

FSU creates new innovative health-care degree program



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FSU's Interdisciplinary Medical Sciences program is first in nation



(Photo: Byron Dobson/Democrat)

Once upon a time being in health care meant becoming a doctor or a nurse, period. In more traditional academic settings, that resulted in too many would-be physicians falling off track when those students decided that medicine wasn't really what they wanted to pursue.

Health care today is fast becoming one of the leading destinations for incoming freshmen and transfer students focused on graduating on time and finding the ultimate combination of job satisfaction and gainful employment.

But understanding all of the options in health-care employment can be tricky.

At Florida State University, academic leaders recognized this trend and believe they have come up with an ideal program that helps unravel some of the complexity students face in deciding what aspect of health care fits their capabilities and interests.

This fall, the university introduced an innovative new major: the Interdisciplinary Medical Sciences B.S. Degree Program, or IMS.

Billed as the first of its kind in the country, it already has more than 100 students.

The concept was envisioned by Myra Hurt, a key architect in creating the FSU College of Medicine, where she now serves as senior associate dean. Hurt believed that by combining resources from multiple academic programs on campus, FSU could come up with a major that would expose students to various careers in health care.



FSU Provost Sally McRorie, center, and Myra Hurt, senior associate dean of FSU's College of Medicine, watch a video introducing the program on Friday. *(Photo: Byron Dobson/Democrat)*

The idea was embraced by Provost Sally McRorie. She helped shepherd the program to fruition by bringing deans from seven FSU colleges to the table to address the what-if factor.

McRorie excitedly describes the program as her "baby."

"Dr. Hurt has been advocating for this for a long time. I said, 'We are going to do it.'"

By bringing in the resources of various academic programs, FSU can offer students a true multidisciplinary education focusing on health care, she said.

She said studies indicated that such a program would be popular if there was support from the top and buy-in from the deans of other departments.

“I think a lot of young people are interested in the health care industry,” McRorie said.

Besides the College of Medicine, other colleges include: Arts and Sciences (biology, chemistry and psychology); Communication and Information; Human Sciences; Nursing; Social Sciences and Public Policy; and Social Work.

The IMS program offers three career tracks:

- Pre-Professionals (physicians, nurses, physician assistants and pharmacists).
- Patient Care in the Community: social workers, patient navigators, health advocates.
- Health Policy and Technology: management and policy; health informatics.

The first two years consist of the core subjects in the sciences — chemistry, biology and physics. After that, majors can choose their academic curriculum based on their career choices.

A unique aspect of the program is that it goes beyond academics and classroom instruction. Students are paired with professionals in health care to gain a broader understanding of real-world experiences. In addition, there are seminars and other opportunities for personal interaction.

“Most of the kids say they want to be physicians, but they don’t necessarily know what the other options are,” McRorie said.

For instance, under Patient Care in the Community, students can be trained as patient navigators, one of the fastest-growing fields in the country. These are the people who work for companies that assist patients through the maze of health-care options.

Health Policy and Technology majors are trained in analytics and can work for insurance companies, state agencies or private industry.

In some cases, such as working with data and patient navigation, students can find jobs waiting after graduation. Others will be prepared to go on to medical or dental school or graduate work in occupational or physical therapy.

Student finds electives, resources appealing

Rachel Gold, 20, Niceville, is a transfer student in the IMS program. Because of her previous experience in shadowing physicians at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland, she wants to become a physician assistant. She’s enrolled in the Pre-Health Professions track.



Rachel Gold, a student in FSU's new IMS degree program, says the course offerings are what she needs in becoming a physician assistant. (Photo: Special to the Democrat)

“I have always wanted to pursue a career in the health field,” Gold said.

“This major seemed like the perfect learning experience to narrow down what niche would be the most meaningful to me. The core curriculum has most of the requirements for continued education in any health field and a list of interesting electives. This was very appealing to me because the requirements for this major help me keep my options open while getting to choose electives that I'm interested in.”

This semester, she is taking Food and Society, Organic Chemistry I, Biological Sciences II (with lab) and Physics A (with lab).

“It’s going very well,” she said. “I have found an overwhelming amount of resources and opportunities. I plan to take all of the prerequisites to later pursue a physician assistant program and begin acquiring my patient-care hours by becoming a certified nursing assistant.”

Enhancing FSU’s footprint

Gold’s description of the first-year program is exactly what Hurt has envisioned in her decades of working in health-care education.



Thesia Berne-Anderson, center, director of pre-college and college outreach at the FSU College of Medicine, explains program options during a reception Friday at the college. (Photo: Byron Dobson/Democrat)

By incorporating the seven colleges, Hurt said, students gain a broader understanding of what health care offers. That helps them focus more clearly on career options and what courses they need to get the degree they're pursuing.

"We believe they will make more informed decisions about their careers," she said. "It also ultimately benefits Florida State in increasing the four-year graduation rate of students and in those students finding jobs.

"All of the kids will get a chance to examine, 'Is that what I want to do?' And, if so, they can make an informed decision."

Hurt said most of the students enrolled this fall have indicated they want to become physicians. But over the next few years, the interdisciplinary approach will increase interests in other options, such as health informatics.

"You have the flexibility to change your mind with real information being available," she said.

"I believe we will increase the number of kids going into the health professions from FSU. I believe we are going to produce health-care professionals who are strong in their academic background."

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