

■ Mapping Out The Personal Statement: A Visual Thinking Strategy for Students

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In my second year as a health professions advisor a student asked me to review his medical school personal statement. It was an essay I'd read before- for another student, verbatim! The original essay's author successfully matriculated to medical school the prior year. My student explained to me that it was his friend's essay and since the personal statement had "gotten him accepted" he decided to use it. Years later I faced a similar situation when two applicants asked me to review their essays that contained several identical sentences and phrases. Upon speaking to both students together, the guilty party confessed that her study group partner's essay was so much better than she felt she could ever write, so she lifted some content. Both of these applicants were well prepared. Why would they risk so much? Why wasn't their pathway enough? How could I help students feel confident to tell their own story?

These questions and more lingered with me as I helped students navigate the personal statement each application cycle. With the help of NAAHP publications, articles in *The Advisor* and several years as an advisor under my belt, I had become adept at helping students refine their essays. I would ask clarifying questions; help to focus their message; suggest organizational strategies; discuss transitions; ask

how the concepts could be linked, themes identified; recommend points that could be strengthened by examples. I was very comfortable helping students with the delivery of their content but not with the content itself. Where some of the essays fell flat was in the story a student chose to tell. I had always talked to students about brainstorming content and identifying what was most important to share in the limited characters allotted but I still sought more effective strategies to help with those essays that felt forced, formulaic, and generic. Enter Mind Mapping!

Mind Maps, also known as visual maps and wandering maps, are a creative way to approach the professional school personal statement and help students see the big picture. Mapping is a method for visual thinking that helps students organize their thoughts and make sense of their experiences. I had taught the use of mind mapping in study skills workshops and student success classes over the years but never thought of using them to help students with their goals until I attended a conference where Maps were used to help students identify possible majors and careers.

The conference speaker was Katharine Brooks, PhD and author of *You Majored In What? Mapping Your Path From Chaos to Career*. Dr. Brooks outlines the use of a Wandering Map

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technique she employs while working with undecided and liberal art majors who didn't have a good grasp of their strengths and skills and how they might apply them throughout their lives—not just in a work setting. She found that when students were asked to “list their top ten strengths” they would write one or two things, but then get stuck. “The Wandering Map is a way to get around those mental roadblocks because it invites students to ‘discover’ their strengths intuitively through what they have done in the past.”

Those same mental roadblocks sometimes hinder pre-professional students. Even students with a clear goal, such as medical school, have trouble reflecting on the qualities, experiences, and strengths that they want to highlight in the application. Pre-professional students have spent so much time checking items off of their “to-do” list and following a self-prescribed formula that they often have trouble crafting a unique and reflective essay. Maps can help students identify key strengths and admissions competencies that they can highlight in the personal statement, supplemental essays and even the interview. Mapping can help them “connect the dots” and develop an essay only they could have written.

I was excited to try out this new tool and started employing the mind mapping method in personal statement workshops and in my classroom. The mapping exercise requires very few supplies, can be facilitated in a group setting and provides students with a finished product that they can refer to throughout the application process. This is a creative thinking technique, so some of the more rigid, linear thinkers may have a hard time embracing the process but I find that they usually find value in it after some time reflecting on the process. The best part is that student feedback has been predominantly positive! Read on for instructions:

Mapping Exercise

Adapted from *You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path from Chaos to Career*, by Dr. Katharine Brooks

Approximate time to complete:

45 minutes. Approximately 15-20 minutes to draw the map (some will be more artistic than others) and about 20-30 minutes to analyze it.

Instructions:

1. Give every student a blank piece of paper, preferably legal size, and pencils, pens, and/or colored markers (I provide colored markers for my students.)
2. Ask the students to start thinking about all the interesting, significant things they've done or have happened to them. Tell them to think way back through their childhood, school years, and family through the present and note any highlights from those years. This is a “brain dump” on to the paper. Did you take interesting classes?
 - Did you have a memorable summer/ research/ internship experience?
 - What are some things you're most proud of?
 - Did you face a tough challenge or make a mistake?
 - Did you have interesting hobbies?
 - How did you spend your free time?
 - What was your favorite time in school?
3. Ask the students to start writing down their thoughts. Keep them short—one or two words. Don't try to write an essay or paragraph. If you worked at a summer camp, just write “summer camp.”
4. Tell students to draw a circle around every entry they write down to keep them separate from one another. Encourage them to fill the page with as much information as they can.
5. Remind them not to try to organize it in any way and do not censor or edit what they're writing. Anything that comes to mind should go on the paper—even if it seems trivial or silly. Even if it has nothing to do with becoming a health professional!
6. While they are doing this you can show them the list of “Prompts” that follows. You can also add to or create your own prompt list if you think of additional ideas.
7. Time to analyze the maps. Have students stop writing but tell them they can go back and add more to their map anytime. Start analyzing by asking them to connect by drawing lines between the obvious links. For instance, if they have a lot of extracurricular experiences, encourage them to connect all the different activities. If they have a lot of research experience, ask them to draw lines to connect them.
8. Ask them to really think about what the meaning is of, or the commonalities between, the different things they have done and label each line. For instance, if they played a lot of sports, what does

“sports,” mean to them? Were they leaders on their teams? Were they into the competition—win at all costs? Were they more interested in being part of a team? Did they mostly pursue individual sports and push themselves to be the best? Only the student can identify the meaning- ask them to dig deep!

