The Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education BS/MD program is a seven-year medical program located in the heart of Harlem, New York. It has long been known for providing minority students with an outstanding education in the medical sciences, as well as producing primary care physicians who work in underserved communities. Since the founding of the BS/MD program in 1973, it has been able to fulfill this mission. Students spend five years at the City College of New York, where they complete their undergraduate education as well as the first two years of medical school. Upon graduation from CCNY with a Bachelor of Science degree, students matriculate to the cooperating medical school in which they were matched. However, with the changing nature of the healthcare system, society’s needs, national demographics, and technological advancements, it is not surprising that medical schools are changing their curricular structure and increasing their class size. To assure that we can continue to fulfill this critical mission, the administration at Sophie Davis believes it is best if the BS/MD program becomes its own degree-granting medical school.

This fall, Dr. Erica Friedman, Deputy Dean of Sophie Davis, agreed to participate in an interview with The Biograph and provide the latest information regarding Sophie Davis’ plan to becoming a medical school. She states that Sophie Davis needs to become an independently accredited medical school for three specific reasons.

“The most important driving force is the fact that we have multiple cooperating schools, and each of them is changing their curriculum,” stated Dean Friedman. She explained that the changing nature of the other medical schools’ curriculum is resulting in issues of incompatibility in terms of Sophie students successfully transitioning to the medical schools following their five years at CCNY. Dean Friedman elaborated that in the past, Sophie students would obtain two years of preclinical training at Sophie Davis and then transfer to the cooperating medical schools for two years of clinical training. With medical schools changing their curriculum, entering Sophie Davis students are often inadequately prepared for each school’s specific requirements. Dean Friedman revealed that in the last two years, both NYU School of Medicine and SUNY Downstate Medical Center (cooperating medical schools) have changed their curriculae. NYU now ends its preclinical training in February of the second year, while SUNY Downstate now ends its preclinical training by April of the second year. This creates an issue because Sophie students entering these two institutions would have to wait for at least one semester before transferring. Not only is the sequencing of the curriculum an issue, but so is the content. “It’s really difficult to send our students who are all trained in one fashion to six different places that have trained students in six different ways, and to be sure that all our students are competent,” explained Dean Friedman. This will no longer be an issue if Sophie Davis becomes an accredited medical school, as every student will be ensured the same quality of education and experience. “We would have complete control over the clinical curriculum, which we don’t have right now,” said Dean Friedman.

The second reason is the insufficient number of clinical sites available due to the changing class size and makeup of medical schools. Dean Friedman explained that in the last few years, there has been an increase in Caribbean medical schools paying hospitals in New York to accept their students for clinical training. Hospitals that are burdened by budget cuts prefer to take these students, which results in a decreased number of clinical spots for non-paying students from US medical schools. This is further compounded by the fact that medical schools are
increasing the number of students in their classes going to clinical sites, which decreases the number of spots at cooperating schools and clinical sites typically reserved for Sophie students.

The third reason is the desire to preserve the integrity and fabric of the school’s mission. “While we believe we do an outstanding job of inculcating the importance of primary care as a career choice into our students during the five years they are here, we then send students off to some medical schools that don’t promote primary care as a career choice, and often devalue it. So, whatever strides we make in convincing students that primary care is important get extinguished when students train in environments that don’t value primary care,” Dean Friedman said.

Peer mentorship programs will become more efficient if Sophie Davis becomes a medical school. “Ideally, we would develop peer mentors that would be students in the clinical years, with the more senior students helping junior students understand the clinical experiences,” said Dean Friedman.

The curriculum is also changing. Dean Friedman stated that “the process of revamping the curriculum is going on independently of the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) accreditation process.” Dean Friedman predicts that there will be a change in the curriculum from block-scheduling to a more systems-based model in which students will be able to more easily integrate information. Another change to the curriculum will be the introduction of classes like “Ethics”, “Population Health”, and “The Business and Law of Medicine”, which incorporate other disciplines into traditional medical sciences.

There are currently no plans for the 7 year BS/MD program to become an eight-year program, there are however plans to offer students the option to pursue additional masters like a Master of Public Health (MPH), Master of Business Administration (MBA), or to pursue clinical research.

Sophie Davis will need to hire new teachers to support the changing curriculum. However, Dean Friedman stated that the hospitals with which Sophie Davis becomes affiliated will provide committed faculty to oversee major clerkships and clinical courses. The teaching style of teachers will become more interactive as the LCME requires small group meetings and formative feedback.

Although the required classes will remain the same, the number of credits required to complete the program will shift and students ideally will obtain their Bachelor of Science in four years instead of five. Dean Friedman clarified that there will be an overlap of medical school and undergraduate classes in which credits earned in the fourth year will count towards both the B.S. and M.D. degrees.

Regarding tuition, Dean Friedman says that is currently still being worked out. The proposal is that the tuition will be similar to that of other state medical schools. She hopes that the school will continue to provide scholarships and be able to provide students with interest free loans in order to lighten the financial burden imposed.

The admissions process will remain the same until Sophie Davis obtains the preliminary accreditation. Because the LCME does not allow admission of students to a medical school before preliminary accreditation occurs, for students admitted to Sophie Davis prior to obtaining preliminary accreditation, there will need to be a readmission process following the third year in order to be officially accepted into the preliminarily accredited medical school. “There will be some sort of review and a short-track admission process for everyone who currently entered this year and each year prior to the accreditation to satisfy the LCME and to verify that students are competent to start year four,” stated Dean Friedman. However, she quickly added that “it isn’t
any different than what we currently do, which is to review all students performance at the end of each year to make sure they are prepared to go on to the next year.”

Finding an appropriate affiliate hospital that shares the same mission as Sophie Davis is a challenge. Dean Friedman commented that at Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai, some of the affiliated hospitals could change year or year. “We are really lucky because we are negotiating with St. Barnabas Medical Center to be our primary affiliate hospital,” said Dean Friedman. Although St. Barnabas, a teaching hospital, is also affiliated with the New York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Dean Friedman is certain that these affiliations would not be an issue. St. Barnabas is an ideal match because it shares Sophie Davis’ mission to serve the underserved. Located in the Bronx, it is a not-for-profit, nonsectarian, acute care community-based hospital that also serves as a State-designated Stroke and AIDS Center. However, at this point in the process, nothing is set in stone.

The greatest goal of the Sophie Davis BS/MD program is to literally change the face of medicine. “Ours is an incredible mission...the need for our country, with the Affordable Care Act, for more primary care physicians. It’s [also] clear with the diversity of the population that we need more underrepresented minorities in healthcare. This is an important mission for many medical schools, most of whom will not be able to fulfill it. We are lucky that we have the opportunity to fulfill it,” concluded Dean Friedman. Truly, the future looks bright as the Sophie Davis BS/MD program begins the transition towards becoming an accredited medical school.