

Tia Johnson
11/25/2023

The Dr. Becky J. Smith Scholarship Essay

Throughout my high school years, I was heavily involved in clubs and had no idea what I wanted to do with my future. I know that I have always wanted to help people, but the only opportunities to do so that I was given were to become a nurse or a doctor. I realized after taking a Certified Nursing Assistant course that I want to do more community-based service to help people. I came to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro on a whim, actually. I had a dream school in mind, but I am a first-generation college student and did not understand the difference between private and public universities and the tuition costs. My family was unable to afford the \$22,000 semesterly tuition, even with the financial aid package I received. I had to make the decision to unenroll from the university before the school year began due to this.

Alongside the stress of not knowing what college was, my father began to lose his eyesight due to an injury. This created a shift within the household because my father is the breadwinner and my mother owns a small business. My mother had to quit her job to help support my father and the household. Thankfully, I was able to enroll at UNCG, but the costs were still high, and my parents had to spend thousands out of pocket. We had a system of payment plans for each semester until the spring semester of my sophomore year. After Winter Break, I had to leave campus right away because living on campus came with too many expenses. This led me to become doubtful about what I truly wanted to do with my college experience and if I should continue to stay in school. During my time off campus, I continued to attend school as an online student and decided to change my major to public health education after researching what the major entails. My first public health course was HEA 201 Personal Health. One assignment confirmed that I found my "why" and my motivation to continue to do more. This assignment was about community health and health issues within your community. As a black woman, my mind immediately went to the higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and more for black or African Americans. However, I wanted to educate myself on more health issues, and I was introduced to the black maternal health mortality rate. This was uncommon knowledge for me at the time and sparked my interest. I realized that this is the community I wanted to help, not only for myself but for other generations of black women.

Although switching from a full-time student to a part-time student was upsetting, I am forever grateful that I had to take the time off. This experience served as a catalyst for me. When I came back to campus the following fall, I embarked on my journey as a public health student. I attended every class I could, made sure to attend office hours, and began researching what more I could do. I would constantly ask myself, "What more can I do?" and this motivated me to seek out internships for public health majors. Eventually, thanks to Google, I found the University of Michigan Future Public Health Leaders Program. I paced myself through the application and applied. I was accepted into one of the most esteemed internship programs funded by the CDC.

Meanwhile, I had no clue it was prestigious or that out of 300+ applicants, I made it. My experience in Michigan was amazing. I had the opportunity to collaborate with other public health students from across the United States, meet some of the faculty at the university, and experience what working within the field of public health is like. This experience helped me further clarify what community I want to serve. Maternal and infant mortality is unavoidable in some instances, but there are situations where negligence, racism, and biases can lead to premature deaths. I am interested in working as a doula or lactation consultant. I want to build relationships with patients so they feel supported and have someone to help them advocate for fair treatment. After the completion of my internship, I decided that when the semester began, I wanted to join Eta Sigma Gamma, a health honor society, to be part of an organization of students who lead through teaching, service, and research. I am new to this role, but I know that there is much I will accomplish as a member. I have accomplished a lot so far, and I do not plan on stopping. I believe that this scholarship opportunity will help support my future efforts to become a public health professional.

Thank you,

Tia Johnson