9. Next, tell them to “connect the dots” of their lives. What are the connecting themes or threads that run through their lives? Do they seem to emerge as the leader? Do people seek them out as trusted or dependable? Do they seem to use certain skills over and over again? Are any of the AAMC Admissions competencies themes represented? Does the dental applicant have a history of working with their hands or using fine motor skills? Read on for an extensive list of themes and threads to help students.
10. At this point, depending on your students and the amount of time you have, you can ask for volunteers to share themes or threads that they have discovered. You can also break the students into pairs and have them share their maps with each other (if you plan to do this, tell them ahead of time so they don’t write something they wouldn’t want someone else to see.) Sometimes they can find threads and themes in other people’s lives that they can’t find in their own.
11. Finally, ask the student to write down 5 key strengths, threads or themes that they have uncovered. They can now start to think about how they might use those discoveries in their professional school applications, essays and interviews. The result should be an essay that only that student could have written!
12. If you can, allow a few weeks or months to pass and re-visit the map with them somehow. You can conduct this exercise a few months before your traditional personal statement workshop. This will allow for continued reflection before the anxiety of the application preparation reaches its peak. Students often find new themes as they re-visit the map. If they get stuck on a supplemental question, ask them to pull the map back out for ideas and examples.

This is a creative method that really helps students tune in to the breadth and depth of their life experience. Some

of the feedback from my students who have done the mapping exercise:

“I’ve never done an exercise where I put down special moments and tied a trait to them. It helped me identify and reinforce what I thought about myself.”

“Looking back at my map, I’m noticing some themes that I did not think of when I made it. I’m noticing a strong desire to serve and help others along with a passion for interpersonal relationships.”

“Although it seemed silly at the time, the map really helped reflect my basic values and desires.”

“The map was one of the first assignments we did this semester and somehow, it related to everything I was drawn to in all of my assessments.”

I hope you find that this is a technique you can take back to your campus and adapt. Be creative and find what works for your advising format and student population!

Mind Map Prompts

Events in your life, positive or negative, lasting a moment in time or for years:

- Working in a fast food restaurant or law firm
- Helping your neighbors move in
- Taking a fantastic class
- Tutoring a child
- Baking cookies for the holidays
- Designing a website
- Acting in a school play
- Reading an amazing poem
- Running for school election
- Winning a basketball game
- Parents’ divorce
- Family injury or illness
- Family challenge

Objects you use and/or enjoy:

- Computers
- Musical instruments
- Books
- Binoculars
- Tools
- Skateboards
- Telescopes
- Microscopes
- Sailboats
- Paintbrushes
- Journals

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- Parents
- Relatives
- Mentor
- Professor
- Health Professional
- Favorite teacher
- Hard teacher
- Coach
- Scout leader
- Minister

Academics/College:

- Academic major/minor
- Classes
- Achievements
- Assignments, papers or projects
- Creative works
- College years: freshman, sophomore, junior, etc.
- Theories
- Lab/ Research experience
- Honors

Extracurricular:

- Internships
- Clinical experience
- Study abroad
- Summer programs
- Clubs/Student activities
- Volunteer activities
- Leadership
- Athletics

Other Ideas:

- Unique accomplishments
- Adventures/risks
- Elementary or junior high school
- Family heritage/culture
- Favorite memories
- Favorite quotes or song lyrics
- Fun & leisure
- Games
- High school years
- Hobbies
- Ideas
- Interests
- Jobs
- Pets
- Places you've lived
- Places you've traveled
- Reading
- Sports
- Summer activities

- Vacations
- Writing
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Threads and Themes

- Achievements/Awards
- Alone or with others
- Animals
- Art
- Classes
- Computers
- Creative ideas
- “Doing” or “Thinking”
- Drama
- Equipment
- Family
- Fun
- Hobbies
- Indoors or outdoors
- Internally or Externally rewarded
- Knowledge I've acquired
- Learning
- Locations
- Music
- Physically active or deskbound
- Reading
- Research
- Risky or safe
- Roles I've played in family or elsewhere
- Solving Problems
- Subjects - topics of interests
- Things I want to change
- Tools
- Types of people
- What comes naturally to me
- Writing

Skills & Talents

- Analytical
- Artistic/Aesthetics
- Assertiveness
- Communication
- Computer
- Counseling
- Creative thinking
- Detail/Follow-through
- Interpersonal “People”
- Research/Investigative
- Leadership/Management
- Manual Dexterity
- Negotiating
- Numerical/Financial
- Organizational
- Outdoor/Athletic

- Presentation/Performing
- Problem Solving
- Serving/Helping
- Teaching/Instruction
- Thinking Strategically

What's Important/Values

- Adventure
- Challenge
- Contribution
- Creativity
- Diversity
- Expertise
- Family
- Friendship
- Fun
- Harmony
- Health
- Independence
- Justice
- Leadership
- Learning/Knowledge

AAMC Admissions Competencies

Interpersonal

- Service orientation
- Social skills
- Cultural competence
- Team work
- Oral communication

Intrapersonal

- Ethical responsibility to self/others
- Reliability and dependability
- Capacity for improvement

Thinking and Reasoning

- Critical Thinking
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Scientific Inquiry
- Written Communication

Science

- Living Systems
- Human Behavior

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