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UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

**AN UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE:
FROM FIRST GENERATION STUDENT TO RESEARCH ASSISTANT**

Kayla Navarro (Dr. Adam H. de Havenon, M.D)

Department of Neurology

Higher education has always been a part of my equation for the future. While I had little knowledge going into school, I knew I wanted to gain experience that would shape me into an educated person that my family would be proud of. Being a first generation student is tough, as it is similar to stepping into a world that is unfamiliar to you and difficult for your family to understand. However, I have loved this exciting and exhausting journey that I decided to embark on years ago.

Adhering to school was never an issue for me. I love learning and strive to do my best in every class. I wanted to absorb all I could, but that curiosity was a contributor to the problem, I wanted to know anything and everything. That mindset is what made it most difficult to choose what exactly I wanted to study in higher education, but I knew I had to start somewhere. My interests began in business which was influenced by both of my parents. I thought it would be easy since I had already completed several business classes and extracurricular activities.

But then something had changed. I was in the middle of my sophomore year of college and I was not passionate about my field of study. I seemed as though I had been floating by, taking in all that I could, but it was not as thrilling as I was hoping for. Around that time my mind started to drift towards science and healthcare in particular. I decided to set up an appointment with an advisor, Dave Belt, at the College of Health. That appointment was pivotal in my college career because it was when I realized health science was, and still is, my calling. I did not want to be stuck behind a computer all day answering emails, and meeting quotas that were truly beneficial for the pockets of CEOs. I knew I wanted to have a greater impact on people's health and livelihood.

I explored the option to become a registered dietician, but soon after some minimal interaction with the field, I realized I wanted to be on the healthcare frontlines. I struggled with the idea of not being one hundred percent sold on the dietetics career, and it was not until one day in my Exercise Psychology class that everything changed. My professor, Dr. Maria Newton, preached to our class about how sometimes life does not always go as planned, and our plans may have to adjust to fit the needs of our life. Meaning, not all of us need and can be big shots in medicine and healthcare. From there, she began listing off a few careers that were in the field of medicine, but ones that did not require too much time commitment as medical or physical therapy school may require. One profession she mentioned in particular that inspired me was

cardiovascular perfusion. I began my research in cardiovascular perfusion and found that it was something I would be very interested in doing.

The operating room (OR) and being in a hospital setting sounded like a dream to me. Figuring out what I needed to do to learn about the profession was the next step in my plan and I knew I needed to shadow a Perfusionist. Luckily, I was able to connect with the lead Perfusionist at the University of Utah through a friend of mine who worked in the OR. I bombarded him with questions, shadowed a few times, and began to fall in love with the career. The next step I took was to plan out what I had to do next in order to apply to the cardiovascular perfusion program. I met with my advisor to go over the prerequisites and recommendations for my application. Research was listed as a strong recommendation and at that time my research journey began.

I knew little about what research would entail, especially as a first generation student, so I did what I knew best and that was to ask around until I found my answers. I met with the Undergraduate Research Office to start inquiring and it turned out to be very successful. I was able to connect with my current lab, while working with my team under Dr. Adam de Havenon. Dr. de Havenon is a great leader and researcher in vascular neurology science. With a passion to target patients that suffer from intracranial atherosclerotic disease (ICAD) and other underrepresented stroke prevention and treatment methods, Dr. de Havenon has been a prime exemplar in the field of neuroscience. Having the privilege to work with him and his team has opened many doors for me to become a research assistant and carve my path as a future healthcare provider.

Taking the opportunity to collaborate with other physicians and researchers has led me to a great amount of knowledge for research practices and how it is necessary for the healthcare world. Thus far, I have taken part in four different projects in the quick two and a half semesters that I have worked with this amazing team. I have obtained many essential skills that are true to my undergraduate research experience and that were cultivated outside of the classroom. The essential skills specifically include collecting data, analyzing results, consenting patients, writing papers, presenting data, and asking important questions. These proficiencies are to name a few, and I know they will carry on when I become a Cardiovascular Perfusionist.

Having only experienced research for the year that I have has opened doors that I never knew existed. I have found my calling in healthcare much like Dr. Paul Kalanithi articulates in his memoir, "Choosing a lifestyle for a career is a job, not a calling" (Kalanithi, 2016). I know that healthcare is my calling and research is an essential component to the passion. I highly recommend that anyone who is even slightly interested in research or healthcare should take on the opportunity while attending a top tier research university. As an undergraduate student, I recommend taking advantage of the resources that are given to you. I know that my family is proud of my accomplishments, but I am also proud of myself for pushing beyond the barriers of what it means to be a first generation student. I want to thank everyone for supporting me in my journey because I truly could not have done it without them.

References:

Kalanithi, Paul. *When breath becomes air* (1st ed). New York, NY: Random House, 2016.