What are the goals of our MD/PhD Program?

Our goal is to admit students of outstanding potential and provide the training and experiences they will need to become accomplished and independent physician scientists. We want them to graduate from our program ready and willing to complete their training and make important contributions to their chosen fields. Our goal is not to produce private practitioners with some research training; our goal is to produce motivated and enthusiastic physician scientists who will elect a life-long career in biomedical research, translating fundamental discoveries into improved health care delivery and serving as role models for the next generation of investigators. To accomplish this, we’ve developed a strongly collaborative and well-integrated partnership that incorporates the medical education and research programs of the Sidney Kimmel Medical College and the biomedical PhD training programs of the Jefferson Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

How long does it take most MD/PhD students to complete both degrees?

Our students typically take 8 years to complete both degrees. The first two years emphasize the basic science and clinical skills necessary for the MD but include research rotations, seminars and journal club. Years 3 through 6 are devoted to thesis research but continuity in clinical skills is provided by monthly participation in ‘Clinical Skills for Physician Scientists’. After completing their thesis research, students return for the final two years of clinical studies. Some students take more than 8 years but our goal is 8 years.

How do I choose a lab?

MD/PhD students use many of the same resources as PhD degree students. We encourage you to attend staff seminars and meet with PhD Program Directors as well as individual faculty members. We hold advising sessions for you during the first two years to discuss research interests, available labs and choice of PhD Program. We discuss issues involved in choosing a lab and encourage you to choose carefully. JPSA has developed information for choosing rotation and thesis labs that is available at ‘Inside Scoop’ on the ‘For Current Students’ page at the MD/PhD website. We invite you to consider mentors at all phases of their careers; and discuss the pros and cons of choosing more junior vs. more senior faculty and big labs vs small labs. We encourage you to find out as much as you can about the mentoring style of the PI by talking to other students and other lab members. You must have the approval of the MD/PhD Program for your choice of both lab rotations and thesis mentors. In keeping with JGSBS policy on the number of PhD and MD/PhD students in a laboratory, the MD/PhD Program has a policy that no mentor can have more than 2 MD/PhD students at one time, and no more than 1 MD/PhD student from the any one recruitment year. Exceptions may be granted under unusual circumstances.

Do I need to get out of the lab as quickly as possible?

No, we encourage you to be efficient and not to waste time. We expect you to do a first class thesis and to take the time necessary to do that. We expect you to meet the basic goals of all PhD training programs, which includes learning: to ask interesting and significant questions; how to develop these questions into a set of experiments; how to evaluate the results of those experiments; how to present results in written and oral form; the skills needed to develop a career as a successful investigator, including grantsmanship and publications.
Does the MD/PhD Program have a policy on research committee meetings?

Yes, you are expected to follow the JGSBS general requirements of two research committee meetings per academic year. Please see the PhD Thesis Manual for details. In addition, one of the MD/PhD Program Directors or another member of the MD/PhD Steering Committee will serve as an ‘ex-officio’ member of your research committee and, as such, should be notified in advance of each committee meeting. You are also expected to file a copy of your committee chairperson’s report with the MD/PhD Program Coordinator.

Do I have MD/PhD Program Requirements above and beyond those of the PhD Program to which I belong?

Yes, there are additional commitments required of you during your research years. You have weekly meetings of “Current Topics in Translational Biomedical Research”; monthly participation in Clinical Skills for Physician Scientists; periodic Physician-Scientist Dinners; and the annual MD/PhD Retreat (held on a Saturday). You must also complete the course GC 630-Fundamentals of Clinical Trials and, optionally, rotations at the Cancer Clinical Research Review Committee and the Annals of Internal Medicine. You can find more information about your curriculum at the Program’s website. It is important to remember that you are required to participate in “Current Topics in Translational Biomedical Research” until you defend your thesis, no matter what the journal club/seminar requirements of your individual PhD Program.

You are required to apply for individual fellowships and all MD/PhD mentors are expected to support this activity to a successful outcome. Additionally, you are expected to publish primary research work in impactful journals.

