

Chris L. Jenkins

Exchange Program May Make Medical Schools More Diverse

RICHMOND

When state Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III (D-Richmond) first heard the news, it sounded about right, but he still couldn't believe it: The nation's predominantly white medical schools accepted only 70 black men in 2003 for the fall semester.

An ophthalmologist as well as one of Virginia's first black lawmakers, Lambert said he was reminded how much needed to be done in his own profession to promote diversity among the nation's health care professionals. And it struck a powerful chord with the legislator, who lived through the civil rights movement.

"Where we used to be in the middle of the line, we're at the back of the line now," he said, referring to the falling number of black medical students. "It was just shocking to me that we've slipped so far."

So Lambert, who has worked to fund programs in the state's colleges, decided to help. Virginia became part of the solution by throwing his support behind a budding exchange program started by the University of Nebraska Medical Center. The university was having problems attracting minority students to its Lincoln campus and for several years had been working with students from historically black colleges to be part of a program that would help them prepare

for medical school.

Lambert, along with Termon Green, the vice president of a health care company, have enlisted Virginia's five historically black colleges—as well as minority students from Virginia Commonwealth University—to become part of the Nebraska summer exchange program, where students will be exposed to intense class work that will prepare them for the MCAT exams and give them a stronger foundation in the natural sciences and math. Lambert and VCU President Eugene P. Trani are scheduled to announce the partnership this week in Richmond.

Leaders for the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance said the program's goals are to increase the number of minority health professionals and researchers nationwide. Not only will it offer summer classes for undergraduates to prepare for entrance exams and the rigors of medical school, it will also provide training and research opportunities for college professors.

"Unfortunately, what we're trying to make up for is a deficiency in the [K-12] public schools, where many minority children just aren't getting the basics," said Rubens J. Pamies, vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and founder of the program.

Pamies added that while cultural diversity in the United States is increasing, there is a lack of racial

diversity in health care policy, administration, research and practice.

"Research is the driving force that can address minority health disparities and access issues," Pamies said. "The bottom line is that students and faculty at [Nebraska] and each institution will benefit. We want their students to have these opportunities to get diverse experiences across the country."

Nebraska already has exchange programs with several universities, including Dillard University in New Orleans and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. But the Virginia program will be the first in which all of a state's historically black colleges participate. The five historically black schools in Virginia are Hampton University, Norfolk State University, Virginia State University, St. Paul's College and Virginia Union University.

"This really has the potential for being a model that can be used in many places," Trani said.

For Lambert, the attempt to get more young minority students to follow his path is a personal one, one that he has tried to forge in his life as a doctor and lawmaker.

"It was time to do something different, and we need to be aggressive with trying to keep our nation's medical schools diverse," he said. "And it has to start now."