



NC-HCAP: Helping Students Achieve Success

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For administrators of the North Carolina Health Careers Access Program (NC-HCAP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in health professions schools statewide, attracting underrepresented minorities to the health professions including allied health professions is a major priority. Recent statistics from the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at UNC show that minorities continue to be underrepresented in the health professions.

sions despite their population's presence in the state. African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics comprise roughly 27 percent of the state's population, yet these same groups only make up a combined 7.8 percent of practicing physicians in North Carolina. The numbers are even lower for practicing minority dentists (7.4%), pharmacists (4%) and physical therapists (2.3%). As North Carolinians, we must continue to recognize that work still remains to be done and continue to be diligent in our commitment to the health of all of our citizens. It is imperative that the pathway to becoming a health professional is open to every student of our great state. Ultimately, we all benefit from a future health care workforce that is reflective of the growing diversity of our society," said Patrena N. Benton, NC-HCAP director. "We

are gravely concerned about the lack of minority and disadvantaged students entering into all health professions, but the disproportionate numbers entering allied health sciences programs is particularly disconcerting. Minorities represent such a tremendous source of untapped health manpower and we must make their recruitment into these programs a priority. What's exciting is that there are unlimited opportunities for minorities across all health professions, and particularly in allied health sciences."

Many experts believe the key to addressing the shortage of minority health professionals lies in introducing them to options available in the field and providing them with opportunities for academic enrichment. This is a challenge that NC-HCAP has been addressing for over 3 decades. NC-HCAP provides pre-college and college students across the state with a variety of programs and activities to educate, encourage and prepare them for a career in the health professions.

Studies have shown that reaching students early in their educational careers is crucial to developing their interest in the health field. In 1990, NC-HCAP created Health Careers Information and Enrichment (HCIE) Workshops for this purpose. The two-hour workshops expose fifth through twelfth grade students to comprehensive health career information, including state and national job trends, average salaries, work environments and the education/training requirements of health professionals. Additionally, students are given resources for financial aid as well as strategies for developing effective time management, test-taking and study skills. "It's important that we reach students long before they enter college," says Dr. Monica Leach, assistant dean for academic affairs in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at N.C. State University. "The HCIE workshop gives students a jump start on the career planning process."

NC-HCAP offers numerous programs for undergraduate students as well. The North Carolina Access, Retention and Completion (NC-ARC) Initiative in the Allied Health Sciences is a flexible program designed specifically to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully matriculate in allied health sciences programs at UNC and other

health professions schools.

Undergraduate students from Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina A&T State University, NC Central University and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke are exposed to application and admissions processes, academic requirements and professional opportunities relative to allied health science disciplines through teleconference broadcasts of the "Introduction to the Health Professions" course (AHSC-40) offered each semester by the Department of Allied Health Sciences at UNC.

NC-ARC participants also become part of a sustained mentoring network comprised of practicing allied health professionals, DAHS faculty and administrators, and administrators from NC-HCAP's partner universities. Mentors offer advice, counseling and provide clinical shadowing experiences and internship opportunities for these students.

Often referred to as an "academic boot camp", the Science Enrichment Preparation (SEP) Program is NC-HCAP's signature academic enrichment program. It is a demanding program created in 1979 to strengthen the basic science and math knowledge of undergraduate students in order to increase their competitiveness for entry into health sciences schools. It is an eight-week residential program held at UNC each summer during which students engage in over 150 contact hours of rigorous instruction in physics, organic chemistry, human physiology and biostatistics. Students have found that their academic performance greatly improved upon returning to their respective institutions following their participation in SEP.

Beyond the academic instruction, students attend seminars designed to improve reading speed and comprehension, test-taking strategies, essay writing and interviewing techniques. Local trips to health facilities and a shadowing component allow them to discuss their career interests with health professionals and biomedical scientists as well.

SEP has made a significant impact on the lives of many aspiring health professionals. Data compiled over SEP's 29-year history show that it has aided 924 minority and disadvantaged college students in pursuing their health career goals. Of this number, 86 percent of the program's graduates are now employed in a health career,



enrolled in a health professions training program or completing undergraduate prerequisites for these programs.

The NC-HCAP centers at Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina Central University and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke offer the Clinical Health Summer Program (CHSP), a professionally supervised summer clinical work-learning experience in a health care agency for pre-professional students attending these institutions. While enrolled in CHSP, students work full-time in a health agency under the supervision of health professionals. Additionally, they visit other local health care facilities and participate in health sciences seminars and presentations.

"The program provides a wonderful opportunity for college students to look at a variety of careers in health care and related fields," said Sylvia Johnson, director of NC-HCAP at UNC-Pembroke. "The students get practical experience, exposure to real-life situations and the opportunity to make valuable contact with health care professionals by which mentor relationships can form."

UNC-P student Jessica Ortiz, a Lumbee

Indian who wants to become a physical therapist, was inspired by her internship at Scotland Hospital Rehabilitation Services of Laurinburg, N.C. "There are a lot of things physical therapists do that I didn't know about [until my internship], like wound care and aquatic therapy," Ortiz said. "The CHSP Program encouraged me to get involved and I did. I truly feel like this is the work I am meant to do and I am grateful for the opportunity to reinforce my interest in this field."

Ortiz is but one of many to reap rewards from her involvement with NC-HCAP over the course of its 37-year history. According to former UNC Chancellor James B. Moser, NC-HCAP has served thousands of people, especially the many students who have succeeded in their chosen health profession careers and especially the people of North Carolina who have benefited from improved health care. "NC-HCAP is making a positive difference every day for disadvantaged students who are interested in the health professions," he said. "Its presence at Carolina benefits everyone through daily interaction with the health related schools and campus diversity programs. Providing access to a college edu-

cation for disadvantaged students is part of our commitment to the State of North Carolina and key to our mission of service."

Preparing these underrepresented groups to become health professionals and encouraging them to practice in underserved areas of North Carolina will play a key role in the overall health, well-being and quality of life for underserved citizens of the state. Former NC-HCAP director Dr. Carolyn Mayo, a speech-language pathologist and associate professor in the Department of English/Speech at NC A&T State University, believes the services and activities NC-HCAP provides are crucial. "Health care professionals from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to serve persons from similar backgrounds as well as the underserved in general," states Mayo. "Adequate, culturally-competent health care for all of our citizens is not an option—it's a necessity. We must ensure that all citizens are able to receive the quality of health care to which they are entitled and that all students receive a quality education. All of NC-HCAP's programs work toward these goals."

Dr. Robert Thorpe, retired associate professor in the UNC Department of Allied Health Sciences who also served a brief stint as interim director of NC-HCAP, concurs. "This organization has been a beacon of hope, a source of inspiration and motivation [for students]," said Thorpe. "The contributions of NC-HCAP will constantly be measured in the countless hours of health care services rendered by health care professionals first inspired by NC-HCAP's mission and purpose."

Founded in 1971 by Dr. Cecil G. Sheps, the North Carolina Health Careers Access Program strives to increase the number of underrepresented minorities and individuals from educationally or economically disadvantaged backgrounds that are educated, trained and employed in the health professions. Former NC-HCAP executive directors were the Honorable Eva Clayton, Dr. E. Lavonia Allison, Thorpe and Mayo.

For more information about NC-HCAP, visit <http://nchcap.unc.edu> or call 919/966-2264.