

A Year in Boston

在波士頓的一年－哈佛求學記

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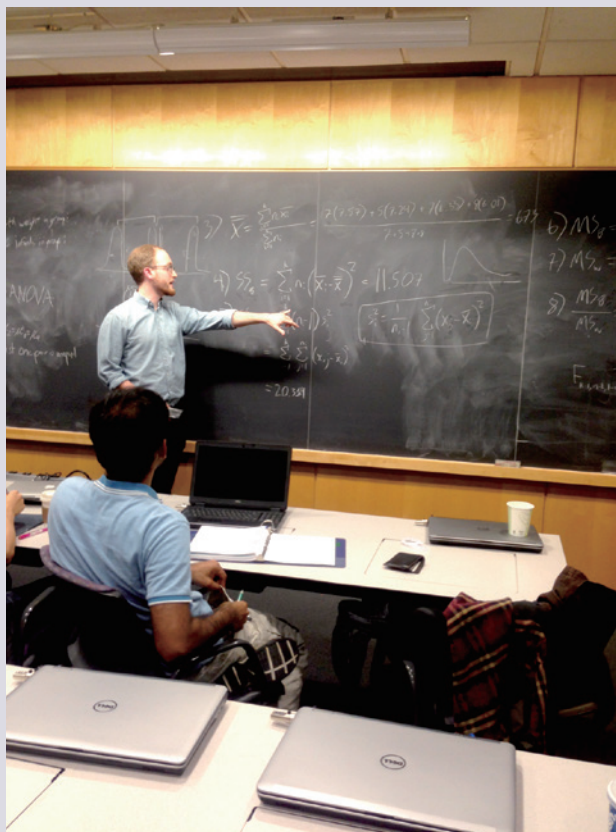


View of Prudential Tower from Charles River Esplanade at sunset

In 2007, I was rejected from Harvard as a senior high school student. It was unimaginable then that almost ten years and one medical degree later, I would fulfill my aspiration of attending Harvard University, only this time as a Masters of Public Health (MPH) student at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public

Health.

Near the end of my intern year in medical school I heard that Dr. Chen Yu-Wei, a senior of mine, would be returning to share his experience as a current two-year student at the Harvard Chan School. At Yu-Wei's talk, I grew intrigued with the notion of delving deeper into



Biostatistics lab session with teaching assistant leading discussion

epidemiology and biostatistics. As a medical student, I had worked on simple case reports that became my stepping stone into clinical research. But I realized that more rigorous analytical skills were necessary if I wished to pursue research on a larger scale. Thus, based on Yu-Wei's experience and conversations with friends who had studied at the Harvard Chan School, I applied to its one-year Quantitative Methods (QM) program.

When acceptances were released

a few months later, I was exhilarated to learn that I had been admitted with a full scholarship. I booked my flight, packed my bags, and reviewed what little epidemiology I remembered from my medical school years. I departed from Taoyuan International Airport in August and embarked on my year-long journey in Boston.

Boston is a city full of its own beautiful idiosyncrasies. The Freedom Walk highlights the city's unique historical and cultural prominence in the United States, and the city's timeworn mass transit system known as "the T" is an attraction to experience in itself. Conversations with locals revolved around the Red Sox or the winter weather. Boston is also a city of change, with students and professionals coming and going constantly. I settled into the school dormitory Shattuck House, which was conveniently located near the famous Fenway T stop and within walking distance to my school in Longwood, and prepared for my first day as a QM student.



Graduation picture outside Shattuck House dormitory

At orientation, we learned about the “elevator speech.” The “elevator speech” occurs in the hypothetical scenario where you are in an elevator with a distinguished professor and have one minute to introduce yourself and make a favorable impression. One faculty gave us her personal “elevator speech,” sharing her numerous publications and grants, and described the astonishing speed at which she rose through the academic ranks. At Harvard, it seemed as if everyone had impressive “elevator

speeches.” However, then we were taught to share the “other elevator speech,” the one where we talked about our failures. The same faculty talked about her personal uncertainties, the tremendous work stress, and even a miscarriage she experienced. We took turns sharing our “other elevator speech” in small groups. It was a moment of clarity for me – I learned that by making our own personal shortcomings and failures visible to others, we established much deeper connections with one another.

During my first week of school, my academic advisor sent me an e-mail scheduling our initial meeting. She signed off the e-mail with her first name, which my American friends confirmed was fine to address her by. However, I remained unconvinced, and when I met my advisor in person and initiated the conversation with “Professor,” she promptly told me to call her by her first name. I would discover that addressing faculty on a first-name basis was the norm at the Harvard Chan School. I was similarly surprised when I began working on my research project with a different faculty mentor, an established researcher in the field. Though I had just begun learning epidemiology and biostatistics, she always addressed me as a colleague of equal standing. She would respond to my questions with “That is a valid question,” or preface her suggestions with “I may be wrong, but...” In retrospect, I realized that by granting me a great amount of independence with the project and assuming that I “could” instead of “could not,” she enabled me to

learn quickly and with confidence.

What I loved most about the QM program was the diversity of the student body. My classmates were mainly physicians at different stages of training and hailed from all over the world. One night while walking on Massachusetts Ave in Cambridge with three other friends, we had a very engaging conversation regarding filial piety across cultures. We represented four different countries – Taiwan, Kuwait, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, and each brought unique insight into the discussion. Interesting conversations such as these, both inside and outside the classroom, provided some of my most important education during my year at the Harvard Chan School.

The time seemed to fly during my year at Harvard. Weeks were packed with busy class schedules, special talks, social events, and research projects. Before I knew it, I had survived a relatively mild Boston winter and it was May and we were listening to our commencement speaker Steven Spielberg speak at the

graduation ceremony. One thing he said resonated with me – “Listen to that voice that tells you what you could do. Nothing will define your character more than that.” For many medical students, taking a gap year or two off to pursue a passion outside the traditional career advancement path of intern, PGY, resident, fellow, and attending physician may seem like a daunting decision to make. It requires quite a bit of courage, but if you follow your intuition, I believe that whatever you choose will be, as Spielberg puts it, a “character-defining moment” that can forever change your life.