

VOICE NEWS

Serving Richmond, Petersburg and 7 Southside Virginia Counties www.voicenewspaper.com

Vol. 18 No. 14 (880th Edition)

September 15 - September 21, 2004

PRSAT STD - U.S. POSTAGE PAID
Richmond, VA PERMIT NO. 639

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U of N, VCU and five HBCUs partner to expand medical careers

By Marlene Obado-Dolla
Staff Writer

University of Nebraska, Virginia Commonwealth University, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College and five Virginia HBCUs last week unveiled a partnership that creates a special program for students from HBCUs or Historically Black Colleges and Universities to participate in academic and research opportunities in the medical field.

According to officials present at a downtown hotel press conference and



signing ceremony, the partnership dubbed the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance

has the ultimate goal of helping increase the number of minority health professionals and researchers in the country.

This is in a bid to promote better health outcomes for minorities and reduce disparities in access to quality health care based on racial and ethnic status, economic and social circumstances. Study and research has shown that minorities, especially Blacks, are more likely to seek medical care if it is provided by fellow minority professionals. They tend to be more

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HBCUs

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trusting of healthcare services provided by other minorities.

Additionally, the quality of healthcare given to minorities tends to be of a lesser means than that provided to Caucasians, according to research.

"[Despite] increasing cultural diversity in the United States, there is a lack of racial diversity in health care policy, administration, researchers and health practitioners," noted VCU officials.

The partnership seeks to make use of research findings that reveal a tendency for Black health professionals to practice in areas that are densely populated by Blacks, mostly urban areas.

"This is something we really need," said State Sen. Benjamin Lambert III (D-Richmond), an optometrist who practices in a largely Black area of the city. "The numbers of African American pursuing health careers has dropped. This will really enhance the opportunities for students to become doctors, dentists and other health professionals."

The partnership will focus on student exchanges between the institutions to cultivate undergraduate students' interests in pursuing graduate education in health and basic sciences; research and clinician faculty exchanges, faculty research collaboration and institutional collaboration for funding opportunities.

Students from the community college and the HBCUs that include Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia State University in Petersburg, Hampton University, Norfolk State University and St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville will attend year-round research opportunities at the Nebraska University's medical college and hospital or the VCU medical college and hospital.

"The Alliance provides an unprecedented opportunity for two major medical centers to work in concert with five HBCUs and a community college on behalf of providing not only access to first rate graduate and professional programs, but to collaborative research opportunities as well," said VCU President Eugene Trani, Ph.D.

"I hope that once this alliance has proven to be successful, and mutually beneficial to all of the institutions

... it will become a model for other similar collaborations to develop across the country.

Alliance insiders plan to solicit funding from the government, philanthropic agencies and private funding sources to help sustain its existence and costs related to stipends provided to selected students. It will also attain a 501c3, tax-free, status that will allow it to solicit donations.

Officials note that the potential for funding is "huge" because of the educational institutes collaboration.

Two VSU students who participated in a 12-week program in Nebraska this summer said their experiences exposed them to medical processes they never imagined but would definitely love to pursue.

In the past three years, the University of Nebraska Medical College reports that

the wait.

it has provided summer research experience for 40 minority undergraduate students, 26 of who are from HBCUs. Twenty-two of these students were awarded National Institutes of Health minority undergraduate stipends.

All five HBCUs have a more than 90 percent African American student population while VCU and Nebraska University have 18 percent and 10 percent African American student enrollment consecutively.