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A FOREIGN PHARMACY GRADUATE'S PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY TO BECOME A PHARMACIST IN THE USA

As a foreign pharmacy graduate, it is not an easy task to become a pharmacist in the United States within two or three years. Yet, that is exactly what I did. I arrived in the United States in 2017, and by the end of April 2020, I was starting my first job as a licensed pharmacist.

My name is Sai Priya Marrapu, and I would like to share my professional journey so that it may offer some guidance for other international graduates seeking a career in pharmacy in the United States. Of course, I had multiple concerns about moving here as a foreign graduate. My major concerns included – language, culture, challenges of academic life and expectations of a pharmacist. I can say that - a positive attitude, my drive to put myself out there and make connections, and my planning and time management skills successfully enabled me to reach my goal.

I graduated in 2017 from Chalapathi Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences with a Doctor of Pharmacy degree in my home country of India. Already at that time, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in the United States, so I enrolled in the Master of Science in Clinical Research Administration program at Eastern Michigan

University (EMU). I selected this program because EMU was one of the first universities to offer such a program with academic credit for training in clinical research. It allows students to have optional practical training, called the OPT period, for three years after earning their master's degree. Not only this, but EMU's program has been consistently ranked at or near number one in the country by various prominent ranking systems that rate health care degree programs. It was essential for me to choose my institution wisely. I needed practical training to provide me real life experience, enable me to do professional networking, and yes, also financial aid to support my wallet. On top of everything else, I chose EMU because it offers graduate research assistantships.

Many people discouraged me from applying for the graduate research assistantships at EMU, stating that it would be impossible for me to get a position outside of my department. I ignored them, but I did take a creative route to get there. I started applying for other campus jobs before I even arrived in the United States, so that on the first day that I visited EMU, I had my first job interview. It was a part-time position with the university dining services — not my dream job — but it did give me 10 hours a week to help cover some of my expenses. Meanwhile, I continued looking for other positions, including the graduate assistantships that could waive some or all of tuition fees. I applied to every single job with "research assistant" in the title. I applied online and applied in-person at different departments. I spoke with multiple professors, and finally landed a job as a research assistant in the Department of Chemistry. It was a part-time position during that first semester. Then, from my second semester until the end of my program, I was promoted to a full-time research assistant, which helped me to waive the remainder of my tuition completely. I spent barely a penny on my tuition in the United States, which itself would be considered as a huge success.



Of course, studying here for free was not my endgame, and I knew as early as my second semester that I needed to begin working towards my board of pharmacy licensure. I initially thought to reach out to the pharmacists I already knew for advice, but as requirements are ever changing, I discovered that best way to get the most updated and complete information would be by contacting the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) directly. That is another lesson I learned: Go to the source. When I needed a graduate assistantship, going directly to different departments is what got me a position, and once again here, going directly to the NABP provided me all the information on the steps that I needed to take next for achieving my goal.

And there were multiple steps. To get everything done as swiftly as possible, I created a schedule for myself to follow - outlining exactly what I needed to accomplish every month, and more importantly I followed my timeline exactly as I planned it. That aspect of my success may be a hard truth for some — everything had to be planned well in advance. By January of 2018 I knew that I would be sitting for the board exams the following year, and therefore, I had to start preparing for them immediately. Otherwise, there simply would not have been enough time to study for the exams while also doing a full-time Master's program and working a full-time as research assistant. In fact, starting from my second semester, I never got over four hours of sleep every night. It was a struggle, but I had to make it happen.

Required first step included collecting documents from my home country to apply for the Foreign Pharmacy Graduate Equivalency Exam (FPGEE). The second step was to apply. Acquiring a reservation to sit for the FPGEE usually takes four to five months, though in

some cases it may take as few as three months. I applied to sit for the exam in February of 2018, received my reservation for May, and finally took the exam in September. I received my passing score for the FPGEE in November of 2018. With that I had completed the third step - it took nine months from the moment I applied, and I spent four to five of those months studying every day. The fourth step, then, was to earn a passing score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Even though I am fluent in English and I attended English medium school almost my entire life in India, achieving a passing TOEFL score was a difficult task. The TOEFL contains sections in four main skills — speaking, listening, reading, and writing — and I failed it twice. Each time, I earned a score just one point below what I needed in the writing section. After seeking support from the writing center and multiple places on campus, finally, I passed the TOEFL on my third attempt.

In March of 2019, after passing both the FPGEE and the TOEFL, I was able to go back to the NABP to apply for my foreign pharmacy graduate equivalency certification. By the end of April, I had my certification and was starting to look for internships. Of course, I got my pharmacy intern license in Michigan, but I also decided to apply for an intern license from the State of Texas, as well. Here again, my tendency to research and plan served me well, because in Texas, pharmacy interns are permitted to apply to the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination (NAPLEX) before they complete their internship. Knowing this, I leveraged my connections with senior colleagues in the field who could help me find an internship in Texas. Searching for open positions online can help this process, but it was the connections I had been making on my own that found me an internship during my OPT period so soon after graduation from EMU. A



colleague suggested the company where I later completed my 1500-hour internship, and within one week of passing the NAPLEX, I was hired on as a licensed pharmacist by the same company in April of 2020.

While, I have been working as a pharmacist since that time, but I do not believe that my professional journey is yet over. I still actively network with other pharmacists, I always try to engage in Continuing Medical Education (CME/ CPE) wherever available, and now I am a licensed pharmacist in the States of Washington and Arkansas, as well. I want to keep my future career path open, and I believe that path may take me to new places and opportunities, including managerial opportunities. I have come to realize that being a pharmacist is not only about understanding your own work, because you cannot do all the work on your own. Every great pharmacist must understand people and how to work with pharmacy technicians, and so developing teamwork skills and management skills is essential. Currently, I am taking the next steps towards becoming a pharmacy manager, excited to enter this next stage in my journey.

What I would suggest to every international graduate — and every American student, as well — is to plan ahead, make connections, and stay positive. Really, nothing is impossible, but you must see every single day as an opportunity to engage yourself, grow yourself, and make yourself into the professional you want to be.