The Microbicides Leadership Institute is a joint effort by the American Medical Student Association and the Global Campaign for Microbicides. Approximately ten women from medical schools nation wide were selected to attend the conference and to receive training in grassroots organizing, political activism, and leadership skills.

The first day of the conference was spent learning about current research and types of Microbicides. Microbicides are a topical gel, cream or foam that is inserted into the vagina for the purpose of protecting a woman from HIV. Although Microbicides are not currently available, scientists worldwide are conducting extensive research trials and expect a product to be available in five to seven years.

The participants learned about the many different types of Microbicides and their potential uses. In many parts of Africa, woman are often 4 times more likely to contract HIV than men and in other parts still, women who are married are more likely to contract HIV than woman who are single (more information can be found on CDC.gov). Often women end up contracting HIV from their primary male partner or husband and due to many cultural factors are unable to negotiate condom use. In many cases, when a woman asks her husband or boyfriend to use a condom, it is interpreted as, “you must be cheating on me,” and the husband or
boyfriend threatens to leave or get a divorce. For the many women who are financially dependent on men due to multiple societal factors, asking for protection is out of the question. This is exactly where Microbicides fit into the spectrum of HIV prevention.

The second day of the conference focused more on how each participant can become microbicides activists. Dan Murphy, AMSA’s current legislative director, video taped each participant so that we could watch it and evaluate our public speaking skills. Student leaders from the Berkeley campus came to show us how they started activist groups. We also received materials on the global campaign so that we can take back what we learned and present at our individual schools. The best thing that I learned from this portion of the conference is that even a very small number of dedicated students can work together and actually change public policy for the better. Medical students are great advocates for patients.

Overall, the weekend was very inspiring. I have always had a strong interest in HIV advocacy but never quite knew where to start. I met many helpful leaders that plan to help me start a Student Physicians for Human Rights chapter at UMKC– an organization that focuses a lot on HIV issues worldwide. I will also present on Microbicides in the KC area and next year at the AMSA regional conference. Participating in the MLI has really helped me to align my passions for medicine and advocacy.