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*Unique partnership is seen as model for rest of country:*

**Five Historically Black Colleges and Universities and community college to affiliate with University of Nebraska, Virginia Commonwealth University**

RICHMOND, VA. – Five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and a leading Virginia community college are partnering with the University of Nebraska and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to create a special program to provide a multitude of academic and research opportunities for minority undergraduate students and faculty.

Called the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, the ultimate goal of the unique partnership is to increase the number of minority health professionals and researchers nationwide, with the hope of promoting better health outcomes for underrepresented minorities.

The impetus for this partnership is the national need recognized by all of the institutions to reduce disparities in access to quality health care based on racial and ethnic status, economic and social circumstances. Though racial diversity in the United States is increasing, there is a significant lack of racial diversity in health care policy, administration, researchers and health practitioners.

Virginia State Sen. Benjamin Lambert III, a key player in bringing Virginia and Nebraska for the partnership, is thrilled with the alliance. "This opens up opportunities for African-Americans to attend professional school. This is something we really need," he said. "The numbers of African-Americans pursuing health careers has dropped. This will really enhance the opportunities for students to become doctors, dentists and other health professionals."

Louis W. Sullivan, M.D., chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on HBCUs, echoed Sen. Lambert's feelings about the alliance. "This really has the potential for being a model that can be used in many places," he said. "This is a model that deserves the careful scrutiny of all 106 HBCUs."

Dr. Sullivan is president emeritus of Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta and served as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under President George H.W. Bush from 1989 to 1993. He intends to cite the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance at the annual meeting of the President's Advisory Council on HBCUs, which begins Sept. 12 in Washington, D.C. He is chairman of the council. In addition, he will allude to the alliance when he makes a presentation at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 20, as part of his duties as chairman of the Sullivan Commission, an organization that looks at the status of health professionals in terms of diversity.

The agreement focuses on four key areas: student exchanges to cultivate undergraduate students' interest in pursuing graduate education in health and basic sciences; research and clinician faculty exchanges; faculty research collaboration; and institutional collaboration for funding opportunities.

Participants at the signing ceremony will be: Sen. Lambert; Dr. Sullivan; Harold M. Maurer, M.D.,

chancellor, University of Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha, Neb.; Eugene P. Trani, Ph.D., president, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va.; Jay Noren, M.D., executive vice president and provost of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb.; William R. Harvey, Ph.D., president, Hampton University, Hampton, Va.; Alvin Schexnider, Ph.D., acting president and executive vice president, Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Va.; John Waddell, Ph.D., president of St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville, Va.; Eddie N. Moore, Jr., Ph.D., president of Virginia State University, Petersburg, Va.; Belinda C. Anderson, Ed.D., president, Virginia Union University, Richmond; and Gary Rhodes, Ed.D., president, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Richmond.

"I'm always interested in initiatives that encourage more minority students to enter into the health professions as careers and this initiative helps further that goal," said Virginia Gov. Mark R. Warner.

"I am very pleased to see the university is taking the lead in expanding opportunities for minority students to study and perform research here," Nebraska Gov. Mike Johanns said. "Creating opportunities for undergraduates to make connections with faculty at one of the country's leading medical research programs is an important part of this exchange."

"The partnership is important for the medical center," Dr. Maurer said. "Our faculty and staff are committed to mentoring and encouraging these bright and energetic students to choose and succeed in the health professions. This also will enable faculty from all involved institutions to further develop their interests in an invigorating setting, whether they be research or clinical endeavors. Eliminating or at least reducing health disparities is crucial. This is a unique opportunity to improve diversity on our campus and in the health professions, not only in Nebraska, but beyond."

Dr. Maurer spent 25 years at the VCU School of Medicine in Richmond, 17 of which were spent serving as professor and chair of the department of pediatrics.

"The Virginia-Nebraska Alliance provides an unprecedented opportunity for two major medical centers to work in concert with five historically black colleges and universities 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 Dr. Trani. "I hope that once this alliance has proven to be successful, and mutually beneficial to all of the institutions involved, it will become a model for other similar collaborations to develop across the country."

J.B. Milliken, J.D., president of the University of Nebraska, said: "I am excited about the opportunities for collaboration among all campuses of the University of Nebraska and the participating Virginia universities, and I compliment Chancellor Maurer and UNMC for leading the way. This affiliation can be an effective way of providing educational and research opportunities in addressing the disparities that exist in our health system."

UNMC currently has academic affiliation agreements with Dillard University in New Orleans, Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. In addition, agreements are being negotiated with Morehouse College and Spelman College, both in Atlanta, Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C., and Tennessee State University in Memphis. VCU has a long history of working with Virginia's HBCUs as well as other of the nation's prestigious HBCUs.

Rubens Pamies, M.D., UNMC vice chancellor for academic affairs, said the joint partnership is an effort

to help HBCUs meet their objectives in educating underrepresented minorities and providing research opportunities.

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

"Our partners have made a commitment to facilitate collaboration at their institutions so talented students can get the knowledge and skills to flourish in their chosen fields of science. We are working hard with other minority institutions across the country. We have a track record. We need to address the growing problems in the minority community of diabetes, cancer, stroke and asthma."

He said potentially more funding opportunities are available for the collaborating universities. "There are grants we can garner together that we can't alone. We all bring a lot to the table. The potential for funding is huge," Dr. Pamies said.

Activities will include student research opportunities during the summer, faculty exchanges, seminars and presentations, and collaborative grant applications. Students participating in summer research spend at least two summers at UNMC and are typically supported by stipends and supplemental funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) and other sources.

In the past three years, UNMC has provided summer research experience for 40 minority undergraduate students, 26 of whom are from HCBUs. Twenty-two of these students were awarded NIH minority undergraduate stipends.

Tyrone Cherry, who participated in a UNMC summer research internship in 2004 as a student at Virginia State University, appreciated the time UNMC physician/researchers spent with him.

"Coming in I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult because I hadn't taken organic chemistry yet," Cherry said. "But it was a very nice experience. My primary investigator was real patient with me and my lab mates taught me organic chemistry during our breaks, so I actually learned a whole lot.

"My experience was very rewarding as far exposing me to the process of medical research in the lab. It gave me a head start as well as some confidence. Most importantly, the program allowed me to make lifelong friendships with other minorities from all around the country who are on the same path as me. It also has provided valuable lessons about school, as well as life."

Besides UNMC Chancellor Maurer's tie to Virginia, two VCU administrators have ties to Nebraska. Dr. Trani served as assistant vice president for academic affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) from 1976 to 1980. Marsha Torr, Ph.D., vice president for research at VCU, served as vice chancellor for research at UNL from 1999 to 2001.

Sept. 12-18 has been designated as National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week. President Bush is scheduled to issue a proclamation that week honoring America's HBCUs.