

A Wellesley College and Harvard Medical School Alumna's Reflections on Wellesley

BY HANNAH GALVIN '01

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In the years following my graduation from Wellesley, during my medical education 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 understanding I have gained has been of the true benefit of my Wellesley education and of the Wellesley community of which I am a part. I am not writing this at the request of the Admission Office or the administration. I simply feel compelled to share my thoughts about Wellesley from the perspective of a young alumna.

AS A STUDENT AT WELLESLEY

My education at Wellesley – both in the humanities and in the sciences – has been unparalleled in its contribution to my development as a physician and as a person. Wellesley students are not taught but rather shown how to learn, and we're 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 histology classes, we learned more histophysiology than has been presented in my medical courses. 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 as a team to analyze results, draw conclusions, and present our data in the form of a scientific paper.

The greatest challenges were given by Mary Coyne, professor *emerita* of biological sciences, who often sent us off to find solutions to physiologic conundrums that baffled the scientific community at large. We were expected to step up, take on the role of graduate students, and do what any sane person would have deemed impossible. Just as your head was dropping in desperation, “da Chief” (as we had affectionately nicknamed her) would look at you with complete confidence. There seemed to be no question in her mind that you would figure out a unique model for the complex physiologic phenomenon in question and use scientific methodology to propose experiments to test your theory. By the end, we had developed from students into scientists.

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On an academic level, I gained a great deal of knowledge from the Biological Sciences Department at Wellesley, 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. I also realized for the first time that Wellesley teaching – in every department – is unparalleled. 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 art and music history classes like “American Painting” and “History of Jazz,” to an English course on modern poetry, to literature seminars such as “Black Women Writers” and “Literature in Medicine,” to language classes in Spanish and Chinese, to Africana Studies courses like “The Black Family” and “Medical Anthropology,” to a cinema class on British film, 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 training.

It was thanks to my biology and chemistry classes at Wellesley that I entered medical school as a scientist, but it was thanks to my liberal arts 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 (chemistry), for example, would hang around the Science Center late at night before an organic chemistry exam to answer students’ questions. Dr. Haines and 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 during my first years of medical school, Becky Bedell, my art history professor, met up with me to tour a new exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts; Michele Respaut, my literature professor and pre-medical advisor, called me to check in from France, where she was running the Wellesley-in-Aix program. Mary Coyne continues to pick me up and take me out to dinner on a regular basis, and every year I look forward to spending Christmas Eve with her family.

Wellesley's support of students and alumnae 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 alumnae are more committed to one another, to current students, and to the school, than any other institution I have encountered. The kinship is matchless. Since I graduated, I have met countless alumnae 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 alumnae above those of any of my other esteemed colleagues.

On a personal level, I find that staying in touch with friends and other alumnae really revitalizes me. There is just something about being with Wellesley sisters; their support, their humor, their encouragement all help me to re-focus on what is truly important in life. In addition, I also find myself experiencing the inescapable desire to serve future classes (*non ministrari sed ministrare* – the Wellesley motto). I dream of someday returning to campus to conduct a hands-on course designed to give pre-med students greater exposure to clinical medicine. Wellesley's 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.

AS A RECENT WELLESLEY ALUMNA LOOKING BACK

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 of medical school, 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 became most clear in considering one's 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.

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AS A MEMBER OF THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY

I am currently a second-year resident in pediatrics at Children's Hospital Boston. After I finish my residency, I will go on to a three-year fellowship in forensic pediatrics and an academic career focused on the diagnosis and treatment of child abuse and neglect. My Wellesley education and my connections with other alumnae continue to play an invaluable part in how I practice medicine. Every day, I use the critical thinking skills and understanding of differing world views that were central themes in my undergraduate training.

I also have access to an entire community of women who are doing amazing things with their lives, and to whom I can turn for both personal and professional support.

Recently, I have consulted on cases with a classmate who is now a radiology resident and one who is a social worker specializing in helping critically ill children and their families. I stay in touch with other friends pursuing their dreams all over the globe: a World Bank consultant in Washington, D.C.; a psychologist in Hong Kong; a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali; a financial analyst in New York City; and a mother and homemaker in England. Closer to home, my Wellesley connections have formed much of my support system here in Boston. My relationships with both classmates and professors have remained strong, and I often turn to them for support and encouragement. I really enjoyed medical school and love my work; but I can say without a doubt that the most fun I have had since I graduated from college was returning for my five-year reunion this past year. The admission brochure may sound cheesy, but truthfully, the connections you make at Wellesley last a lifetime.

In addition, a community of thousands of alumnae is available to me by a simple online search. Should I need help in the future with a research project or grant funding, if I need to find a specialist to whom I could refer a patient, or even if I need an accountant or a dog walker, I can find these things through the Wellesley alumnae network. The College has created fabulous online databases to help Wellesley alumnae connect with one another in these ways.

I also want to note that all of the information technology resources that Wellesley offers its students and alumnae are incredible. I have yet to find another academic institution that is so committed to staying at the forefront of technology, to constructing information systems that work so seamlessly, and to providing its students and faculty with the most advanced hardware and software on the market.

Over the past five years, my appreciation for my Wellesley education, the services available to students, and the alumnae community have just continued to grow. I have been amazed by the addition of the beautiful new Wang Campus Center, the Newhouse Center for the Humanities, several new academic departments, and the extensive landscaping project. It is so wonderful to see the way that Wellesley continually works to enrich the lives of its students, and I look forward to watching and participating in the developments of the next five years.

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.