

Connecting the Dots



Seeing patterns in your interests, choices, and competencies and making sense of the whole for your reader—“connecting the dots”—is the chief object of any fellowship application. A coherent presentation of your special qualities, experiences, and aptitudes enables you to make the best case for yourself as an applicant and transforms you from a faceless applicant into a memorable candidate. For his Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) application, Daniel Hickey, a fellowship advisee still formulating his career plans, wrote about teaching



Daniel Hickey ('22) on the bouldering wall at his rock climbing gym in Valhalla, New York

rock climbing. I knew through working with him on his application essays that he was a thoughtful writer and highly proficient in both Arabic and Spanish, so I asked him why he chose to write about rock climbing. He said that he chose the topic because he could talk about overcoming a teaching challenge, which the Fulbright encourages, but also because he had, as a teenager, once considered rock climbing professionally and that the sport had been

so critical to his formation as a young person. Realizing at some point that he would never be at the level of professional competitors, he abandoned his fantasy and resigned himself to climbing recreationally but loved the sport so much that he decided to teach younger climbers instead.

When I asked him what he found so compelling about the sport, he said that it shares important qualities with other similarly absorbing activities that require skill, discipline, creativity, and effort: writing and learning other languages. Each of them, he observed,

(poses) a challenge that I know I'll get something out of—a sense of accomplishment. Every climb is a problem to solve and like other problems, such as writing a long essay or learning a language, it requires study, practice, repetition, some imagination, and breaking the problem down into its constituent parts . . . There's a concept in climbing that we call "linkage." It refers to linking up the sequential parts of a long climb. The other part of completing a climb in "one go" is endurance, so once you have mastered the parts of the climb you have to have the endurance to "link them up," in order to finish it. Both writing a long essay and learning a language are like this. I can turn a nice phrase while writing an essay but that's not the same as writing a whole essay. I can (and do need to) learn more vocabulary to be able to communicate more fully and fluently in Spanish or Arabic, but I need many more of those smaller "parts" to create a nuanced flow of speech in the manner of native speaker of another language.¹

It's useful to think of connecting the dots as an exercise similar to creating the kind of "linkage" that Daniel describes when he masters a climb from beginning to end. Conceiving of your accomplishments, interests, and experiences like "holds" on the face of a climbing wall,

¹ Interview with Daniel Hickey, Hunter College, February 23, 2022.

which when connected, allow you to reach the summit, helpfully underlines the importance of connecting the dots when writing your personal statement.

Once Daniel had identified some themes among his chief forms of satisfaction and connected them in his personal statement, he had created, in effect, a “template” for a personal statement that he could use for many different purposes in the future. When he applies for another major fellowship (or graduate school) he can compose an essay that weaves these threads together with an intellectual mission and the goals of the fellowship. But in the meantime, he has identified some important qualities in work and play that resonate meaningfully with every one of his significant intellectual and physical endeavors. These form an important clue to what motivates him and this will be the key to understanding whatever future he envisions for himself.

