

Alumni in Focus: Getting Into Top Graduate Schools

Charlotte Flood

Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

Just over 20% of Lake Forest College students pursue a postgraduate program after graduating, and many more begin graduate degrees after taking a gap year. Lots of anxiety comes from narrowing down interests and applying to programs, especially for those reaching upperclassmen status. Estella Tcaturian graduated from LFC in 2021 as the first-ever Neuroscience and Chemistry double major and is currently a PhD candidate in the Neuroscience department of Northwestern University. Majo Orozco Fuentes graduated from LFC in 2024 with majors in Neuroscience and Psychology and is a Genetics PhD student at Yale University. Both Estella and Majo seem to agree on two key things: Getting into top graduate schools involves not only what you accomplish on paper before applying, but who you become as a person.

What Does Being Prepared During College Mean?

Undergraduate preparation is key to success, but it is easy to misconceptualize what being prepared means. Estella came to college on the pre-med track and soon realized that other pre-meds seemed to enjoy chemistry a lot less than she did. This led her to decide to major in Neuroscience and Chemistry. However, she points out that what you pursue at LFC might be very different from what you pursue after. Though major choice and thesis completion are highly regarded accomplishments, preparing for graduate school includes extracurricular experience and community impact. Estella mentions that it was natural to help out and participate, eventually leading to leadership positions through executive boards and peer tutoring, which she considers a major factor in her admission to Northwestern. Not only is being a teaching assistant part of a typical PhD program, but the communication, management, and project management skills from extracurriculars are also considered translational skills by graduate programs.

Another unique aspect of LFC, as Majo explains, is the independence of the senior thesis. Majo notes that completing a senior thesis or master's thesis is extremely common in her current program, and for good reason. Not only is it extremely helpful to gain experience being in a lab, but Majo also explains that the long-term research projects "give you some agency. You start to decide which research you're going to do. Where are you taking those questions?" If possible, think about senior projects as early as possible. Additionally, Majo was an extremely active member of academic honor societies, organizations, and committees that served LFC faculty and students. She believes that communication is one of the top skills to gain from being involved on campus, and that "graduate school really pushes you to be independent...leadership positions helped me build those skills". Additionally, showing commitment to peers, faculty, and academics all play a role in both boosting a resume and growing as a person. Overall, preparing as an undergraduate student is not only about what is written on paper, but also about growing as a person and a scientist.

How To Plan Postgrad Life?

One similarity with science and graduate school is understanding that success is not always achieved on the first try. It is not always possible to control the timeline, but it is possible to make the most of the extra time provided. Estella took a gap year after being rejected from graduate programs. She emphasizes that "ego is your biggest enemy," connecting this back to her strong undergraduate background. However, she ended up connecting with a Northwestern lab and later got accepted to the school of her choice. Gap years can provide time for hands-on experience, access to campus information not available online, and stronger motivation letters.



Majo Orozco Fuentes, LFC' 24, stands in front of Yale University School of Science, where her department resides.

Knowing when to apply is a decision unique to the individual. Majo applied and was accepted into Yale while she still attended LFC. Though there can be pressure and external stressors, Majo emphasizes that "it's you who's going to do the PhD, you who's going to move to a different place. So just do what feels right for you." When reflecting on personal experiences, utilizing resources from professors and alumni can help to provide more personalized feedback. Overall, planning life after graduation depends not only on life circumstances but also on a lengthy period of self-reflection.

After considering how to plan for post-graduation, the next challenge is standing out in a competitive applicant pool. Interviews are something that causes anxiety in many, and even the brightest acknowledge how normal it is to be nervous. Estella says that when practicing for interviews, "have examples in the back of your pocket for every skill you have on your resume." Drawing experiences provide an opportunity to elaborate on extracurriculars and research experience, which allows one to showcase a distinct set of skills and knowledge at every opportunity.

Another piece of advice from Majo is that it's important not to pretend to be somebody else. As cliché as it may sound, interviewers catch this facade. Instead, in a "pool of applicants where everybody's trying to impress the people that are interviewing you, you should just be yourself, because that will come off as genuine." The next tip is to be prepared to ask questions. Majo explains how crucial it is to read through the papers of the principal investigator (PI) you are being interviewed by. However, do not bring only technical questions, as this can come across as a critique. Instead, ask open-ended questions such as why a technique was used, why a gene was chosen for study, and what the implications of the work are. This allows for a natural conversation about science and is a way to connect personal research goals to the PI's research. It is okay to be nervous during interviews, but the true way to shine is to practice, be genuine, and be curious.

With interview strategies in mind, it is important to consider how to make the most of the resources available to you throughout your academic and professional journey. One of Estella's last pieces of advice is to not only create, but also to continue to tend to connections. She was connected to her post-baccalaureate position after speaking with Dr. Kelley, who knew of another LFC alumnus who had left their job. Estella explains that "the moment you know somebody inside, you skip that HR wall." In addition to asking professors for resources, befriending upperclassmen, lowerclassmen, and LFC alumni are great ways to build connections on a personal and professional level.

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Estella Tcaturian, LFC'21, shares an experience at the Cancer Grand Challenges Future Leaders Conference 2024 in Barcelona, where she presented a talk on understanding the brain's role in systemic metabolic regulation and its application to cachexia.

On the other hand, though Majo did reach out to graduate school professors to chat before starting the application process, she does not owe her Yale acceptance to specific connections. She, however, credits professors like Dr. Delventhal for her personal, professional, and scientific development. She continues to invest in the relationships she built at LFC in a non-transactional manner. She “keeps [s] emailing them like, hey, guess what? Or here’s a picture of my organoids. I’m very excited to share this with you.” LFC has a unique community of professors and peers who want to invest in each other, and using these resources can support individual growth and help take steps toward success.



Majo Orozco Fuentes, LFC'24, shows off her workstation at Yale University, where she pursues neurogenetic study on how transcriptional regulation changes the brain.

Growing As a Person and Scientist

Overall, Estella and Majo have established that getting into their dream programs involved not just what was accomplished on paper, but also improving their extracurriculars and participating in long-term research projects. The crucial component is to continue growing as a person and scientist, and, of course, to continue questioning everything.

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