

Embracing Community-Centric Careers in a Post-*Barbie* World: Navigating Identity, Expectations, and Impact in Medicine and Veterinary Medicine

Carmel Falek, Cecilia Joshi, and Minna Ng

Abstract

Navigating the intersection between personal aspirations and societal expectations poses a significant challenge. We as college students share our transformative journey toward embracing community-centric career paths in medicine and veterinary medicine amid the expectations of attending a prestigious institution. Through an educational neuroscience service-learning course led by Dr. Minna Ng, we partnered with our local YMCA AfterSchool Program, designing neuroscience-based activities and forging meaningful connections with students. Reflecting on our experiences, we challenge stereotypes surrounding “prestigious” specialties and female-dominated fields. We underscore the importance of aligning career aspirations with personal values and passions while celebrating the inherent value of community-centric professions within medical fields.

Navigating the delicate balance between self-fulfillment and societal expectations marks an identity crisis for many college students, including ourselves. We often find ourselves torn between prioritizing fields of study that ignite our passions versus those that align with expectations set by our friends, family, and peers. Both of us hope to pursue careers in medicine, exploring our love for biology and the natural sciences while engaging with community members. However, the prestige associated with attending a selective institution like Duke University brings its own set of pressures. Merely entering the medical field doesn’t always suffice to meet the criteria of utilizing one’s higher education effectively. Amid discussions among peers about prestigious specialties like surgery and radiology, we feel a sense of unease admitting our preference for roles focused on direct community support through primary care and veterinary medicine. The societal expectations weigh heavily on us, demanding that we seize every opportunity and make the most out of each one. A moment of validation came unexpectedly while watching the movie *Barbie* last summer, as America Ferrera’s character articulated feelings of inadequacy despite striving for excellence. The character’s struggle to “always be extraordinary,” but feeling like “somehow we’re always doing it wrong,” mirrored our internal conflicts about our career paths (Gerwig, 2023). The persistent guilt and sense of inadequacy associated with our preference for community-focused, less “prestigious” careers

continued until we enrolled in Dr. Minna Ng’s educational neuroscience service-learning course halfway through our college journey.

As sophomore and junior undergraduates, we needed to take a seminar-style course to fulfill major requirements, and we stumbled upon this service-learning course—a rare find. We were unsure of what to expect from the class, as most other seminars focused on reading and discussing cutting-edge scientific publications in a particular field. What does service-learning even look like in neuroscience and the natural sciences? While signing up, we were also skeptical about the methods and sustainability of our work. Duke has a complex and difficult relationship with Durham, as a privileged gated community within the larger diverse city. We were scared of perpetuating this strain throughout our engagement with the community and instead hoped to foster meaningful support and longevity in the relationship, as these are important aspects of the careers we hope to have.

On the first day of class, our professor clarified that she was also unsure of what to expect. Dr. Ng was fortunate to have worked with our partner organization, the YMCA of the Triangle’s AfterSchool Program, during the pandemic. However, this previous partnership was entirely virtual, making the course’s community engagement component markedly different. Despite these uncertainties, we remained hopeful, knowing that the journey

of community appreciation and self-discovery ahead of us would be more than worth it. The course got off to a slow start as we communicated with the AfterSchool Program on what their expectations were, our shared goals, and how to structure our involvement. After meeting directly with Ms. Taylor Dorsey Flowers, the youth director for YMCA Durham, we decided to create kits with neuroscience-based activities for Brain Awareness Week that the programs could reuse in the future. We wanted to avoid putting restrictions on the program directors, giving them the freedom to decide how to implement the activities considering their individual programs' needs and environments. We worked on developing these activities in our class for weeks, revising constantly and practicing the ease of implementation on one another. In particular, we focused on finding an appropriate balance in the amount of educational content to include, given the diverse age range within the program.

However, our service involvement did not stop there, as our tangible community-based experiences came through our time spent with the AfterSchool Program directly. Our group collaborated with the Lakewood YMCA, going on-site every Friday, where we engaged with the students during their usual programming while also spending time with the counselors. Participating in recreational activities like kickball and hopscotch gave us time to connect with the children's lives beyond the YMCA, allowing us to learn about their sibling dynamics or their social lives at school. These face-to-face interactions were crucial for the implementation of our activities, as we picked up on important details that informed our Brain Awareness Week activities; for instance, we learned more about kids' energy levels, learning styles, interests, and dislikes while simultaneously learning how the AfterSchool Program was run. Knowing how popular the use of chalk was during free time, we incorporated this detail into our Build-A-Brain activity, a chalk-based drawing exercise in which the students explored the different lobes of the brain through a creative medium. Once we finished designing our Build-A-Brain and Brain Cap activities, we had the opportunity to do them with the students directly and witness their enthusiasm for learning. We'll always cherish the thrill the students experienced as they crafted their Brain Caps and unleashed their creativity, conjuring up superpowers they envisioned having when wearing them.

