



Valeria Melo

Majors: Biology (pre-medicine) and public health

Minor: Biochemistry

Activities: Varsity track & field, Búhos tutor, Phi Rho sorority, Beta Beta Beta (biology), Board of Trustees Fellow, Phi Beta Kappa

Internships: Cardiovascular medicine internship with Dr. Sanjeev Puri at UnityPoint Health in Rock Island; Texas Medical Center Summer Research Internship Program in Houston, where I worked in the laboratory of Dr. Kjersti Aagaard within the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, doing circadian biology research related to metabolic disease; internship with the NormaLeah Ovarian Cancer Initiative in Rock Island, as the Hispanic community outreach coordinator

Post-grad plans: I will start medical school in July at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

“Passionate, gifted, purposeful, genuine, compassionate...that’s Val! Val has been intentional about embracing opportunities at the intersections of public health and biology in order to develop a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges of medicine. Her passion for learning and discovery drives her to push her limits as well as invest in those around her to be better. In light of Val’s many achievements, one of her most precious gifts is her ability to form connections with others and discovering how each person has a story to tell...she makes others feel valued and heard. Val is the complete package, and it has been such a joy to be a part of her Augustana story!”

— Dr. Scott Gehler, associate professor, biology

MORE THAN I IMAGINED 2018

SENIORS REFLECT ON ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND LOOK AHEAD

Why Augustana?

I had a teacher in high school with whom I was very close, and her son went to Augustana. She raved about how genuine and thoughtful the people here were and so that is how Augie first got on my radar. I liked the small size (my high school graduating class was about 120 students), as well as the opportunity to play sports.

After my first visit, I knew that Augustana was a place where individuals mattered and strong interpersonal relationships could be built. It was the community culture that convinced me, and the financial aid that sealed the deal (some are hesitant to bring up this up, but the scholarships matter—financing a college education is not easy).

Are you where you thought you’d be when you first came to campus?

No! Being the first in my family to attend college, I did not come in with specific or clear expectations. I was just happy to be here and tried to never take the privilege of a college education for granted. I really just wanted to try new things and form meaningful relationships. Never could I have guessed that four years later, I would be leading an amazing group of women in track & field as their captain (a sport which was new to me in college) or getting ready to attend my dream medical school.

Who helped you get to where you are now?

Too many people to count or do justice to here! The encouragement and guidance I received from professors like Eric Stewart, José Boquin and Scott Gehler made all the difference in my college experience. They are some of the best listeners I know, and each of them supported and believed in me during very different stages of my educational career. My coach and my teammates helped teach me what hard work, commitment and selflessness look like. My friends showed me how to make a home away from home and find strength in our differences.

Peak experience?

I could speak to many meaningful experiences, but my Medical Service Learning and Public Health Outreach trip to Nicaragua stands out the most to me. This humbling and eye-opening trip is when I decided that it was my responsibility to use my life experiences and competencies to serve others through medicine. Nicaragua is where I was inspired to fully pursue my passion with medicine, and two years later, I now have the opportunity to return this summer with the Mayo Clinic Global Medical Brigades program.

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What surprised you?

I never expected I would love track & field so much. Vocationally, these past four years have taught me to see the hardships that my family and I faced throughout my upbringing as strengths in my identity that have shaped my resiliency, emotional intuitiveness and determination. The experiences and interactions I had through Augie unexpectedly taught me to see how these defining characteristics serve a place in medicine and my vocational aspirations.

How did you use Augie Choice?

I used my Augie Choice to do medicinal organic chemistry research with Dr. José Boquin the summer between my sophomore and junior year. I was essentially working full-time as a student researcher and being paid using Augie Choice!

What will you miss the most?

The authenticity of the people is what makes Augie so special. It has created a strong sense of community that I will miss the most. I also, of course, will miss the privilege of competing in collegiate sports and being surrounded by such passionate and mentally strong women.

Advice for the Class of 2022?

- Keep an open mind. Try new things!
- When a professor sees greatness in you, *believe them* and learn to see it in yourself.
- When you fail, forgive yourself and *ask for help*.
- When you succeed, *bring others with you*.