, medical technology, and education to provide the best care for patients, both in person and through research, technology, and education.

As an advisor, Brian aims to help those who want to learn from his own story. He has helped hundreds of students get into medical school and successfully founded his own company (and also struck out on one). He believes that, with the right strategy, anyone can find their path to becoming a graduate or medical student.

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Sahil V. Mehta, MD

Dr. Mehta is the founder of MedSchoolCoach. He graduated Summa Cum Laude from Columbia University in New York City with a Bachelors of Science in Civil Engineering. He finished his degree with the highest GPA of any graduating senior in the major. He was accepted to multiple top ten medical schools in the country and chose to attend the University of Chicago; Pritzker School of Medicine, where he graduated with research honors. At the University of Chicago, he was actively involved global health opportunities and in interviewing candidates for medical school.

After graduating from Pritzker, Dr. Mehta trained in medicine and surgery at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. He then completed his residency in Radiology with an emphasis on Interventional Radiology as well as Global Health. Actively involved in the teaching of Harvard Medical students, he constantly earned exceptional remarks as part of the senior teaching faculty for the Radiology Core Clerkship. Following residency, he became a fellow in Vascular and Interventional Radiology Fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital. Academically, he has presented his work at multiple national meetings, including SIR and RSNA, and has been published in multiple peer reviewed journals.

Outside of his teaching and admissions consulting interest, Sahil has a keen interest in Global Health. He founded a teleradiology program with Scottish Livingston Hospital in Botswana and was awarded the Goldberg-Reeder Grant from the American College of Radiology for further development of the program and travel to Africa.

He has also spent extensive time in the Dominican Republic and India on global health endeavors.

Throughout his career, Dr. Mehta has been actively involved in education. He served as a teaching assistant for multiple premed classes at Columbia as well as for multiple medical school classes at the University of Chicago. He was also a top rated MCAT instructor at Examrackers for three years in the Northeast Region and eventually served as an Examrackers teacher trainer. Sahil also served as the Senior Editor on USMLERx QMax, an online question bank for medical licensing exams from the makers of First Aid, where he oversaw over 50 authors in their creation of a Step 2 Question Bank. As the founder of MedSchoolCoach, he has successfully guided thousands of students through the medical school application process. As one of the nation's leading experts in medical school admissions consulting, he has received innumerable accolades from the students he has help.

Dr. Mehta is currently a practicing interventional radiologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, with clinical interests in portal hypertension, women's health, interventional oncology and interventional pain management. He is a clinical faculty member and holds an academic appointment at Harvard Medical School.

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Appendix

Personal Statement Examples

Example #1

I met Sayaka at a temporary shelter prepared for the Tohoku earthquake victims. She was a cheerful, young 11-year-old girl that lit up hearts with her bright smile, even in the midst of disaster. Despite her liveliness, Sayaka would become easily frightened and anxious from the occasional aftershocks following the infamous 2011 Japanese earthquake. With the assistance of the physician relief workers, we realized she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With intense counseling and ample time, Sayaka gradually began to overcome the trauma she had experienced, and watching her benefit from this medical intervention was incredibly rewarding, reminding me of myself when I first came to Japan.

Following my father, a pastor, my family moved to Japan when I was only thirteen. Although through completely different circumstances, similar to Sayaka, I suffered many difficulties during that time. My family struggled financially, and I was isolated due to the stark cultural and language barriers. However, ironically, the ones who befriended me without any prejudice to a foreigner, were the Japanese children living in my neighborhood. Above all, they wholly embraced me, and with their selfless help, I grew into a stronger person during this difficult time and realized the value of helping and comforting others.

Growing up with a pastor as a father, and a mother who dedicated her life to others, service was something that was instilled in me from an early age. However, as the one being served, my friends showed me a whole new perspective on how helping others can actually heal and mend. With that in mind, and a newfound strength, I pursued different activities where I could bring care to others, eventually leading me to medicine.

When I first considered medicine, I immediately became enthralled with it and sought out every experience I could. To gain medical knowledge, I shadowed doctors from diverse specialties, ranging from internal medicine to surgery. And to continue fostering a service-minded attitude, I invested a considerable amount of time volunteering in various countries, including Japan, Korea, and the United States. Moreover, I finished a graduate degree in a counseling-related field to provide holistic treatment to my patients in the future.

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Although every activity was remarkable, one of the most memorable experiences was serving as part of the Earthquake Relief Volunteer Team following the devastation in Japan. Working as a team with various physicians and other healthcare professionals for the common goal of saving people enabled me to witness the powerful dynamic of medicine. I was greatly impressed by their perseverance and diligence despite terribly long hours with poor staffing in the face of such tragedy.