As our semester with the YMCA AfterSchool Program went on, we saw the significant impacts that working alongside these students had. Becoming a familiar and constant face within the YMCA community, we began to forge bonds. They grew to trust us—sharing interpersonal struggles, telling us about their dreams, and introducing us to their families at pickup. At the end of the semester, the students made us a poster, writing “I love you” and begging us to stay. Saying goodbye and giving the staff and students our homemade cards, it hit us that those Friday afternoons would be the part of our semester we would miss most. Reflecting on our final drive back from the Lakewood YMCA, we realized that we no longer felt conflicted in our desire to work close to our communities. Society will likely continue to undervalue community-centric work, but we will no longer feel self-conscious about choosing stereotypically less “prestigious” career paths in the medical field. Instead, we feel a sense of pride and fulfillment knowing we can make a significant impact on our communities despite what may be projected upon us.

Much of the initial doubt we had in our career goals centered around the fields being highly female dominated. Seventy-five percent of pediatricians and 63% of veterinarians are female (Nolan, 2020; Vassar, 2015). We asked ourselves: Are we wasting our education by entering fields that are already filled with individuals like us? As two women attending a highly ranked university, the expectation is that we are the ones who should enter male-dominated, more “prestigious” specialties and help pioneer the path for other women. While our interests in pediatrics or veterinary medicine might be less “original,” we have grown confident that they are not any less important because of this. Thinking about the stereotypical female career paths (nurses, elementary school teachers, etc.), we recognize that they tend to be much closer to the community than the related male-dominated career paths (surgeons, college professors, etc.; Women's Bureau, 2021). Dr. Ng's service-learning course and our partnership with the YMCA of the Triangle taught us that this female dominance should not make us shy away but instead give us a sense of pride when joining this cohort of community-oriented individuals. Only one student in our service-learning course was male-identifying, but that did not mean that the course was any less important. In the same way, we are now fully confident in the importance of our career paths and their proximity to local communities—

an importance that is unaffected by the individuals who enter the fields or the value that society has determined they are worth.

Transitioning from outsiders in the YMCA AfterSchool Program to true members of the community throughout the semester mirrored our aspirations in the medical field as future primary care physicians and veterinarians. This class reaffirmed the value of our goals by showing us that it is “extraordinary,” rather than “wrong,” to pursue these career interests so highly invested in the community (Gerwig, 2023). We hope to be there for our patients during healthy and nonstressful times so we can build trust for when sick days do come. We hope to be the first individuals that community members feel confident coming to when their pets or kids are sick. We hope to be there for our patients through testing, diagnoses, treatment plans, and all of the other steps along the way. We hope to be the people whom these community members can come back to at any point in their health care process as a constant source of support and optimism. We hope to be pillars for our communities—communities we are a part of because of our active engagement with the people and animals living within them. We hope to make an impact on our communities and for our communities to have an impact on us, just like we were lucky to experience with the YMCA AfterSchool Program in Dr. Minna Ng’s educational neuroscience service-learning course. We are grateful to no longer feel like “tying ourselves into knots,” as Ferrera’s character expressed, knowing that we want to enter a community-based career that is already filled with women who may be like us (Gerwig, 2023).

References

- Gerwig, G. (Director). (2023). *Barbie* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Nolan, S.R. (2020, December 3). *Women practice owners projected to overtake men within a decade*. American Veterinary Medical Association. <https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2020-12-15/women-practice-owners-projected-overtake-men-within-decade>
- Vassar, L. (2015, February 18). *How medical specialties vary by gender*. American Medical Association. <https://www.ama-assn.org/medical-students/specialty-profiles/how-medical-specialties-vary-gender>
- Women’s Bureau. (2021). *Most common occupations for women in the labor force*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/occupations/most-common-occupations-women-labor-force>

About the Authors

Carmel Falek is a recent graduate of Duke University, where she majored in neuroscience. Cecilia Joshi is an undergraduate student at Duke University majoring in biology on the pre-veterinary track. Minna Ng is an Assistant Professor of the Practice of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University.