After five years working in the health care field in a variety of positions, Paige Hosler was looking to boost her career prospects with a graduate degree. The question for Hosler, who was interested in health care management or hospital administration, was which degree to pursue: M.P.H. or M.B.A.?

“I thought the M.B.A. would give me more of an in-depth background in finance and entrepreneurship than a public health program would offer,” Hosler says. “But on the flip side, most of the M.B.A. programs I looked at didn’t have a strong focus in health care.”

At UCLA, Hosler found the best of both worlds – the opportunity to enter a three-year program ending in an M.B.A. from the UCLA Anderson School of Management and an M.P.H. from the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. “I was really impressed with the strength of the two programs and the achievements of the faculty from both schools,” says Hosler. She graduated in June with two degrees and no regrets. “I got a strong foundation in both health care and management that will serve as the springboard for the next several years of my career,” she says.
Eli Tomar’s original plan was to pursue a law degree. But as someone interested in helping to shape health policy in Washington, D.C., Tomar reasoned that adding an M.P.H. would give him more credibility, whether it was with health care clients of his law firm or with future employers if he chose to pursue a position with a health-related company. So Tomar enrolled in UCLA’s M.P.H./J.D. program, the first of its kind west of the Mississippi River. “I felt public health would be interesting to study, and it was,” says Tomar, who completed the four-year program in June. “I learned about the American health care system on a much more academic level than I would have ever gotten in law school. But I gained a great deal besides the knowledge.”

For Farah and Ridwa Abdi, an M.P.H. was part of the initial plan. The twin sisters, who were born in Somalia but had lived in the United States since they were 6, harbored ambitions of returning to East Africa after their education to tackle community-level health issues. But at some point, both concluded that they also wanted to learn more about their place of birth. “When I was an undergraduate I took an African history class and began to realize I was lacking knowledge about the history and politics that would help me do the most meaningful work there,” says Ridwa Abdi.

In the process of looking into M.P.H. programs, UCLA’s – which would allow her to concurrently earn a master’s degree in African Studies – stood out. Farah Abdi felt the same way. “I knew that in the places where I hope to one day work, the problems extend well beyond the individual,” she explains, “and I felt an M.A. in African Studies alongside my M.P.H. would give me invaluable context for the health and social issues I would be working to ameliorate.”

By its very nature, public health has always had close ties with other professions. That is arguably more the case today than ever before, with a growing recognition of the importance of social and physical conditions in influencing health – factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and both the built and natural environment. In addition, a burgeoning “Health in All Policies” movement calls for health consequences to be factored into policy decisions made by non-health agencies.

With that in mind, the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health has increased the number of joint and concurrent degree programs available to students. “This is an increasingly attractive option,” says David Clark, the school’s assistant dean for student affairs. “It gives students with varied interests and skills the chance to dive deeply into two fields, and broadens their opportunities after they leave.” Public health...
can now be combined with degrees in any of 10 programs on the UCLA campus: law, medicine, business administration, urban and regional planning, social welfare, public policy, Asian American studies, African studies, Islamic studies and Latin American studies. Last fall, Clark says, 35 students enrolled in one of the joint-degree programs.

“Often, students gain skills that allow them to participate in their field very differently. For example, we will get medical students and when they begin taking courses in public health their horizons expand dramatically.” DR. DIANA HILBERMAN, director, M.P.H. in Health Policy and Management Program, UCLA FSPH

“The additional coursework and interactions with students in the other departments and schools enriches the depth and breadth of our students’ knowledge, and enhances their perspectives and contributions in their future efforts as public health professionals,” says Dr. Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, a professor in the school’s Department of Community Health Sciences and in UCLA’s Asian American Studies Department, and director of the concurrent degree program between the two. “As someone who has had many students from multiple programs in my own courses, I have seen this in action.”

For many students, the joint/concurrent programs help to establish a distinct career path. Greg Flaxman was preparing to enter the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health in the fall of 2010 when he learned about the dual program with the Department of Social Welfare in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. Flaxman had enjoyed working as a volunteer with older adults that summer, and decided that the clinical skills he could obtain from the social work program would provide the ideal complement to his public health education.

Students pursuing an M.S.W. choose between a macro population focus and a micro clinical focus. Since Flaxman knew he would be getting the population perspective in his M.P.H. program, he chose to pursue the clinical focus in his M.S.W. studies. “I’ve taken some macro classes in the social work program, and you can see the similarities to public health,” says Flaxman, who will complete the three-year program in June. “There’s a shared vision between the two programs. So in a sense, as a dual degree student I have been able to pursue both tracks.” While he is currently planning a career working with older adults as a clinical social worker, Flaxman believes the M.P.H. will enhance his ability to participate in program planning, and will give him the flexibility to work in administration should he ever choose that direction.

