From My Perspective...

**The Utility of Joint-Degree Training**

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One of the more common questions I get asked by prospective students is whether they should pursue joint-degree training or instead focus on one degree. Despite having a JD and a PhD and directing a joint-degree program, my answer to this important question is, “It depends.” This answer seems to surprise many, who apparently expect me to blindly endorse joint-degree training for all students. The reality, though, is that joint-degree training, like any specialized training, is not for everyone. Whether joint-degree training is the right choice for someone depends on several considerations. Before describing those considerations, I will explain why I pursued joint-degree training, what I have done with my degrees, and the benefits of such training.

As a freshman in college, I knew with absolute certainty that I wanted to become a lawyer and practice law . . . until I started taking psychology courses. Despite my long-standing interest in pursuing a legal career, I fell in love with psychology. I loved its utility and broad scope. I loved the idea of helping people and society through psychological research and practice. A few short months after entering college, the pendulum of my career interests had swung from one side (law) to the other (psychology), and I decided to pursue a career in psychology. Admittedly, I was lucky; many people change majors multiple times before settling on a career choice.

Eventually, however, I realized that my true interests were not entirely in psychology or in law, but at the intersection of psychology and law. Throughout college, my interests evolved and matured, and I became interested in conducting methodologically rigorous research aimed at helping legal decision makers and policy makers make better informed decisions, and evaluating criminal offenders and civil litigants so that attorneys and courts could make better decisions. Given these interests, I found myself gravitating toward a career in psychology because lawyers do not typically conduct research and certainly do not perform clinical evaluations. I found myself in a quandary. I no longer wanted to practice law, but I still wanted to learn about the law. I also wanted to be able to think like a lawyer and have the analytical skills of a lawyer, and I wanted to use those attributes to enhance my work in the psychology field. Fortunately, I found out about a joint-degree program offered by MCP-Hahnemann University and Villanova Law School—one of only a few joint-degree programs in the United States at that time—that would enable me to pursue advanced training in both psychology (PhD) and law (JD).

If we fast-forward to when I was approaching graduation from the 7-year joint-degree program, the next major question I faced was how to use both degrees in a meaningful way that satisfied my career interests. My main interests—conducting policy-relevant psycho-legal research and working with offenders and litigants—remained intact, and other interests, such as teaching and consulting, had emerged. I wanted to find a job that satisfied these diverse interests. As many people find out, getting the right job is an iterative process—that is, your first job will likely not be your final professional stop. The goal should be that each successive job satisfies more of your career interests. I first obtained a position as a research scientist at the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), which is a nonprofit research institute that works closely with the University of Pennsylvania, where I satisfied my interest in con-ducting sophisticated and policy-relevant drug-policy research. My work at TRI focused on drug-involved criminal offenders, and our research examined the effective-ness of drug courts, the ethics of obtaining consent from individuals to participate in drug abuse research, and the development of interventions for offenders with less severe substance use problems. However, I had little opportunity to teach or consult, and I wanted to use my clinical-forensic skills and work more closely with students. After 4 rewarding years at TRI, I was hired as a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at Drexel University.

Over the past 10 years in academics, I have been able to put both of my degrees to good use. I spend my time conducting research aimed at influencing policy and practice in several areas; teaching courses to undergraduate, graduate, and law students; mentoring undergraduate and graduate students; conducting forensic mental health assessments of juveniles and adults; consulting with attorneys, courts, and other agencies; sitting on various committees and editorial boards; and publishing and presenting my research. Moreover, as director of Drexel’s JD/PhD program, I helped develop a law–psychology training curriculum and serve as a mentor to the next generation of law–psychology professionals. My days are professionally fulfilling and not always predictable. Depending on the day, I might be in my office, in the class-room, in a jail, or in a courtroom. I might be developing a new course, writing a book, conducting research, working on a forensic report, or meeting with students to advance their education and training. The varied nature of my job is something I truly enjoy.

Before returning to the original question of whether joint-degree training is a good idea, let me address the other question I routinely get asked—that is, whether my joint-degree training has helped me in my career. Fortunately, the answer to this question is an unequivocal “yes.” To my knowledge, no jobs require having both degrees (perhaps with the exception of being director of a joint-degree program), but having both degrees pro-vides a unique skill set, increased marketability, and a multitude of professional options. Although I initially believed that having a law degree would be most beneficial in terms of my forensic assessment work, which requires interacting with attorneys and having some amount of legal knowledge, it has actually proved more beneficial in my research. Much of my research is con-ducted with justice-involved individuals, and having a law degree has enhanced my credibility with those from whom we need permission to conduct such research (e.g., judges, attorneys, court administrators). Further, having both degrees enabled me to be appointed to the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Legal Issues (COLI). As Chair of COLI in 2011, I assisted in drafting three amicus curiae briefs submitted to the Supreme Court of the United States. These amicus briefs focused on psychological research that was relevant to the issue the Supreme Court was addressing in each case. Two of the Supreme Court cases dealt with the reliability of eyewitness identification, and the third case focused on predicting future dangerousness in death penalty cases.

So, let’s return to the original question of whether joint-degree training is a good idea if you have interests in both psychology and law. It depends on several factors, including the availability of joint-degree pro-grams (6 to 8 at this time), the level of funding being offered, how much time one has for education and training (with most joint-degree programs taking 5–9 years to complete), and professional goals. Focusing on professional goals deserves additional comment. Students should ask themselves how they want to spend their professional time and then carefully con-sider whether having both degrees will help them obtain a position that is consistent with their professional goals.

Most people who receive joint-degree training work either in law or psychology, and then use the “other” degree to enhance their primary work. For example, some are practicing lawyers—they need a law degree to practice law but of course are not required to have a doctoral degree in psychology—and they practice in areas of law in which having psychology training can be particularly helpful (e.g., family law, mental health law, litigation). Some individuals with joint-degree training mainly use their doctoral degree in psychology (e.g., academics, research, forensic assessment work), and they use their law degree to enhance their functioning in these areas. In essence, joint-degree training may be right for you if you are interested in becoming a scientist–practitioner who will produce legally sophisticated social science research to aid the legal system to make empirically based decisions; a lawyer–psychologist who will participate in the development of more empirically and theoretically sophisticated mental health policy and law; or a clinician who can contribute to the advancement of forensic psychology in areas such as criminal law, civil law, family law, and mental health law. Joint-degree training is a long but rewarding journey, and it is of great benefit to those whose goals are consistent with such training.

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