



Strengths and Perspectives from Nursing (and other “Non-Traditional” Backgrounds)

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Hi everyone! My name is Lauren and I began my first year at the University of Calgary Cumming School of Medicine this July. Having been in medical school for several months, I have had some time to reflect on my own “pre-med” journey, as well as the paths of some of my amazing classmates who have had rich, fulfilling careers and less traditional experiences before medicine.

I remember feeling so out of my depths as I struggled with the MCAT and **feeling so discouraged** comparing my GPA to other applicants. I had felt that my “non-traditional” background as a nurse was such a disadvantage back then, and I wondered if there would ever be a spot for me in medical school.

Going through medical school now and reflecting on my application process, I am **realizing how helpful my less traditional background has been** in allowing me to be where I am. More importantly, upon looking around at my colleagues from non-traditional backgrounds, I see the strengths and perspectives we can **all** bring to our school and classmates.

For those of you who may feel just as out of place as I did, I hope this piece will encourage you and make you **realize the unique strengths you possess**. I will also include some **specific tips** to help you become as successful as possible in your application process!

Real-Life Experiences and Stories

As most medical school interviewees can attest, some of the trickiest yet most common MMI questions include “Tell me about conflicts you have had” and “Tell me about a mistake you made.” These are challenging questions, because for most applicants, they have had limited opportunity for so-called “**real-life experiences**” and the inevitable mess that accompanies them.



Having worked in various health care settings as a nurse, I have had my share of the inevitable conflicts with patients, family members, interdisciplinary team members, and co-workers. I have also made my fair share of mistakes. These errors range from giving a wrong medication to one of my patients when I was in a hurry and disclosing my medication error to the patient's parent, to wrong assessment and care decisions I made as a novice nurse. These are real stories that were highly stressful at the time, but events that **pushed me beyond my comfort zone and required me to reflect and learn**. I know that I became a stronger nurse because of these experiences.

Similar to my experiences, I know that many applicants from non-traditional backgrounds have stepped into tangible, often challenging roles as professionals. And because we are human, we have inevitably faced conflicts and challenges that shaped us. These stories are unique compared to some of the more typical stories an interviewer might hear. My advice for all applicants is to **reflect on impactful, often challenging experiences you have had, and to bring them forward for the MMIs**.

Gaining Skills and Confidence

Thinking back to when I was 22 years old, I know that I was cautious, highly averse to conflict, and still unsure of my abilities. However, my years as a nurse gradually pushed me to **gain my voice and become confident** and comfortable in all settings. When a worried parent yelled at me about their sick child, I learned to discern their expression of frustration and helplessness. When I saw my patient's needs unmet, I learned to find my voice and speak up on their behalf. As I began to teach students and new hires in my unit, I learned that I could be a patient and thorough teacher.

These skills we gain from our various backgrounds all help us to contribute back to the medical community and the **confidence we have is noticed by those around us, including the interviewers**. During my MMI, when I was thrust into an acting scenario with an upset person, I knew to stay collected, and reassure and validate them. Now in medical school, when I saw a fellow classmate being evaluated harshly and unfairly by an instructor, I was able to speak up and advocate on my classmate's behalf.

The varied skills we have gained from our less traditional backgrounds have surprising ways of fitting into our new roles in medicine. I encourage you all to have **faith in the unique skillset you carry— they will help you to uplift and serve your classmates and patients**.



Perspectives We Bring to our Class

Lastly, I would like to close off by sharing some of the valuable perspectives and wisdom that are brought by my classmates from non-traditional backgrounds. I know I am not speaking just for myself when I say that their stories **instill a much deeper meaning to our learning.**

When we were learning about the stigma experienced by some of the marginalized population in hospital, we were able to hear from a classmate who had been a social worker. This classmate had worked predominantly with Indigenous patients in the hospital, helping them to navigate the health care setting and enabling them to access culturally safe space and ceremonies. This classmate's first-hand stories in the challenges faced by this marginalized population were sobering and insightful to our class. Another classmate immigrated from a nation that was struggling financially and politically. This classmate is a bold advocate for newcomers to Canada, achieving equity in our health systems, and eliminating cultural and language barriers. Thanks to this classmate, we as a class were able to brainstorm ways to reduce healthcare barriers and became more aware of specific needs of patients we may come to serve. Other than this, there are countless more stories of classmates from all backgrounds – from business, arts, to the military – who all bring forth **many unique perspectives and strengths** for the medical community at large.

In conclusion, I want to give a **BIG CHEER** for all the fellow non-traditional applicants out there! **Do not ever feel discouraged** – there are spots in medicine saved for you and unique perspectives you will bring for the good of the whole medical community. All your seemingly “random” experiences thus far will serve you well and enable you to become the best physician possible. **Believe in yourself** and I look forward to greeting you on the other side soon