Seeing this dedication, I greatly respected the strong sense of duty the physicians possessed, and my desire to devote my life to heal the wounded and save lives grew even stronger. It was indeed a decisive time to confirm my calling as a physician to help others throughout the world.

After finishing the hectic volunteer work that lasted for several months, I could have gone back to the United States. However, the knowledge, experience, and the people I met during this time meant so much to me, I decided to stay an additional year in Japan to utilize my counseling skills for patients suffering from PTSD after the traumatic earthquake. Now, seeing Sayaka's bright smile again has truly confirmed my path, and I believe medicine is the next step in my journey to continue to provide healing and relief for those in need.

Example #2

This place was muggier than I remember, almost as if the humidity had made a pact with my suit and tie to slowly strangle me. Or perhaps the gaze of our elected student assembly leaders, and the scrutiny of the politically active undergraduates frequenting these forums was tugging on my nerves. Whatever it was, it fought to take my focus away from landing my pitch. The chamber's speaker system crackled to life, "Up next is Rutgers GlobeMed." Although I was the acting president, I generally did not deliver speeches before large crowds as I trusted that role to members of my exuberant executive board. However, this speech was pivotal, this grant proposal could easily help us reach our fundraising goal for *Change-A-Life Uganda*. The decision of the voting assembly members was in my hands, and the success of our yearly water sanitation and female menstrual hygiene project was at my fingertips. Standing at the podium, as I spoke, it seemed as if my message began to resonate with the crowd. I presented GlobeMed's partnership mission with confidence and answered every question with authority as nods of acknowledgment and smiles of approval generated momentum. I had never felt more in control of a room filled with strangers. This is what pouring my heart and soul into a student organization did to a once weak-kneed, immature freshman over the years.

GlobeMed, a simple student-run, non-profit organization, had defined my college career. It challenged me intellectually and politically, put me at odds with my colleagues while knitting bonds of trust, and has made me a charismatic leader of peers and a meek servant to marginalized communities here and abroad. Above all, it has prepared me to be an asset to healthcare through strong leadership.

I had always underrated patience as a virtue. If I needed something done, my team worked diligently until we reached our goal, but I slowly learned that patience and consideration can strengthen my interpersonal relationships. Leading GlobeMed posed a considerable challenge, but served as a catalyst for personal growth. It wasn't until a particular member came to me in confidence, explaining that her medical issues and her demanding schedule were impacting her other commitments. Goal-oriented and haunted by deadlines, I had never thought to consider the personal lives of those I work with. Priorities are inspired by experiences, and as experiences vary, priorities clash, and as I recognized this, I softened my disposition in teamwork. Patience is understanding circumstances, accepting them as they come, and reorienting plans to fit a new trajectory. My leadership experience has made me realize the critical importance of patience in order to successfully function as a team and achieve a common goal.

Beyond patience in teamwork, a physician should display humility and exhibit mutual respect in leadership. I had the privilege of directing and selecting a staff of the most diverse, inquisitive students on campus to both give back to the local community and to become globally engaged. In developing my leadership skills through mentoring and advising, I built meaningful connections with my staff on a personal basis, and together, we worked towards executing successful campaigns and building our young organization.

I made coffee plans with members I had yet to know better, and organized hiking trips to build team chemistry. Seeing potential in some students, I mentored them to fill my roles after my graduation. My personal growth in maturity and leadership over the past year has been pivotal to our success. Medicine calls for leaders and decision makers, for physicians to know their patients and their peers, and to have confidence that, by way of their guidance, everyone is on the same page. When it calls for me, I know I will have been a friend and a leader to those around me, and that I won't have to answer that call alone.

A gesture caught the corner of my eye, advising me of my remaining time. "Thank you for your attention! I'll take any additional questions . . ." Zealous applause cut in mid-sentence, and who else could it be but a crew of GlobeMed members in the crowd that came to support me. The vote hadn't happened yet; we hadn't known we would win the grant over dozens of competing organizations or go on to exceed our yearly goal by \$3,000, but that moment emanated victory. We locked eyes and shared foolish grins that could only be inspired by tested loyalty. In that brief moment, I ceased to see them as individuals, or even as a group. I saw them as my contribution to the future of GlobeMed and as a testament to what kind of physician I will be in the future. I saw the fruits of heartfelt leadership and mentorship in my personal development and in our collective success, and I knew that I have what it takes to lead in the future of medicine.