

Considering an MD-PhD program? Here's what you should know

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For potential medical students with a passion for science and research, an MD-Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dual degree program may hold some appeal. Because it's a path that differs from the traditional medical school trajectory, here are a few things that students weighing this less-traveled road should keep in mind.

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding, but figuring out a medical school's prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge unto itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Selectivity

There are fewer MD-PhD programs, and they accept fewer students than traditional MD programs. According to a recent survey conducted by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)—"The National MD-PhD Program Outcomes Study"—in 2016 there were 1,936 MD-PhD program applicants, 649 matriculants and 602 graduates.

Looking over the past few years of medical school matriculation data, roughly 20,000 new students matriculate each year. Considering that there are significantly fewer spots, MD-PhD program applicants are likely going to need to apply to more programs.

Now in the first year of his PhD research—after completing two years of medical school—at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, Drayton Harvey applied to 30 MD-PhD programs.

“It’s not just hard to get in, it’s hard to survive and thrive during the process to fulfill the requirements of both becoming a medical doctor and a PhD,” said Harvey, an AMA member. “If you don’t have the passion, it could be very daunting.”

Learn the pros and cons of pursuing a dual degree.

Cost of attendance

Most MD-PhD programs grant entrants tuition-free training. In addition, most students in those tracks earn a stipend, which according to the AAMC report, can be as high as \$38,000 annually. Harvey believes that the potential savings on education shouldn’t be your top motivation for entering an MD-PhD program.

“[The lack of tuition] is a very attractive aspect, especially with the cost of medical education being what it is,” Harvey said. “But it is an incredibly competitive process to get in and during that process it is really easy for interviewers to pick up on that you are doing this for the wrong reasons.”

Time commitment

The average MD-PhD program length, according to the AAMC report, is eight years. So, in attending an MD-PhD program, you’re doubling your time in medical school. When factoring in residency training and, for those who have aims on fellowship, an MD-PhD student’s training can extend well beyond a decade.

“The best advice I got was once you are accepted into a program and you show up on day one, you have started your career,” Harvey said. “You are at your job working every single day. You are not waiting to get to a career point. That is helpful for students, instead of focusing on how long-term the training process is, you can center yourself on the fact that [getting in] is an amazing accomplishment. You are in your career. It’s called professional school for a reason.”

Learn how research experience can strengthen your medical school application.

Career paths

Of MD-PhD program alumni, according to the AAMC report, the vast majority either work as faculty members at U.S. medical schools or work for the for the National Institutes of Health, research

institutes, industry and federal agencies—in the COVID-19 pandemic the value of these rules has been reinforced.

As far as specialty, a survey conducted by the AAMC of more than 4,600 MD-PhD physicians found that the most popular specialties among that group were:

- Internal medicine—25.3%.
- Pathology—13.2%.
- Pediatrics—12.6%.
- Neurology—8.2%.
- Surgery—7.1%.

It is worth noting that the list above excludes “other,” a specialty designation selected by 7.1% of respondents.

Within specialties, MD-PhD degrees were most common among physicians in:

- Medical genetics—with 18.4% of physicians who entered programs in that specialty holding an MD-PhD.
- Radiation oncology—16.8%.
- Pathology: Anatomic and clinical—14.3%.
- Neurology—10.1%.
- Neurosurgery—8.2%.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start medical school off strong_