

Lessons from our Alumni

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I have been set on becoming a neurologist since I was a freshman in high school. However, I have recently begun to look at other careers in the science field, explore other career opportunities within the neuroscience field. I emailed several Lake Forest College alumni, who graduated with a biology degree to talk about their career paths. I was particularly interested in whether they ended up in the biology field, or if they went in a completely different direction. It became clear to me that no matter which direction these people went after graduating, at least one of the following played a crucial role in each of their career paths: perseverance, confidence, and flexibility.

Natalie Simak '11 took the MCAT during her junior year at LFC with hopes of going to medical school immediately after graduation. She spent three nights a week in a small classroom on campus taking Kaplan classes in addition to studying independently for this test. Unfortunately, her score did not reflect the amount of time and effort she spent preparing for the MCAT, and thoughts of self-doubt emerged. She notes, "I felt like I was the sum of my MCAT score." Although she could have given up on becoming an anesthesiologist, she pursued a master's in biomedical sciences at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science the summer after graduation. That summer proved to be a pivotal one in that Natalie came to the realization that her MCAT score would not define how good of a doctor she could be; I believe this is an important lesson for anyone interested in medicine to keep in mind. Her story is a reminder that the LFC professors are there to give support. Natalie says, "All of my professors were a strong support to me during the grueling process of applying to medical school and dealing with setbacks." Natalie is proof that hard work and perseverance does pay off because not only did she receive her master's and a certificate in healthcare administration and management, she was also 1 of 15 students accepted to Chicago Medical School in the first wave of acceptances.

Lisa Jeziorny '07 is another model of perseverance when it comes to pursuing a career. Lisa started preparing for optometry school when she was a freshman at LFC. That year, one LFC staff member told her she would never get into optometry school because of her grades. Instead of letting this negative comment crush her dreams, Lisa used it as motivation to work even harder the next three years to prove that person wrong. Her hard work and perseverance paid off! Lisa was accepted at the Illinois College of Optometry, where she earned a Doctor of Optometry degree. Lisa says, "I absolutely love what I do," about her work as a full-time associate O.D. at a private practice in Bourbonnais, IL. Looking back, Lisa is grateful for being pushed and challenged in college because it gave her a chance to prove to everyone, including herself, what she is capable of. It takes confidence to keep going when someone tells you to give up, to embrace challenges that are thrown at you, and to overcome obstacles in life.

Other alumni have shown me the importance of self-confidence. Michael Zorniak '07 matriculated into the Neuroscience Training Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison after graduation from LFC. Currently, he is finishing his Ph.D. dissertation in Dr. John Kuo's Brain Tumor Research Lab. Michael will be doing a postdoctoral fellowship in the Antibody Therapy Section at the National Cancer Institute starting next year. According to Michael,

"Two key experiences at Lake Forest College have shaped my career as a scientist: One, having the opportunity to role-play a Nobel laureate to see what high-quality science looks like and how it's done; and, two, having the independence to ask and answer my own research questions during my senior thesis in Dr. DebBurman's lab. Both experiences have given me the tools and confidence to shape my own scientific career that I often look back upon for guidance in planning for the future." LFC offers students plenty of experiences to gain the confidence necessary to succeed in life.

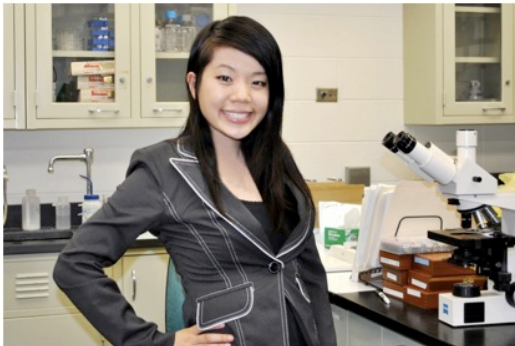
Laura Thilgen '09, who graduated with a major in biology and minor in chemistry, uses the confidence gained from her LFC education every day as part of her job. Laura knew she was not interested in graduate or medical school after college, but she still wanted a job that would allow her to use the skills she gained from LFC. So, Laura got a job in sales at Fisher three months out of college. She says, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me! I loved working in a field where all I do is make relationships with scientists and people who buy lab products." This is a type of job that requires someone who is confident about going in front of clients and customers to sell products. After two years, Laura switched companies and started working for VWR, where she manages million-dollar accounts and lab/production supplies. One major benefit of having an on the road office/field sales covering a 3-state territory is that it pays well. According to Laura, "If you are wanting to make money with a science degree—go into sales because there is commission." That sounds like an awesome job to me!

Being flexible often helps open doors for people in the "real world," as proven by our alumni. Joseph Campagna '10 did an internship at Illinois Bone and Joint Institute during his last semester of senior year at LFC, which inspired him to pursue physical therapy school. However, Joseph switched paths at the end of 2010 when he was asked to become the Western Illinois University Men's and Women's Tennis graduate assistant. Since Western did not have a PT school, Joseph obtained a master's degree in sports management. Later, Joseph had another career path change that landed him in the financial services industry. Currently, he works for MetLife Investor Distribution Company. Looking back, "I definitely ended up going a different direction than I ever anticipated. Honestly, if I didn't study biology at LFC, I wouldn't have found the path to what I am doing today," says Joseph. LFC helped him learn how to take positive qualities and skills from one field and relate it to another, meaning he could apply what he learned from LFC to a different field and still be successful.

Katie Elbert '07 has also applied the qualities and skills she gained from her biology major to different career paths. When she moved to Utah after graduating from LFC, she started out as a receptionist at an occupational health clinic. Later, Katie managed to get a job as a lab technician in a Nobel Prize winning lab at the University of Utah. Katie recalls, "My boss was impressed with my depth and breadth of knowledge, as well as skills that I had acquired at LFC." After a few years of working in a lab, Katie knew she had to switch jobs again due to her unhealthy level of anxiety about the chemicals she worked with. However, she still wanted to pursue a career in science. After some research, she decided on a graduate program to earn a masters degree in teaching that she obtained in 2011. Katie will start working

as a secondary science/biology teacher as soon as her youngest child enters preschool. Although she regrets not double-majoring in teaching and biology at LFC, Katie's flexibility helped her take her life in a new direction.

Learning about what different people have done after graduating from LFC has opened my eyes to careers I never considered before. I used to think there were only three career paths science majors had the option of taking after college: research, academia, or medicine. Today, I feel reassured that no matter which path I take, I will still be able to use the skills I learned as a neuroscience major. Until now, I've lacked confidence about the knowledge and skills I've gained in college so far. Now, I feel a fresh sense of optimism about the future that lies ahead of me. I owe my new outlook on life to the ten alumni who graciously volunteered to share how their experiences at Lake Forest College influenced their career paths. Although it was not possible to include all ten of the stories I received for this article, I enjoyed reading each one. I would also like to thank the Alumni Office for their assistance.



Lani Leong '14 is exploring different careers in the neuroscience field.

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