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Diversity expert acknowledges UNMC program at Washington news conference

By Tom O'Connor, UNMC Public Affairs

The chairman of a national commission looking into how more minority students can be directed into the health professions cited a unique partnership spearheaded by UNMC as one example of how academic health science centers can address the diversity shortage at a news conference Monday at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Louis Sullivan, M.D., chairman of the Sullivan Commission on Diversity in the Healthcare Workforce, referred to the partnership during the question-and-answer session at the end of the news conference.

"Just about 10 days ago, I happened to be in Richmond, Virginia, to be part of a unique program there," he said. "Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Nebraska have formed an alliance with the five historical black colleges (in Virginia) and one community college in Richmond to bring more minority students into those medical schools, and I'm sure this will also benefit other medical schools by forming a consortium to indeed work closely together."

While attending the signing ceremony on Sept. 8, Dr. Sullivan said he learned that 63 percent of the college students in Virginia are in community colleges.

"In the commission's report, we emphasize that there must be much more interaction between all segments in the educational pipeline -- much more bridging between colleges and high schools, between colleges and community colleges," he said. "The percentage of minorities in community colleges is higher than in the baccalaureate four-year institutions. We need to find ways to tap into this resource, and that is one of the things in the report that we emphasize."

Following 18 months of work, the 16-member Sullivan Commission announced its findings at the news conference, which was attended by about 100 people. Attendees included representatives from several major health organizations such as the Association for American Medical Colleges, the National Medical Association, the American Medical Association, the American Dental Association and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

The partnership cited by Dr. Sullivan at the news conference is called the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance. It brings together Virginia's five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) - Hampton University, Norfolk State University, St. Paul's College, Virginia State University, and Virginia Union University - and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in partnership with the University of Nebraska and Virginia Commonwealth University.

"We're honored that Dr. Sullivan would give our partnership special recognition at a major national news conference," said Rubens Pamies, M.D., vice chancellor for academic affairs and one of the UNMC architects of the alliance. "It speaks volumes for how highly it is regarded by key national people trying to solve the diversity issue in the health professions. It epitomizes exactly what Dr. Sullivan is recommending - an alliance that brings together several universities, colleges and a community college. Many experts feel it is a model for other academic medical centers to follow.

"It is especially gratifying to me that the university's top leadership - President (J.B.) Milliken and Chancellor (Harold M.) Maurer - has diversity as a major part of its strategic plan."

The Virginia-Nebraska Alliance provides a multitude of academic and research opportunities for minority undergraduate students and faculty. The alliance will offer summer research internships for students, faculty exchanges, seminars and presentations, and collaborative grant applications.

In addition to the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, UNMC also has academic affiliation agreements with Dillard University in New Orleans, Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. 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. In the past three years, UNMC has provided summer research experience for 40 minority undergraduate students, including 26 from HCBUs.

The Sullivan Commission cited 37 specific action steps that should be utilized to address the shortage of minority health professionals.

"Three overriding principles are central to solving this problem," Dr. Sullivan said. "First, the culture of health professions schools must change. Second, new and non-traditional paths to the health professions must be explored. Finally, commitments must be made at the highest level.

"There is no place in this wonderfully diverse nation to have a medical school with just one or two minority students. A culture that allows this to continue is out of step with America's realities."

The Sullivan Commission report stated that the lack of diversity among healthcare professionals is placing the health of at least one-third of the nation at risk.

"Access to health professions remains largely separate and unequal," Dr. Sullivan said. "We know that minority physicians, dentists and nurses are more likely to serve minority and medically underserved populations. Without much more diversity in the health workforce, minorities will continue to suffer."

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.

For more information about the Virginia-Nebraska alliance, go to: www.unmc.edu/virgina. For more information on the Sullivan Commission report, go to www.sullivancommission.org.

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