

July 24, 1958

Miss Elke Jordan
207 Morris Avenue
Lutherville, Maryland

Dear Miss Jordan:

Your letter caught me just as I was preparing to leave for several weeks in Europe and my reply is therefore a bit hasty although the circumstances clearly warrant it.

I am especially sympathetic with your predicament since it closely parallels my own experience and on that basis I hope you will forgive me for offering what may be rather importunate advice. This advice may not be well suited to your particular circumstances but without knowing very much more of them I would venture to suggest that you consider completing a second year of your medical studies before switching your program. You must have a strong interest in medicine or medical science or medical research or you would not have gone to medical school in the first place and I doubt that Harvard would have accepted you. I believe that there is a serious gap in our program of research training which places particular difficulties for those whose interests lie somewhere between the usual medical curriculum with its preparation for applied medicine and the ordinary PhD curricula which too often are too specialized. I strongly believe that there will be many opportunities for people who have the intellectual breadth and stamina to bridge these two extremes. I am not suggesting that you should firmly commit yourself to complete the entire four year program, as this is something that you should make up your mind about a year from now. But I do not believe that a second year of pre-clinical studies at an institution like Harvard would be harmful to you in the long run, provided that you can maintain a spirit of inquiry about your studies rather than the mass assimilation of didactic teaching which is often a necessary compromise. I would suggest that your doing this would be very much easier if you can maintain some research interest while you are attending medical school. And in view of your interest in bacterial genetics, I would think that you could make a profitable connection with Professor Bernard Davis of the Bacteriology Department at Harvard, at least for next year. I do not know whether his advice would concur with my own, but I would urge you to seek it if you have not already done so.

As to the more immediate question whether a research assistantship and studentship will be available here for next Fall, I have to tell you that I am leaving the University of Wisconsin to take an appointment in and start a new department of genetics at the Stanford University Medical School. This next year will be a period of transition during which it would be most awkward for me to consider taking on any more students for the time

One of my objectives at Stanford will be to lay down a clear cut training program for people who, like yourself, find themselves caught between two schools, as between medicine and science. I see no reason why the first two years of the medical program as they are now projected for Stanford University should not serve in lieu of the basic course requirements for a PhD in a field of biological research related to medicine. At any rate, I do not believe that the pharmacology and pathology and so forth that you will be experiencing next year will be any waste of time to you at all if you are going to enter a research career that will have any relationship to medicine whatsoever. At least I can tell you that that was precisely my own experience.

I would be very happy to discuss this with you further and I very much regret that time is so pressing. If you would like to continue this correspondence during the next month, I would suggest that you reply by aerogram furnished herewith for your convenience. I would suggest that you mail a copy to the Madison address to be sure that it is not lost on the way. Please mark this copy 'Hold for arrival'.

I suspect that it would be too late to consider such a possibility as transferring your medical studies to some other institution that might be more congenial to you. I know that different schools have different things to offer students whose main interest may be in research, but my impression had been, in fact, that Harvard was one of the best of these for that purpose.

These remarks are predicated on the assumption that, to put it bluntly, you are a superior student because I would not recommend a program of the sort I have been indicating to anyone of average or less than average ability.

While I would be unable to entertain an application to supervise a graduate student at Wisconsin for 1958-1959, if you would be interested in filing application for the following year at Stanford I suggest you send the papers and recommendations that you indicated. It is really none too soon to begin doing that now.

With my best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Medical Genetics