

An Accelerated Path to Emergency Medicine

Several Medical Schools in the United States Offer Three-Year MD Degrees to Students Ready to Commit to the Specialty

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Should medical school take 4 years to complete? Many say no, especially when a student has decided on a residency specialty early on. Increasingly popular, 3-year accelerated-path programs seek to address this by providing students this potentially attractive option. Although only 4 medical schools in the United States currently offer an accelerated path for students ready to commit to emergency medicine, the success and appeal of these programs mean that the number could increase soon.

When Justin Worthing was employed as a scribe for Emergency Medical Associates in New Jersey, he worked alongside a physician who'd just graduated from the emergency medicine residency program at New York University's (NYU's) Langone Medical School. "I knew I wanted to do emergency medicine by then," said Worthing, "and I had firsthand experience seeing what a high-quality doctor NYU's program could produce." He became even more interested in NYU after discovering that they were offering a new option for medical school applicants ready to commit to an emergency medicine specialty before matriculation; if accepted, those students would be

able to complete their first 4 years of medical school in just 3 years, and would be guaranteed a match into NYU's emergency medicine residency. A shortened path through his courses appealed to Worthing for a number of reasons. "You not only saved a year of time invested, you also saved a year's worth of expenses on tuition, room, and board," he noted. "For me, that was a savings of \$82,000. On top of that, I'd also start working—and earning money—a year sooner. That was important for me because I'm financially independent from my family." Worthing also liked the idea of being guaranteed a match at the school of his choice. So he applied and, in 2013, became the first student in NYU's history to move through its emergency medicine training on an accelerated path.

The number of medical schools in the country offering accelerated 3-year paths has skyrocketed in recent years; fewer than 10 existed in 2013, according to a recent article in AAMC News, compared with approximately 150 now. What's more, a 2016 survey published in Medical Education Online found that a third of all US medical schools were considering developing 3-year paths, which would help produce physicians faster, thereby helping to address a national shortage. Even so, although many schools offer a shortened route for individuals interested in specialties

such as primary care or family medicine, only 3 others aside from Langone offer an accelerated program for students pursuing emergency medicine, according to Joan Cangiarella, MD, associate dean for education, faculty, and academic affairs at NYU, who is also a spokesperson for the Consortium of Accelerated Medical Pathway Programs. Those 3 are Pennsylvania State University in Hersey, PA, which began taking students into its accelerated program for emergency medicine in 2017; Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University, in Stony Brook, NY, which began taking students in 2018; and The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) in Charleston, SC, which began taking students in 2019.

Annals spoke to all 4 schools about what interested applicants can expect.

At all 4, students must be accepted into the traditional 4-year program before being permitted to seek admission to the accelerated path in emergency medicine. At NYU, Penn State, and Stony Brook, a separate secondary application must be made, in which students describe why emergency medicine interests them; then they are interviewed for conditional acceptance into the residency program by residency program directors and faculty. Students at MUSC must complete their first year of medical school before they can seek entrance to the accelerated program, by way of an interview, after demonstrating excellent academic performance. At NYU, once accepted, students are followed by a departmental advisor. Program director Lawrence Kass, MD, at Penn State follows his accepted students personally. At Stony Brook, it's graduate medical education mentor and (during the third year) 3-year-program director Lisa Strano-Paul, MD, a

professor of clinical medicine in the Department of Internal Medicine. At MUSC, faculty in the Emergency Medicine Department and others follow students.

At NYU, aspiring emergency physicians have 3 chances to apply for the program: prematriculation and in April of either the first or second year of the regular MD program. At Stony Brook, interested students can seek admittance either prematriculation or after their first year. At Penn State, the only opportunity to apply is at the point of matriculation; at MUSC, after the first year in the regular medical program.

What happens if students decide to back out? At NYU, if students decide to change specialty, it's still possible for them to remain in the 3-year program; but even if they ultimately have to complete 4 years of course work, they incur no financial penalty because the school has been tuition free since 2018. At Penn State, Stony Brook, and MUSC, if a student chooses to switch out of the program, he or she must revert to the traditional 4-year path and pay for that additional year of schooling. To graduate from any of the programs, students must meet all standard requirements, academic and professional; those on the accelerated path do not receive special leniency. At Stony Brook, in fact, they're held to even higher standards than the 4-year students.

