

Why a BS/MD Was Right for Me

by Marguerite Huff

When I was four, I wanted to be a doctor. When I was twelve, I still wanted to be a doctor. When I got to high school, I was fortunate to have a branch of the world-renowned Mayo Clinic near my school. Mayo has many hands-on opportunities for high school students, and over the next three years, I gained experience in a wide variety of clinical fields: I pulled and filed charts in the ophthalmology department, restocked drugs in the pharmacy, and even helped with a patient-interactive television program in the hospital.

When it came time to apply to college, I still wanted to be a doctor. Since I'd accumulated a lot of medicine-related experience in high school, I decided to apply to combined undergraduate/medical school programs for college. These programs vary widely, but most guarantee admission to the university's medical school after completion of undergraduate coursework, provided that the student maintains a minimum GPA and earns a minimum MCAT score.

Ultimately, I chose to attend Northwestern University's Honors Program in Medical Education (HPME), a flexible seven- or eight-year program. Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine consistently receives top rankings, and I loved that it was located in the heart of Chicago—a major, culturally rich city. Northwestern is also renowned for many of its undergraduate programs, and as an avid sports fan, I could imagine taking study breaks to cheer on its Big Ten teams.

Opportunities & Connections

From the first day of orientation, I was part of a community of peers who knew we would be together for the next several years. That knowledge helped

us form a strong bond, and although I've made many friends not in the program, I maintain a close connection with those who are. The program's required coursework often leads to our studying (and post-exam celebrating) with one another, and we attend a dinner each quarter where we get to mingle, catch up, and listen to guest speakers who introduce us to various aspects of the medical profession. Speakers have ranged from an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology to the director of International Program Development and an ER doctor. Each talk has been both interesting and practical.

HPME also provides networking opportunities and connections I otherwise might not have had. Finding research, shadowing, and volunteer opportunities is easier because many faculty and staff consider the students part of the medical community, even if they have not yet officially matriculated to medical school. For example, last summer I received a grant to continue research in the neuroscience lab where I work part-time during the school year. This year, I'm considering applying to the Medical Student Summer Research Program (MSSRP), typically open only to Feinberg medical students, but to which HPME undergraduates are allowed to apply.

HPME has also allowed me to explore interests beyond medicine. Although I do have required math, biology, chemistry, and physics courses, I'm majoring in statistics, hardly a typical pre-med major, but one that I find engrossing and applicable to another interest of mine, policy research. Other friends in the program have majors varying from religion to economics. And I've been able to take a diverse load of classes: for the past two years, I've led a weekly physics review session; in conjunction with this, I was able to take a course on teaching methods through the School of Education.

Although some of my extracurricular activities are related to medicine, such as the neuroscience research, I also sing in the



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Northwestern Women's Chorus and last year founded a choir that focuses on early church music. And because I will remain in the area for medical school, I'll be able to continue my extracurricular commitments beyond my undergraduate years.

Future Physician

Between the second and third years of the program, students either apply to matriculate to medical school following their third year, or provide a reason for which they wish to defer matriculation. Some of my classmates have chosen to defer their med school matriculation, using their fourth year to travel, teach, do research full-time, or even found non-profit organizations. In contrast, those who matriculate after their third year start their medical school coursework the following year. That is what I have chosen to do.

The security I have in my future mitigates many of the fears that might hold other aspiring medical students back—the fear of becoming too involved in extracurriculars and falling behind in classes, or of not doing the extracurricular activities they think med schools want. Without these worries, many HPME students have a wider variety of experiences than they might have had otherwise. And while some of our experiences may not seem directly applicable to medicine, the leadership skills and understanding we gain of others and the world are invaluable to our work as physicians. As leader of my choir, I've learned how to manage a group of people with diverse personalities, levels of experience, and goals, which is similar to the situation doctors face when coordinating their teams and staff. As I communicate ideas to the students in my physics review sessions, I'm preparing for the day when I'll communicate health information—often scientifically intensive—to patients with little or no scientific background but whose lives may depend on my teaching. All of these experiences benefit me not only as a person, but, I hope, as a future physician.

This broad undergraduate experience, which has allowed me to fully pursue and enjoy my interests, has prepared me to focus on my medical studies. I look forward to graduation and the years that follow, when I know I'll have the opportunity to put all that I've learned—both in the classroom and beyond—into practice. **i**



Marguerite Huff is enjoying her third and final undergraduate year at Northwestern University. During her time there, she has prepared a full Thanksgiving meal, danced bhangra in the South Asian Student Alliance's annual dance show, and ice skated in Millennium Park. She looks forward to moving to downtown Chicago next year and beginning medical school in the fall.