

Mercedes Hernandez

Kids, Nutrition, and Opportunity

If you plan on pursuing medicine, the path of your academic career has already been established for you. The steps are simple: major in Biology, ace the MCAT, and earn acceptance into medical school. Becoming a physician is the life I have chosen, but I have decided on reaching that life through a path less-traveled. Instead of majoring in Biology, I am majoring in Health Sciences because of my interest in Nutrition. My summer was spent at the Maverick Boys and Girls Club educating Kindergarten through 8th-Grade students about Gardening and Nutrition, instead of in a hospital. Although my internship was not in a hospital, I gained valuable experience for a future doctor. The internship strengthened my ability to provide basic preventative medical care: a nutrition education, along with human compassion.

A proper knowledge of nutrition goes hand-in-hand with a medical education. This belief was reaffirmed during physician-shadowing experiences in the past. During these opportunities in the hospital, I observed that many of the patients we were seeing had an ailment relating to diet (diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular issues, etc.). These cases were fitting examples that highlight the significance of preventive medicine, specifically a nutrition education.

While interning with the High Plains Food Bank Garden, I was given an opportunity to provide exactly that: a nutrition education (and not just any nutrition education). This particular education included lessons on gardening to encourage organic consumption of fruits and vegetables. I provided my program at the Maverick Boys and Girls Club, a facility that offers summer child-care services to those of low-socioeconomic status. A typical day consisted of seeing six classes a day, with class sizes ranging from 7-10 children. When beginning the “Garden Club” program, I sought to establish a warm environment—conducive of learning. My

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classes met outside in a small garden located behind the Maverick building. This isolation and chance for fresh air gave the kids a break from their normal day. Lesson plans for Garden Club covered everything from simple gardening techniques to USDA MyPlate and much more. Every Friday, I held a taste-test to allow the kids to enjoy the healthy foods we discussed during the week. Some examples of taste-tests include: "Breakfast of Champions" (whole grain cereal, Greek yogurt, fruit), Pesto sauce (used Basil leaves grown in the garden), "Plant Parts Salad" (how to make salad using every part of a plant), and many others.

Inevitably, I ran into some problems too. Initially my supervisor, Justin, had two lessons planned a week for me to cover (meaning I saw the kids only three times a week: Monday-Wednesday group and Tuesday-Thursday group, everyone Friday). However, I strongly believed the kids would benefit more to meet with Garden Club every day. Therefore, I volunteered to construct extra lesson plans so that I may meet with the kids daily and Justin encouragingly, gave me the green-light.

I grew to love these kids very much. Each day, intentionally or not, they brought joy into my life. Sometimes I questioned whether or not I was having as large of an impact on them, as they were on me. Yet when these doubts surfaced, I arrived Monday morning to a smiling face announcing that she showed her mom a recipe we did in Garden Club. I learned from this experience that one should expect doubt from time-to-time (for a Pre-Med student studying for the MCAT, perhaps a little more often). I also learned however, when you take a step back to see the big picture, such as the impact of a nutrition education, you can find a solution to a simple problem that is impeding you. This lesson, along with a reaffirmed belief in the value of providing preventive medicine with compassion, is what has been derived from my internship and will be used in my pursuit of medicine.



September 25, 2014

To the Intern of the Year Selection Committee:

Please accept this letter as a formal recommendation and note of high praise and support on behalf of Mercedes Hernandez. Few students have displayed the level of commitment, compassion and character that Mercedes has in her time here at WT. It is with great pleasure that I write in support of Mercedes for Intern of the Year.

I first came to know Mercedes when she was selected as a Readership WT Ambassador to Bolivia in the fall of her freshman year (2012). She was one of only fourteen selected from her class and she earned the position for her thoughtfulness and a commitment to learn about and impact the world around her. Mercedes was a leader during our trip and embraced every opportunity. She had a positive attitude even in challenging situations. She encouraged her peers; she eagerly shared time with the local people; she was reflective and appreciative. She was an excellent ambassador for our university.

After returning from Bolivia, Mercedes was selected to serve as a peer leader for first year programs. She is dedicated and compassionate in her work to help new students be successful. She communicates effectively with her diverse group of peers and is trusted to interact with faculty, staff and community members. She continues serving today as a peer leader in the Honors program.

