The paper I am submitting was written as the final research paper for POL 317: U.S. Health Politics and Policy with Professor Tom Burke. At the beginning of the fall semester, I had no idea how I would complete such an insurmountable task. As a first-year, the longest paper I had written in high school was maybe ten pages; this was more than twice that. However, it was through extensive research, careful planning, and outside resources that I was able to write this research paper.

The requirement for my research topic was only that it be a political question related to some aspect of the American healthcare system. As we explored more about health costs in the United States, the high cost of prescription drugs stood out to me. I read recent news articles about the topic and discovered that the pharmaceutical companies were basically able to set their own prices. However, I couldn’t find a political explanation as to why they were able to do so. I thought I would have to find a new topic.

It was around this time that the Alumnae Achievement Awards were being presented. Diane Rowland ‘70 was one of this year’s recipients, and Professor Burke invited our class to a discussion she was giving. After the discussion, I introduced myself and explained what I was trying to research. Rowland, who is the Executive Vice President of the Kaiser Family Foundation, suggested I look at the differences between prescription drug purchasing policies in Medicare, Medicaid, and the Veterans Administration, for an interesting political research paper. I started out looking at three specific laws that established purchasing rules for the three organizations. My initial approach to writing this paper was a strategy Professor Burke taught
our class to look at issues from four political angles: institutions, individuals, ideas, and interests.

I relied heavily on the laws themselves to build my case, as well as a third-year Harvard Law School paper written on a senator who was influential in passing the Medicaid regulations (note 22). Although those were important pieces to the puzzle, I knew that my greatest argument would be built on special interests: those in the medical and pharmaceutical industry as well as consumer protection groups.

I met with Daria Hafner, my research librarian, several times over the semester. She suggested I use Open Secrets to find information on lobbyists (notes 83 & 85). However, most of what I was researching was not recent enough to be available on the site. She then suggested I turn back to the Congressional hearings to see who was involved in the open-door discussions before the bills were passed. I spent hours poring through testimony, both C-SPAN videos and Congressional Record transcripts, and it was during this that I realized how much I loved the research I was doing. However, my favorite source was not found in a database, but rather as a Google pop-up ad while I was doing some preliminary research on current prescription drug policy proposals. I used the primary source as proof that Big Pharma is continuing to spend large amounts of money to combat drug pricing reform (note 7).

Professor Burke taught us that political science research papers are rarely about finding solutions -- or at least, one solution. Rather, they are an opportunity to ask questions and offer possible suggestions. In researching and writing this paper, I didn’t find a way to solve the prescription drug crisis in America, but I was able to uncover a new piece of the puzzle.

* Note: For our research paper, we were not required to turn in an additional bibliography. All cited sources are included as footnotes in my final paper.