“Often, students in these programs gain skills that allow them to participate in their field very differently,” observes Dr. Diana Hilberman, an adjunct professor of health policy and management at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health who, as director of the school’s M.P.H. in Health Policy and Management Program, is closely involved with a number of joint/concurrent degree students. “For example, we will get medical students who have been learning about anatomy and treating individuals, and when they begin taking courses in public health their horizons expand dramatically. Now they’re learning about the context in which they’re practicing medicine and the environmental factors that are contributing to successes or frustrations they have in providing good patient care.” Hilberman notes that some M.P.H./M.D. students come to the school as part of UCLA PRIME, a federally funded dual-degree program focusing on developing leaders addressing issues pertaining to underserved populations. Others are considering careers in hospital administration, research or policy.

Hilberman says she has seen increased interest in the M.P.H./M.B.A. program as well as the M.P.H./M.D. program. “There’s a greater recognition of the importance of business skills in a field as complex as health care,” she says. “But even if you go through an
M.B.A. program with a health care emphasis, you get significantly less depth on the health care side. We provide the health wraparound to the management skills students get in the business school, and our close ties with the medical school, hospital and health care field add considerably to the experience.”

Christina Batteate knew she was interested in practicing public health in Latin America, where she has worked in the past and hopes to return in the future. Concurrently pursuing an M.A. in the interdepartmental Latin American Studies program enabled her to explore aspects of Latin American society in greater depth, including concentrations in Portuguese and urban planning. “It allowed me to tailor the tools I was obtaining in public health to fit the region where I was interested in working,” says Batteate, who graduated in June. “It was a great balance and opportunity to connect with professionals and professors who are working in that area.”

Ridwa Abdi says engaging with students and professors who have worked in Africa in non-health disciplines has helped to stretch her thinking about ways to attack public health problems. “We have many of the same challenges,” she explains. “Whether you’re doing urban development or public health, you still have to work within the same societal framework and the same cultural boundaries. Stepping outside of your specialty and learning how people in other fields go about it allows you to analyze the problems from different points of view and gain a unique vantage point to conduct what you want to do in the region in the most meaningful way.”

Where there is overlap, having a foot in two programs can help students appreciate the disparate perspectives different professions bring to the same issues – and the need for professionals skilled in both worlds. “I think lawyers tend to be as mystified by health care as health-minded people are mystified by the law,” says recent M.P.H./J.D. graduate Eli Tomar. “There are very few people who are experts in both. I certainly don’t profess to be one, but it’s important for more of us to learn about these areas where health and the law intersect.”

Experiencing the different approaches to health care in the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health and UCLA Anderson School of Management reinforced Paige Hosler’s decision to pursue degrees in both. “I felt I was bringing a broader health care perspective to my M.B.A. classes, as well as a deeper understanding of business concepts to the team interactions and classroom discussions in my public health courses, than if I were only in one program,” she says.
Not that it was easy. “Either program by itself is rigorous, so combining the two is that much more challenging,” Hosler says. She notes that an important part of any graduate program is the time spent outside the classroom networking and forging relationships with other students; being part of two programs at once doubled those time commitments. But Hosler, who recently accepted a position in the leadership development program of DaVita, a leading provider of kidney care in the United States, believes these relationships – combined with the ability to tap into both schools’ alumni networks – will serve her well as she advances in her career.

Tomar has returned to Washington, D.C. and Patton Boggs LLP, the law firm where he served as a policy analyst prior to entering UCLA’s M.P.H./J.D. program; he is now working as an attorney in the firm’s health policy practice group. Like Hosler, he expects to benefit from an expanded alumni network, as well as from like-minded public health students he met at a weeklong symposium in Washington, D.C., that Tomar attended as a recipient of the school’s David A. Winston Health Policy Scholarship.

Batteate is still weighing her options, which range from working in a Latin American region through the United Nations, World Health Organization, or a ministry of health, or working with the large Latino community in Los Angeles. “Right off the bat, people are impressed by someone who takes on more than one master’s degree, because it shows ambition and points to a more diverse experience,” she says. “With the background in Latin American studies as well as public health, I feel I have many good options.”

Farah and Ridwa Abdi are on track to have completed both of their degrees by June, and have begun applying to medical schools. Ultimately, they hope to start a clinic together in their native Somalia or elsewhere in the East African region. Ridwa Abdi says the tools she and her sister take with them from the Department of Epidemiology and elsewhere in the school will enable them to go beyond one-on-one patient care to conduct needs assessments and implement community health education programs. “But instead of having to walk into the community blind, we will be able to hit the ground running with our knowledge of the history, politics and culture of the region,” she notes.

Kagawa-Singer believes that as public health becomes more of a collaborative process, professionals such as those who graduate from the school’s joint/concurrent programs will be increasingly valuable. “The problems public health professionals face are complex and wide-ranging,” she says. “We need professionals who have a breadth of experience and a solid foundation of knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines to make the difference that’s needed. Our students who go through the joint/concurrent programs are uniquely prepared to do that.”