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Virginia students enhance diversity in medical and scientific research

BY TAMMIE SMITH
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Virginia State University biology major Nakiesha Bridgers got bit by the research bug early — as an adolescent she dissected frogs from a neighborhood pond to find out what they had last eaten. Her scientific inquiries have gotten a lot more sophisticated since then.

The college junior has spent most of the summer at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha researching a protein that seems to make some breast-cancer cells resistant to chemotherapy drugs. Bridgers is one of eight students from historically black colleges and a community college in Virginia who have science research fellowships with the University of Nebraska Medical Center or Virginia Commonwealth University.

The fellowships are offered through a collaboration called the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance that was created about a year ago to increase the numbers of minorities doing research.

Officials at the medical center in Nebraska, a state where 4 percent of the population is black, looked to the South, particularly Virginia, to recruit students because of the number of historically black colleges here. The alliance was also facilitated by ties that administrators at VCU and Nebraska developed working at the partner institutions.

Though most of Virginia's colleges have programs in place to provide minority students research opportunities, those programs were not connected, said Terone Green, chief administrative officer of the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance.

Also, perhaps because of historical divisions, leaders at Virginia's historically black colleges and those at the mainstream universities weren't collaborating as much as they could have. "This is an attempt to bring them together," Green said.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center has committed \$250,000 a year for four years to get the program going. VCU, Bon Secours Richmond Health System, Amerigroup Corp. and the Saltillo Mae Corp. are also major supporters.

"I see this consortium as a model that could be adopted in other states," said Dr. Louis Sullivan, former U.S. health and human services secretary

and chairman of the alliance. He was in Virginia Beach recently to pick up a \$30,000 donation from Amerigroup, a company that manages Medicaid health-maintenance organizations.

Virginia state Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III, D-Richmond, is vice chairman of the alliance.

"What has happened, surprisingly, [is] many of the other institutions would like to join," said Lambert, mentioning the University of Richmond, the University of Virginia and Radford University.

The alliance also includes a faculty component. Five faculty from Virginia State, Virginia Union and St. Paul's College were awarded fellowships to study with National Institutes of Health-funded researchers at VCU and Nebraska.

Dr. Omar Faison, a VSU assistant professor, is collaborating with Dr. Severn Churn, a neurobiologist at VCU. Faison, who did postdoctoral work at VCU before joining the VSU faculty, is studying the protein calcineurin and its role in the death of cells, especially nerve cells that play a role in aging and epilepsy.

Faison got a \$10,000 research initiation grant to set up his lab, he said. But he always needs help to buy supplies.

With the fellowship support, Faison said he was a "good year ahead of where he planned to be" in his research. Back at VSU, his students will benefit from his increased knowledge, he said.

Traditionally, black universities have not listed very high on National Institutes of Health rankings of institutions awarded federal research grants.

"You have to have experienced researchers to get grants," said Dr. Wally Smith, an associate professor at VCU who studies sickle cell disease. "In order to have experienced researchers, you have to have research on board. It's the chicken-and-egg problem."

A broader goal of the alliance is to produce more researchers interested in addressing minority-health problems.

"We are really as a nation experiencing a burst in diversity," Sullivan said. "In order for people to get effective health care, we have to have well-trained personnel."

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WALTER BRODINS

Virginia State University biology major Nakiesha Bridgers has spent most of the summer doing research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Science students

There were 540,720 graduate students in the sciences and engineering in the United States in 2002. The breakdown included:

- White, non-Hispanic: 270,183
- Students with temporary visas: 152,369
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 35,420
- Black, non-Hispanic: 28,753
- Other/unknown: 27,494
- Hispanic: 24,259
- American Indian/Alaska native: 2,242

Source: National Science Foundation



DOUG LONGRINES-DISPATCH

Dr. Karen Cropsey (left) works with Virginia State University student Elijah Robinson on a research project together at Virginia Commonwealth University. Robinson is part of a group from historically black colleges who have science research fellowships with the University of Nebraska Medical Center or VCU.