

2-1-2007

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Life after Lake Forest College: Where are they now?

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Top Left: Beth Ruedi '01, Top Right: Brandon Johnson '03,
Bottom Left: Allison Huang '98, Bottom Right: Silvia
Skripkauskas '04

While in college, many of you have probably wondered, "What am I going to do with my life?" Unless you were born knowing your fate, this question may be truly disheartening. After interviewing four recent biology alumni from Lake Forest College, I realized that knowing your future is not as important as knowing yourself.

Writing this article as a senior has forced me to come to grips with my future. I understand that this article is supposed to feature graduates from Lake Forest College, but, being on the brink of commencement, I feel that my soon-to-be alumnus perspectives are simply an added bonus. Before talking with the alumni, I felt that graduating from college marked a fork in the road of life. I believed that by choosing one path, one would have difficulty backtracking or switching paths. Upon receiving correspondence with Allison Huang's '98, Silvia Skripkauskas' '04, Allison Huang '98, and Brandon Johnson '01, I realized that changing one's mind is a natural and sometimes necessary step in life.

Silvia and Allison

Let's start with Silvia, who, at the moment, is pursuing a master of arts degree in Public Policy and Administration at Northwestern University. At Lake Forest, she majored in biology and psychology while managing to pick up a minor in chemistry with medical school in mind for the future. After graduation, she tacked from one job to another, only confirming her desires for autonomy in a health-related field, "I need more say in what I do, and that can be achieved only after I get more training, whether it be the master's degree I am currently working towards, a Ph.D., or an M.D." She first held a brief position as a research technician at Abbott laboratories in the International Pediatric Nutritional Regulatory Affairs Department. Later, Silvia obtained another research position in the Institute of Healthcare Studies at Northwestern University, where she was appointed as a project

coordinator for the Health Literacy and Learning Program. She and her group have published several articles on health literacy and presented their findings in conferences from Chicago to Basle, Switzerland.

Although Silvia has pursued various interests, she reverts back to an experience she had in college where she mentored freshman biology students, "I really enjoy working with people in the teaching environment, and whatever career I choose, it will have to involve some kind of mentor-student relationship." She misses being a student at Lake Forest where, "the only thing I had to worry about was studying for exams." No one could have predicted the experiences Silvia has had after graduation. Despite this uncertainty, she is still resolute in pursuing a doctoral degree, yet, she maintains that, "nothing is set in stone."

Allison has traveled a similarly unpredictable route. While writing a senior thesis in Dr. Kirk's lab, she applied to graduate programs in environmental engineering and was accepted to Stanford University. By pursuing a research project in college, Allison claims she was able to, "gain admission to most of the programs I applied to, even though I wanted to switch fields." She also emphasizes that a research experience is critical for any undergraduate. She then switched gears, again, and received a master's degree in economics from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Although her environmental engineering and economics degree don't seem to mix, she has consolidated this education and finally pursued a doctorate in environmental science and management at UCSB. She expects to graduate in 2007. Allison believes that the "secret to life is to find the job you like" and that "sometimes it is worth taking the risks to change directions."

With a plethora of academic experiences, Allison is finally "at peace" with her decision to pursue a career in environmental economics. After her unique experiences, she has gained a wealth of advice for undergraduates. She states that at a large research university "you see how the envelope of knowledge is being pushed." Yet, she cautions that "the graduate school environment is not as nurturing as undergraduate programs. There are a lot more hoops to jump through and there are a lot of competitions. And often times, you really need to expect more from yourself and less from others."

Silvia and Allison have showed us how their lives have been guided simply by their interests. Both Silvia and Allison have emphasized the need to polish writing and speaking skills in college. Silvia further elaborated that these skills are the, "most necessary [abilities] in any path of life you choose." Lake Forest College has equipped these two students with skills that they will value and use for the rest of their lives, "I feel that Lake Forest College prepared me for the real world," affirms Silvia.

Beth and Brandon

Brandon Johnson '03 and Beth Ruedi '01 have progressed through life in a more linear fashion when compared to Silvia and Allison.

Beth, a biology and English double major, found pleasure in studying genes and behavior when she took Dr. Houde's Ecology and Evolution class, for which she was later a peer teacher. Following her

interests, she entered a doctoral program at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana. Beth's goal is to become a university-level professor, "I felt that I needed to learn a great deal more about biology before I could teach it." Taking steps to further her career, Beth is employed as a teaching assistant and she is, "reinforcing the fact that this was a good career path to take." She says that although, "Lake Forest College provides students with many opportunities for thesis research and laboratory work, which is one of the key elements that can help a student get into graduate school," she was not prepared for the intense research at a Level 1 institution, "due to Lake Forest College's comparatively relaxed atmosphere." All in all she concludes that, "graduate school is challenging and stressful. However, I can honestly say that the past five years have been the best of my life."

Brandon traveled a path no less direct than Beth's. While at Lake Forest, he majored in biology and chemistry and wrote a thesis in Dr. DebBurman's brand new lab. As side-effect to this, he was a permanent resident of Johnson Science Center during his junior and senior year. He became so attached to Johnson that whenever his experiments went awry he, "cursed the entirety of Johnson building." Despite his negative sentiments toward the actual building, he says that, "the Lake Forest College experience, as a whole, really solidified my motivations towards graduate school...the opportunity to write a thesis and defend it gave me the confidence to conduct graduate research." Now at Stanford University, Brandon is pursuing a doctorate in cell biology, which may lead him into a career in teaching where he has, "a passion for science and maintaining a high level of scientific achievement in the US." Brandon may even want to, "reenergize scientific awareness and research," possibly by teaching science at the high school level. He thinks that, "high school students are not receiving adequate scientific training. Right now, we are seeing reduced scientific funding in the United States and a general apathy towards basic, non-clinical scientific discovery."

Like Allison, Brandon cautions undergraduates, "graduate school is all about learning how to conduct a long term, independent, primary research project." Unlike Lake Forest College he says, "Classes are secondary to conducting primary research." He faces the same challenges at Stanford as he did in Johnson, "there are many times when my project doesn't move forward for months at a time, and brief periods where the science advances rapidly." Even though there are ups and downs in science, Brandon looks to other successful scientists, with similar experiences, for inspiration, "I take comfort in knowing that I am on the same rollercoaster." Additionally, Brandon is no stranger to the distress and adventure he experiences in science. He avidly surfs and hikes in California's wilderness and has recently competed in an 11 mile relay swim.

Silvia, Allison, Beth, and Brandon have all found value in immersing themselves in the academic climate at Lake Forest College. By looking inside themselves and pursuing their interests, they have become successful scholars in their respective fields. One thing they all miss is the, sometimes, daily interactions with faculty, which have strengthened their understanding of biology as well as themselves.

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