



Student Perspective

A Turn of the Clock: A Student Perspective on Remaining “Present” in Medical School

by Chase LaRue – MCW–Milwaukee Medical Student

Tuesday morning. 9:46 a.m. I’ve been awake for five hours, but I still have two more hours of lectures to watch. A mid-morning nap teases me from the bed just a few feet behind me. Snacks are within grasp if only I ... uh ... Lecture! Cardiovascular pathology! Lecture, Chase, Lecture!

This internal conversation has been common since mid-March. Like many at MCW and the Kern Institute, my life took on dramatic changes when my normal study location was ripped from underneath me. Medical school, relationships, and my well-being shifted as quickly as the hands on a clock face.

Whenever I sat down to do something, rather than focusing on what needed to be done, I was distracted. Think about that friend who is always on their phone, even when you are speaking right to them. It doesn’t feel great, and you don’t get the feeling they “care” about you. That was what I was doing to myself. It’s me. I’m the friend to myself. I’ve figuratively been on my phone rather than giving each moment a full look – both in school and in life.

When I came to medical school, I knew exactly what I hoped to build for myself while embodying the student-doctor persona. The pandemic hasn’t changed my pursuit, rather it has provided detours and scenic views that I did not have in my original blueprint.

So, you wonder, “What did Chase envision for medical school?” Despite the risk of oversimplifying the learning experience, I’ll summarize my hopes and my commitment in a few short words: *Investment*, *Purpose*, and *Present-ness*. And

though my Attention Disorder doesn't necessarily enhance these hopes – it does ride shotgun to the COVID-19 that is driving my M2 year.

I don't know what these goals look like for anyone else, but here is how they look to me:

Investment

Medical students are a unique brand of learners. We willingly invest at least eleven years of our lives just to claim the “attending physician” title. When we don the white coat or make that first cadaveric incision, our souls reignite with a sense of “this is how I get there,” and few feelings will ever replace that. I am no different. I pride myself on a “jump-in headfirst” type of commitment.

But when most doctor-like learning environment was taken from me, my commitment to the investment was challenged and, honestly, broke down. The big picture became full of telehealth and recorded lectures. *I didn't like it.* Suddenly, I craved the frigid temperatures of MCW's Kerrigan Auditorium just to recall how uncomfortable it could be to willingly pursue the dream.

And then it hits me. This pandemic is nothing but a speed bump in my education. How might I double down and reinvest my energy? Medical school *is* hard, but I knew that “challenge” was a non-negotiable in this process. I re-invested. I sat down with my journal and revisited why I gave up another career to someday be a physician.

Purpose

Sick kids, sad families, and my own memories of emergency room waiting rooms brought me here. My experience with health disparities pushed me, and my sense of belonging while working in clinic got me up in the morning. But when my Clinical Apprenticeship rotation was restricted in 2020, my ability to connect with my education shifted – people are my purpose, health is my outcome. Where are they now? Why am I still here? How can I keep caring? I search my work for the places where I can continue to connect with my purpose.

Present-ness

The crux of medical education – of every patient encounter, the attention to detail required for high quality care – is in every moment. The more I felt cheated by circumstances, the more I realized I was missing the bigger picture. Despite the challenges set forth by these “unprecedented times,” I remembered something that I was asked the first time I stepped on a baseball field as a teenager. My coach challenged me then with, “What are you going to get out of this moment? This practice?”

I thought of my coach as I re-read my personal statement for medical school and looked over my interview notes. I remembered one important fact: *MCW has my academic trust, that's why I came here*. MCW trusts me to work within my means to grow into a capable student-doctor. I realized I had shifted my focus to drama, excuses, and self-deprecation. I believed I was absorbed in my education when I was, instead, overwhelmed by the stimuli around me.

And so, I reassessed my purpose and my investment in the journey. I asked myself what I needed to do to be “present” in my learning, my relationships, and my goals. The answer surprised me. It was, *Do less*.

Do less?

Before the pandemic, I had struggled for hours under the assumption that “more is better,” and when my office and bedroom became the same place, it was even easier to let work and life become the same thing. It never worked out for me.

My solution? A thirty-minute hourglass where I dedicate one turn to one activity and one activity only. If I finish early, I take a break. If I need more time, I note my progress, take a five-minute break and start fresh with another turn. Whether it's a small group (where I still take a break to disconnect after thirty minutes), a lecture, or this article, staying present in the pandemic requires struggle and suffering, but my thirty-minute intervals offer a soft reminder of why I'm here and provide the attention the work deserves. Just as we have

windows of time set aside for patients, meetings, or other tasks, I use my hourglass method to fully commit myself to each moment.

This approach has brought me back. My hourglass has made me pay attention to the present and helped me make each moment one of commitment.

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