

EXAMPLE SUBMISSION

Title: Can you ever escape from your personal (and scientific) bubble?

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About Adriana Bankston:

Adriana Bankston is a bench scientist turned science policy researcher. She is a member of the Board of Directors at Future of Research (FoR), a nonprofit organization with a mission to champion, engage, and empower early career scientists with evidence-based resources to improve the scientific research endeavor. Her goals are to promote science policy and advocacy for junior scientists, and to gather and present data on various issues in the current scientific system. She can be reached via LinkedIn (<http://linkedin.com/in/adrianabankston>) or on Twitter (@AdrianaBankston).

Story Key Points:

1. Celebrate your accomplishments
2. Be like yourself, and not like others
3. Appreciate the people who allow you to discover your own path

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Your Story:

Ever since I can remember, I have always been a very diligent student. My parents impressed upon me from an early age the old saying that there was “no play until your homework is done.” I took that very seriously. I always had a great sense of duty that it was my job to do well. As a result, I never really celebrated my accomplishments much, which is the first theme.

I come from a family of scientists who instilled in me this sense of duty and also had very high expectations. When I obtained my PhD, my grandmother said “of course you did, we’ve all done that” - and by “all” she meant everyone on that side of the family. Doing well in school and getting all the degrees I had set out to get just had to be done. No questions asked.

I spent my childhood going to my parents’ laboratory after school. In the summers, visiting my grandparents almost always included going to the “[Institute of Cellular Biology and Pathology](#)” which they had built from scratch - talk about high expectations.

It now bears my grandfather's name. Whenever I walked into either of these buildings, everyone knew my name and I felt like a celebrity. But this was only by association to my family members, and not by anything that I had actually accomplished.

Still, I was very proud to be a part of this family, and of all the things they had accomplished. But somehow, this planted in my mind at an early age the unrealistic idea that everyone else was superior to me professionally. This myth transpired into my school years and later among work colleagues. I still carry it with me and seek to dispel it nowadays. Combined with the need to always perform at a very high level, this can be a recipe for disaster.

To an extent, I've wanted desperately from early on to have a straightforward path. I imagined that everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing professionally, and that they were surely great at it. Everyone but me. I always thought that I needed to perform better, so that I might live up to where they were and still "stay in the race." At the same time this way of being worked to fulfill my family's expectations.

So what did I really want? My dream as a child was to become a pediatrician. Why? It seemed like a noble profession - again, thinking about the image instead of what I actually wanted. It was also the only profession that was in front of me when I finished high school. In Romania, where I grew up, medical school and law school were the two most respectable professions for smart high school graduates. I wasn't thinking at all about doing bench science at the time. All my classmates who were at the top of my graduating class - and whom I looked up to - went to medical school. I wanted to be right up there with them. And part of me also wanted to see just if I could do it.

Deep down, I always knew that I wanted to help people. Medical school seemed like the way to do it. And, I was stubborn - another life theme - and wouldn't let anyone talk me out of applying to medical school. I did apply multiple times without success. I started contemplating my own path and adopted another life slogan, which is that "everything happens for a reason." This helped justify in my mind the fact that medical school just wasn't meant to be. Somehow this made me feel better for not being accepted into medical school, even though I had no apparent direction.

Then, I got lucky - which has also driven a lot of my life, although my husband calls it being opportunistic. I moved overseas to the U.S. with my father after high school. Here, I obtained my B.S. in Biology, followed by my Ph.D. in Biochemistry, Cell and Developmental Biology. This not only fulfilled my sense of duty but also made me realize that science was something I knew how to do.

Somewhere along the way I figured out that I preferred working with people instead of machines. This is partly what attracted me to medicine in the first place. As a child, seeing my parents work at the bench seemed impersonal. As an adult, science still had a certain appeal due to its intellectual challenges. Also, part of me had always been curious and thirsty for knowledge, which made this an attractive direction. Graduate school and postdoctoral training were both challenging, full of all the things that most people talk about such as failed experiments, long hours, etc.

But none of that really bothered me as much as my own personal struggles during this time.

Because of moving to the U.S., I ended up having a small gap before starting college. Once I was in college, I again felt like my life had direction. Then, my father moved to another state for his job. The school transfer was tough as I was just beginning to make friends. However, I eventually got used to the new place and graduated from college *Magna Cum Laude*. This made me feel just a bit proud but probably not as much as it should have. Mostly I had a sense of fulfillment that I had now completed something big that I could check off my list. Believe it not, my biggest problem was how I was going to justify on my CV that I had attended two schools in four years. I imagined that not having a “clean path” in college - which I thought everyone else had - was going to haunt me for the rest of my life. It didn't.

After college, I ended up doing a year of Optional Practical Training (OPT) before starting graduate school. Strangely, I was fine with it because I enjoyed what I was doing at the bench. And to an extent, this was out of my control. But this experience ended up being my first true, full time research experience. It was also the reason I applied to graduate school. And even though it was a gap, I could justify it as helping advance my career.

In graduate school, I wasn't quite prepared for how mature I needed to be. I started in a Genetics & Molecular Biology program because I wanted to work on cancer - a very naive view of the world - but soon realized that I was more interested in Biochemistry & Cell Biology. I switched programs early on in graduate school, following a meeting with a committee who decided this. For this meeting, I prepared a whole portfolio of documents to convince them that my calling was this field and not genetics. Deep down, I knew that was true. This move was initially frowned upon. But apparently I had a good enough case - maybe I should have been a lawyer after all? I was able to switch to this program and graduate from it with my Ph.D. Having made the switch early on in graduate school was likely an advantage as it wasn't going to be a huge setback.

