

SPECIAL SECTION: EDUCATION

MORE MEDICINE FOR THE MONEY: DUAL DEGREE PROGRAMS

For some students, pursuing two medical degrees at once is just what the doctor ordered.

BY LAUREN SIEBEN

For some aspiring health care professionals, dual-degree programs are attractive on a practical level.

A joint-degree program might combine a Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) degree with a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree, or a bachelor's degree with a Doctor of Pharmacy degree, allowing students to earn two degrees on a fast track. In most cases, students spend less time (and less tuition money) than it would require to earn the degrees separately.

But for many students, the motivation to enroll in a dual program runs deeper. That was the case for Sai-Suma Samudrala, a student in the Medical College of Wisconsin's (MCW) M.D./Ph.D. program. As an aspiring physician-scientist, Samudrala plans to use her two degrees in tandem: the M.D. will give her the credential to become a doctor, and the Ph.D. will deepen her research experience.

"With an M.D. program you can study the disease, and with the Ph.D, you can research, but there's usually not much cross-talk [between disciplines]," Samudrala says. "I wanted to be able to bridge that gap."

Samudrala says her peers in the program — which only admits about six students per year — share her desire to have one foot in the clinical realm and another foot in laboratory and academic research.

"A lot of us not only want to help patients, but we also want to feed our inquisitive minds to learn more about why patients are having these issues," she explains.

MCW's M.D./Ph.D. program began in 1983, and today the college's medical school also offers an M.D./M.S. program in clinical and translational science, and an M.D./Master of Public Health (MPH) program.

But joint-degree programs aren't just for students pursuing an M.D.; Undergraduates can also enroll in dual programs that put them on a quicker path to an advanced degree after completing their bachelor's degrees.

Carroll University offers dual-degree programs that allow students to finish their undergraduate coursework in three years and then transfer to a partner institution to earn a doctorate in either podiatry, pharmacy or physical therapy.

"Students want to shorten the amount of time they are investing in their degree so that they can enter the workforce with good paying jobs as soon as possible," says Tom Pahnke, dean of the College of Health Sciences at Carroll University. Students also appreciate knowing they're guaranteed a spot in their chosen graduate program, as long as they continue to meet the program requirements during their undergraduate years.

Elsewhere in the state, Wisconsin Lutheran College offers dual-degree programs for undergraduates interested in earning a doctorate in osteopathic medicine, chiropractic medicine or optometry. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the dual M.D./MPH program allows students to earn both degrees on a condensed five year timeline.

As students near graduation and begin the job search, a dual degree can lead to opportunities that may not have been accessible with an M.D. or a bachelor's degree alone.

"Students often come with diverse interests, and medicine is becoming more

interdisciplinary," explains Ravi P. Misra, dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at MCW. "It also gives you a credential that opens up certain doors to perhaps even have some leadership."

Outside of Wisconsin, medical joint-degree programs are pushing past the boundaries of the health sciences department. Schools including Harvard Business School and the University of Pennsylvania offer joint M.D./MBA degrees that integrate medical education with an MBA focused on the administrative and financial side of the health care industry. To date, Wisconsin doesn't have any M.D./MBA programs, but the number of programs across the country has doubled over the past 20 years.

Ultimately, graduates of dual-degree programs gain a deeper understanding of the medical field, and they often graduate more quickly — and with less debt — than students who earn multiple degrees separately. But the decision to pursue a dual degree shouldn't come lightly, Misra says.

"These are challenging programs. They're often very competitive to get into," he notes. "You don't usually do these programs because you feel like picking up another credential. You have to be motivated."MKE

