Founding Dean Elisabeth Van Bockstaele, PhD, has one
overriding goal for the College of Medicine’s new Graduate
School of Biomedical Sciences and Professional Studies. She
wants every graduate student to be able to launch their careers
immediately once they receive their degrees, well equipped
with skill sets that ensure success in nonacademic as well as
academic health science institutions.

This goal has been driving an avalanche of initiatives since
Van Bockstaele came on board in September 2013, following
an illustrious 17-year career at Jefferson Medical College,
where she was founding director of the graduate program
in neuroscience.

“I was drawn to Drexel because of the University’s reputation
for innovation and focus on results — employment for graduates
through its well-known co-op system,” says Van Bockstaele.
“Drexel is very career oriented. The money you spend to obtain
a degree at Drexel provides incredible return on investment
because the moment you walk across the stage and receive
your diploma, you are marketable. We have a responsibility
as educators to make that happen.”

Careers Beyond the Bench

Van Bockstaele intends to build on the College’s outstanding
biomedical and professional studies programs, shaping them
for an innovative 21st-century graduate education geared to
the growing diversity of career choices in the sciences.

She has already launched a committee to plan “Careers
Beyond the Bench,” a symposium to be held in fall 2014 for
midlevel and senior graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.
The innovative half-day program will focus on nonacademic
careers in the health sciences, discussing skill sets needed in
those careers and employment opportunities.

The idea for this symposium was informed by the National
Institutes of Health Biomedical Workforce Report published in
indicated that there probably wouldn’t be enough tenure track
positions to accommodate the plethora of PhDs that we were
training for academic settings. It also indicated that academic
institutions may need to broaden student experiences in
science and training to accommodate different job prospects.

“The NIH findings allow academic institutions to realize that
success in graduate studies is not solely dictated by one
academic career track,” she continues. “Our success is dictated
by accomplishments in multiple areas of science and our ability
to train our students to achieve various professional goals.”

Van Bockstaele is quick to add that it is also extremely
important to train students to be successful in academia.
“We plan to offer our career symposium annually,” she relates,
“and our planning committee may alternate the focus between
academic and nonacademic careers every other year.”

Another goal of the symposium is to create a “success
network” by affording students the opportunity to network with
participants from business and industry. “This will give them
the opportunity to hear firsthand about career paths they may
never have considered or even knew existed,” observes
Van Bockstaele. “Having the face-to-face opportunity to listen to
other people’s personal stories about how their careers unfolded
is invaluable.”
This also points out the critical need for mentorship as an ongoing process,” she continues. “Students might not know how to adjust in the middle of their training for another career possibility. Our faculty has a responsibility to listen to the students they are mentoring and address their professional goals continuously; and they are committed and passionate about this.”

Crafting the Curriculum

The new graduate school has begun a strategic planning process with a major emphasis on designing new master’s degree programs with specific targets for employment. To inform this effort, the school plans to create an advisory board of leaders from biomedical companies in the region who will share their vision for the needs of their companies in the next five years.

“This will enable us to ensure that our training programs are crafted to meet the needs of these companies so they, in turn, will know that a Drexel graduate will bring the skills needed to do the job for their company,” explains Van Bockstaele.

One such program is the recently created master’s program in drug discovery and development directed by Paul McGonigle, PhD, which provides students with management courses and the opportunity to pursue internships in industry, where they can learn what is required to be successful in that environment.

Two other degree programs currently being developed include a master’s in patent agency, led by Karen “Chava” Hurley, PhD, and a master’s in human cognition and aging, led by Drs. Barry Waterhouse, Andres Kriete and Karol Osipowicz.

“We have solid data showing that law firms are looking for people with patent agency training because they are less expensive to hire than lawyers,” notes Van Bockstaele. “We also know that our elderly population is growing, and we need people to work in settings that serve them. We are leveraging the College of Medicine’s strength in neuroscience and partnering with the School of Biomedical Engineering, Science and Health Systems; College of Arts and Sciences; and School of Public Health to develop a program to meet that need.”

Cross-Disciplinary Collaborations

Cross-disciplinary initiatives are a major emphasis of the new graduate school. To build new collaborations with other Drexel schools, Van Bockstaele has launched a Collaborative Graduate Council, which she co-chairs with Teck-Kah Lim, associate vice provost of the University’s Office of Graduate Studies. “Having the ability to brainstorm ideas will be a tremendous force for collaborating and finding ways to do things better,” Van Bockstaele says. “We have invited graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to serve on the council, always keeping us informed about issues that are important to them.

“Drexel University has always distinguished itself by being clear about its mission — we want to prepare you for the real world. That is my goal for the new graduate school,” concludes Van Bockstaele. “The energy on campus is palpable and we’re excited about the possibilities that lie ahead.”