As if that wasn't enough, I also switched advisors, in spite of being told not to. This ended up being one of the best decisions of my life. I suppose being (overly) stubborn can pay off? I partly did it because I was slowly starting to realize what I was looking for. And when I truly knew what I wanted out of life, I didn't hesitate to go after it - it was just a matter of finding it. And this turned out to be another life theme for me. So far, this was the case for both my chosen graduate program and advisor.

I knew that I wanted a graduate advisor who could challenge me and tell me when I was doing the wrong thing. I also needed someone to essentially help me get what I needed from the graduate school experience. I clearly hadn't figured that out yet. My Ph.D. advisor taught me how to be a good scientist, which encompassed many things. I will always be grateful for that. She also showed me - which I realized later - how important it is to take care of yourself in this process but also enjoying your time at work. In her lab, we frequently celebrated birthdays and paper acceptances. And we almost always won the Halloween costume prize in our department while I worked there. In terms of science, I learned to always be very honest and careful at the bench and to report data as they were. At the same time, she taught me how to think about the big picture - which I had to be reminded of repeatedly at first given my very detail-oriented brain. I still carry these lessons with me and try to apply them to my current situation.

At the end of graduate school, as I still liked science, I decided to pursue postdoc training in order to become a faculty member. At the time, this was still a popular choice - can you see a trend here? Again, I saw being a faculty member as the only respectable path in front of me. That was a path I had been exposed to my entire life. And I was again naive enough to think I could do it. In retrospect, this wasn't realistic because I didn't have the right amount and/or type of publications to be extremely competitive as needed nowadays. But, true to self, I applied to - and to my surprise got interest from some - high caliber labs for postdoctoral positions. None of them hired me in the end. I ended up doing a postdoc in Louisville, which was not the high level place where I expected to land. But perhaps this was a blessing in disguise. I had both degrees in hand, which was a step forward. And now, the high expectation of being in a prestigious place was removed. I was here and there was no turning back. So I felt that I could now actually focus on my life path.

During this time, I had a lot of time to think about my life. I had also now matured enough to start figuring out that maybe I shouldn't let everyone else dictate where my life was going. I started volunteering for things that actually mattered to me - and not just those that would fill in my pre-med CV as before. I began to realize that it was OK to do something other than what everyone else expected of me. I felt a bit guilty, especially

in thinking about how my family would react. But I started to slowly figure myself out at the same time.

This self-exploration phase also came with having to battle uncertainty. I hadn't really been used to that before. I toyed with various career prospects, until I eventually realized that I didn't want an academic career. I began to feel more confident in my own choices, and become less influenced by other people's opinions. I knew this felt right. I just had to break it to everyone else. When I finally told my family, my grandmother's reaction was "sure, you can do anything you want, but you won't ever have as much fun as doing science." Of course, this was coming from someone who had spent their entire life in science and loved it. Someone who built an Institute around it, and still went to the lab and chatted with the people running it at over 70 years old. For someone like that, there was nothing else. And that kind of dedication is something to be admired. I somewhat have gotten my sense of loyalty and passion for a particular direction from both her and my grandfather. They pretty much dedicated their entire life building something from scratch because they believed in it so much. And I suppose my deep sense of loyalty has always made it hard for me to give up a certain direction in life.

All my life, I've battled with the discordance between what I am supposed to be and what I really am, in a professional sense. My family always had high expectations. I also learned to have high expectations of myself. But I also realized that my family really only knew how to guide me in one direction, and that was their own career path. That is not say that I never had champions. Maybe there were just cheering me on for something I didn't really want. Maybe I was just "going with the flow."

And yet, some considered my path pretty unique. Things not turning out as I planned - which has happened at every major stage of my life - actually allowed me to forge my own path in the end. Now, I am at a point in my life where I feel fortunate enough to have found my true passion. I cannot articulate enough how much that means, given everything I've been through to find it.

I have now left academia. I am lucky to have some very special people in my life who allowed me to explore things and entrusted me with independent projects with a high stake. This has made all the difference for my life. I still don't know where things will lead. However, I know that I can take my personal values and apply them to building my own professional direction around something that matters to me.

I've always planned everything to the last detail, but my life never went that way. Perhaps this was actually a blessing that allowed me to explore more. I may never become a famous scientist, build an institute, or do what my family or society expects.

But now, I finally have a sense of freedom that I never felt before. I know what it feels like to have someone give you ownership over your own life essentially. That is not to be taken lightly. I now have people who cheer me on and celebrate my accomplishments. They ask for and value my opinion, and allow me to discover my own direction. Who would have known that all I had to do was stop listening to everyone else and just do what truly feels right?

I am aware that few of us have this kind of luxury in life to freely explore new directions we want to pursue. But I think this is essential in today's society, where everyone is just going forward continuously and may not stop to reflect on whether they are heading in the right direction. My life theme has always felt like the song "[My way](#)" by Frank Sinatra, my favorite song of all time. That is because I've had to figure out my life at every step of the way. At the same time, it feels like I've been doing it within a bubble - which could be within my family, or within academia itself. I was trapped in this bubble and couldn't escape until I decided it was time. Now, there is no going back. I know that my life probably won't go as planned from here on either. But I am ready to happily embrace the surprises it may hold in store.