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Va. alliance fosters health careers

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The University of Virginia and the University of Richmond have joined other Virginia colleges in an alliance dedicated to increasing the numbers of minorities in science and health careers.

Schools that initiated the partnership more than a year ago are: Hampton University, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Norfolk State University, the University of Nebraska, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia State University, Virginia Union University and Saint Paul's College.

Adding the two partners "means people are interested in increasing [the number of minority] health-care providers, particularly in minority communities," said state Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III, D-Richmond, vice chairman of the collaborative. Lambert, an optometrist, helped bring the schools together.

In the alliance, the schools collaborate on mentoring, faculty exchange and research opportunities for junior faculty researchers and college students.

Many experts believe one way to address racial and ethnic health disparities -- higher rates of some illnesses and diseases in minority groups -- is to increase the numbers of minorities who treat patients and research health issues.

The partnership, known as the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, was created in 2004. The Nebraska school's involvement arose from its efforts to boost minority enrollment in its science programs. Virginia schools raised the idea of a collaborative during a conference on health disparities.

As part of the alliance, UR will provide Medical College Admission Test preparation for 10 students, two from each participating black college, plus summer stipends for those students, said Terone Green, executive director of the alliance.

"Part of the university's mission is social responsibility and outreach to the community," said June Aprille, UR provost. "This is one way we felt we can serve."

U.Va. is committing slots in its current pre-med summer enrichment program to students from schools in the alliance, will offer MCAT preparation and provide summer research opportunities.

Funding and in-kind support for the program, which may eventually cost about \$500,000 a year to run, has come from the alliance schools, grants and donations.

Last summer, 14 Virginia undergraduate students and about a half-dozen junior faculty were

enrolled in the program. College students or junior faculty interested in the programs should call 359-4100.

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