



## RELATED GOALS

**FAMED AUTHOR MADELEINE L'ENGLE ONCE OBSERVED THAT, "A STRAIGHT LINE IS NOT THE SHORTEST DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO POINTS."** She could have been whispering in Sylvia Guerra's ear. Currently a third-year medical student, Guerra '21 arrived in Hanover after completing a bachelor's degree in religion at the University of Rochester, a master's degree in comparative religion at Harvard Divinity School, and stints as a teaching fellow in organic chemistry, a medical scribe, and a HIV/STI and substance use prevention counselor. "People think I've made a 180-degree turn in my path," she admits with a smile in her voice, "but I've come to realize that there's an underlying current guiding all my decisions: I really like people and I want to figure out how they work."

Guerra has a strong interest in both religion and medicine and feels that both are different means of achieving related goals. However, medicine allows her the personal interaction she craves. "I think that the technical and humanistic skills required of a physician are what continue to excite me about medicine. I enjoy the investigative process that medicine entails, but I love the opportunity for connection."

Guerra is also deeply motivated by the desire to foster a sense of social justice in medicine. All too often, she says, people who evince an interest in diversity and inclusion are siloed into positions that deal only with these topics, rather than encouraging everyone to take responsibility for these issues under their leadership. "Social justice is an obligation of the house of medicine," she asserts. "Everyone should be deeply invested in this work."

Guerra is equally interested in creating opportunities for physicians to develop cultural competencies and greater humility as caregivers. "I think we'll all be better doctors if we approach patients with a sense of curiosity about their experiences rather than a paternalistic attitude," she says. "My job as a physician isn't to get people to do what I want them to do. My job is to ask questions from an exploratory place because that will allow me to provide better care and help them achieve their healthcare goals."

In addition to her desire to care for others, Guerra is also compelled by a sense of community; indeed, she says the opportunity to join a warm and welcoming community was what drew her to Geisel. "I visited Dartmouth long before applying to medical school and was very taken with the sense of community and widespread acceptance of non-traditional students like me, so I was excited by the possibility of attending medical school here." When Guerra returned for medical school interviews, she asked everyone she encountered to name Geisel's strengths and weaknesses. "For strength, the unanimous answer was community," she recalls, "and that was more important to me than anything else. Now that I'm here, I see that it's true; it's clear that people want to see you succeed."

As a first-year student, she was awarded a Swigart Ethics Fellowship, which enabled her to research diversity and inclusion work being done at medical schools around the country and the ethical underpinnings thereof. And this year, she was named a recipient of the Association of American Medical Colleges' Herbert W. Nickens Medical Student Scholarship for her leadership efforts in eliminating inequities in medical education and healthcare and her work to address the societal and healthcare needs of racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S.

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As to whether she envisions a career of practicing or teaching medicine, Guerra insists she'll do both. Indeed, she has already demonstrated her commitment to helping to develop the next generation of physician-educators; she's currently a Medical Education Scholar and a Geisel Class of 2021 representative to the Medical Education Committee. Guerra has been contributing to educational initiatives since she arrived. In her first year at Geisel, she co-developed and helped to teach an elective course, 'Exploring the Role of Religion in Medicine,' with William Nelson, PhD, MDiv, professor of psychiatry, community and family medicine, and of The Dartmouth Institute.

"When I've completed medical school, I see myself in an academic center," Guerra concludes. "Teaching is going to be important for me because there are a lot of changes I want to see made. But I also want to see patients—it's why I came to medical school."

LORI FERGUSON