There is one benefit for the students in these programs. "You don't have to score superhigh on your national exams as your residency is guaranteed," said Stony Brook's vice dean for academic and faculty affairs, Latha Chandran, MD. "This is a *huge* benefit."

Dr. Kass pointed out some other advantages for students in his program at Penn State. "They get an early and sustained exposure to

emergency medicine and should be able to start residency well prepared to hit the ground running," he noted. "Their sustained exposure to our specific department and hospital will also allow them to make the transition to residency more easily." Of the 3 students currently in the program, Dr. Kass said, "We have very high expectations for them as physicians."

Moreover, Dr. Kass explained, the 3-year program is great for the school because it gives them "the opportunity to recruit the strongest candidates and spend 3 years molding them into stellar residency candidates." The program director of NYU's 3-year MD pathway, Dr. Cangiarella, would agree that there are benefits for the institution, as well as the students. "The program allows tracking across the undergraduate to graduate continuum," she said, "and allows individualization of training for students."

Beyond that, as Dr. Chandran pointed out, 3-year programs may very well benefit the country. "Nationally, this is a reasonable solution to the physician shortage that is predicted," she said. "These students enter the workforce earlier, and based on early results from the few early adopters among medical schools, the 3-year students perform at least as well [as], if not better than, the 4-year ones."

Worthing, now in his third year of residency at NYU, said the program has given him a number of advantages beyond the more obvious ones. "When I was going through medical school, the Emergency Medicine Department viewed me as one of their own, part of their family," he said. "The program opened the doors for building relationships with people." He added, "Even if you decided part of the way through med school to focus on emergency medicine, you might not get as much of an

investment from the department as you would if you were in the 3-year program." And although he didn't avail himself of this possibility, he pointed out that the opportunity for long-term research projects is greater for any student who starts school knowing that he or she will have the stability of remaining in the same department for many years.

That's not to say the accelerated path was without its challenges for Worthing. He believes that faculty members from other departments may have been less interested in him because he'd already chosen a specialty. "People view you differently because you are not a blank slate that they can draw into their specialty," he said. "Some people respect the decision to commit early on to a specialty, but you lose the interest of some people. That's tough during your core clinical year because that's when you are being evaluated and graded, and you want to be on people's good side." He also had less elective time and flex time than he would have had otherwise, and once he graduated from medical school, he went full speed into residency, without any time to "get a grip back on being a normal person," as he put it.

Hopefuls considering the 3-year path should keep in mind one drawback, according to Worthing: "You go through medical school having already decided on something, so you have blinders on in a sense. It keeps you very focused on one specialty, and depending on when you came into the 3-year pathway, it could be good for you, or not." He pointed out, too, that after 3 years, students might decide that a school's location isn't right for them; people in hectic New York City might yearn to do their residency in a less urban environment. Priorities that cannot always be anticipated (couples matching or other family concerns that develop, for example)

might also cause unexpected complexities. All the same, he praised Elizabeth Cohen, MD, a professor in the Department of Ophthalmology and advisor for 3-year-pathway students, for constantly checking in with him and the other students in the program. At “every step of the way,” he said, she asked them to reevaluate their choice to ensure they were still on the right path—and to remind them that they had options if they thought they weren’t. “She had our backs throughout the entire process, which I really appreciated,” he said. “She was always there to make sure our voices were heard and we were doing the right thing for ourselves.”

For anyone hoping to apply to a 3-year program, Stony Brook’s vice dean has some advice. “There is no

significant disadvantage in trying it out,” said Dr. Chandran, who designed Renaissance’s 3-year program. “If you feel that you made the wrong choice, you have lost nothing. You can easily slide to our regular 4-year schedule and go for whatever specialty you want to go for.”

But would Worthing recommend an experience like his to other aspiring physicians interested in emergency medicine? Worthing didn’t hesitate to say, “Definitely. It gives you a lot of opportunity to build relationships with people you’ll be spending a lot of time with. It eases the process of matching into residency. It gives you a chance to plan your life a little more.”

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