You should become familiar with the requirements, not only of the MD/PhD Program, but of the particular PhD Program in which you are pursuing thesis research and JGSBS. To this end we recommend the MD/PhD Handbook and the PhD Thesis Manual, both available on line.

What are IDPs?

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) provide a planning process that identifies both professional development needs and career objectives. Furthermore, IDPs serve as a communication tool between individuals and their mentors. While IDPs have been incorporated into performance review processes in many organizations, they have been used much less frequently in the mentoring/advising of MD/PhD trainees. An IDP can be considered one component of a broader mentoring program designed to help you think about their professional development needs as they proceed through their didactic, research and clinical training experiences.

An effective Individual Development Plan helps individuals identify both the tools to achieve long-term career goals as well as means for improving short-term performance. Recent data have shown that individuals that use an IDP are more successful than their counterparts that did not use it.

IDPs are available on the ‘For Current Students’ page of the website. Your initial IDP should be completed before your first individual meeting with the MD/PhD Directors. Once you have identified a thesis mentor, your mentor will also contribute to your IDP as well as the “Graduate Skills Assay”.
How am I funded?

All who are admitted directly to the MD/PhD Program are granted full funding – tuition, fees and stipend-for the entire time that they are in the program. This funding comes from a variety of sources including SKMC, private foundations, individual fellowships, and research grants. JGSBS will fund you until December 31 of the 1st year in which you join your mentor’s lab; after that your mentor is responsible for financial support of the student’s stipend until the student returns to SKMC. You are required to apply for individual fellowships.

What is Current Topics in Translational Biomedical Research?

Current Topics in Translational Biomedical Research is a 1 credit graduate course (GC 710, 712, 714) that you take each semester while in SKMC 1 and 2 and while you are doing your thesis research. There are 4 aspects to this course: a student research seminar given the first Monday of the month at noon; Case Studies in Molecular Medicine presented by students who are back in their clinical years (SKMC 3 and 4) and held on the 2nd Wednesday of the month at 5pm; a research ethics conference that is only required during the 3rd year of thesis research; and a translational research journal club that is held on the 4th Wednesday of the month at 5pm.

What is Clinical Skills for Physician Scientists?

This is a graduate level course (GC 725, 1 credit) that was developed in order to allow students in their research years to maintain a connection with their clinical skills and knowledge base. It is required of you each semester of your research years. There are two phases. During the first year of research you will assist with teaching of first year SKMC courses, usually as lab assistants. During the 2nd year of research and beyond you may join internal medicine morning rounds with Dr. Majdan, volunteer at JeffHOPE clinics, or arrange clinical preceptorships in areas of your own interests. In all phases the time commitment is about one half-day per month.

What is JPSA?

The Jefferson Physician Scientist Association (JPSA) was founded in Fall 2010 with the purpose of advancing the future of translational medicine and representing the position of MD/PhD students in academic and extracurricular matters. Membership includes all students enrolled in the MD/PhD Program who will be primarily recruited at the annual MD/PhD orientation and welcome in early fall of each academic year. Officers are elected annually.

What are the issues that affect the timing of my return to medical school?

A timing issue unique to MD/PhD students is that they can only graduate from SKMC in May, if they plan to do a residency. If you return to clinics too late, it can mean an entire additional year in the Program. For this reason you need to plan especially carefully. This is not a reason to rush a thesis project to a premature conclusion; it is something that needs to be taken into account. Typically you should defend in the spring prior to returning to the third year of medical school. For example, a student who graduated with their MD/PhD degree in May 2013 would ideally have defended in late spring of 2011.
Am I expected to defend my thesis before returning to medical school?

Yes. Completing research and writing for a PhD thesis is a tough job and difficult to do while attending medical school. Only extraordinary circumstances would make us allow you to return to SKMC prior to defending the thesis. Approval has to be granted on a case by case basis by the MD/PhD Steering Committee.

Will I have a chance to review my clinical skills before returning to SKMC 3?

Yes. ‘Third Year Primer’ is a required refresher course for students returning to SKMC 3 after an extended leave of absence. SKMC schedules this course and controls its timing (usually prior to the July start of the clinical curriculum).