Mercedes's determination and commitment to excellence drive her to success both in and out of the classroom. She has maintained a 3.5 grade point average or better in the demanding field of pre-medicine. She gained early admission into medical school when she was selected for the highly competitive Joint Admission Medical Program (JAMP). She is in the Honors Program and is a LEAD WT Scholar.

She is committed to holistic health and wellness as reflected in her personal decisions in her own lifestyle (diet, exercise, sleep, stress management). She is determined to pursue a career in medicine to impact people's lives and has a passion for helping others achieve personal wellness. She sought out the opportunity to invest in our community and apply her passion and field of study through her internship as a Nutrition Education Intern with the High Plains Food Bank this summer. She spent days providing nutrition education programs for K-8 students on topics such as Nutrition Labels, Gardening Basics, USDA MyPlate, and Organic Produce.

Mercedes exemplifies everything a successful WT student and intern should be. She strives for excellence in her academic pursuits, she seeks opportunities for continued learning and professional development, and invests in the communities of which she is a part. It is with the utmost confidence that I recommend Mercedes as Intern of the Year.

Sincerely,

Kendra Campbell
Director, First Year Experience
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Mercedes Hernandez was a nutrition education intern for The Garden at the High Plains Food Bank from July 1, 2014 to August 15, 2014. During her six weeks, her main focus was to lead a nutrition education and organic gardening program at the Maverick Boys and Girls Club here in Amarillo, Texas. She worked between 30-40 hours per week and taught 7 classes a day. Her 112 students ranged from kindergarten to 8th grade. For the roughly 15'x25' garden, her responsibilities included planting and harvesting vegetables, weeding, irrigation repair, soil amendment, pest control, and other standard organic maintenance practices. Coming into the position she had zero experience with gardening or plant care. Her ability to learn quickly and, more importantly, her willingness to do what was required to make the program better made this a small obstacle that was overcome very quickly.

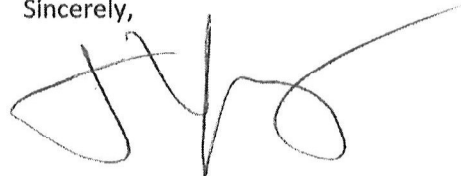
The education component of her position was far more challenging to take on, but met with an equal amount of willingness and achieved even greater success. Her responsibilities for the nutrition education program included leading 7 classes per day Monday through Friday using curricula provided, submitting monthly reports based on the success and demographic make-up of her classes, modeling a healthy lifestyle, and conducting cooking demonstrations and taste tests with the students. At the end of her internship, she prepared a presentation to be given to the Executive Director and Director of Development for the High Plains Food Bank to demonstrate the effectiveness of the internship. She received outstanding reviews. They were both very impressed with the amount she accomplished through her internship and the professionalism of her presentation.

Mercedes went above the responsibilities that were laid out for her in several areas that make her qualified for this honor. First and most impressively, Mercedes expressed a desire to create her own lessons to teach as a way to increase her effectiveness. The lessons she came up with showed that great effort and thought went into them and reflected her personality. She also showed skill in differentiating

the lessons for the wide range of ages that she worked with. She created a special club within the Garden Club for a group of middle school girls, effectively reaching a group of students through the program that have previously been difficult to engage. She created a composting program and trained students to collect and compost the waste from the three meals served at the program daily. She used her creativity to make signs with the students and transformed the garden area into more of an outdoor classroom. At the end of her internship, she presented me with a notebook of all of the lessons and materials she had created throughout the internship as well as notes to be passed on in order to make the position easier for future interns.

The set-up of this internship makes it very challenging. The students at Maverick have very little structure and can be challenging. Mercedes showed great patience and perseverance in building a relationship within a structured classroom setting with the students and it paid off by improving her effectiveness. The students loved her and very much miss her. I require much from our interns with very little oversight. I expect initiative, creativity, and for our interns to take ownership of the program. Although the internship was short, Mercedes was very successful in making an impact. The many facets of the position can be difficult to juggle. Most of our interns excel in one area at the expense of the many others. To do this position exceptionally requires much of a person and Mercedes exceeding my expectations in all areas. I whole heartedly recommend her for this honor. Please let me know if you need any further information concerning her performance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justin Young', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Justin Young
Nutrition Education Director
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