

sustaining dreams

Minority Fellowship Program Emboldens and Mentors Future Researchers and Medical School Faculty

*d*r. Cato T. Laurencin has continued to be a great achiever. As a member of the first class of fellows of the Fellowship Program in Academic Medicine for Minority Students, the Harvard medical student even then planned for a career in academic medicine. He is now a University Professor and the Lillian T. Pratt Distinguished Professor and chairman of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, as well as professor of Biomedical Engineering and Chemical Engineering at the University of Virginia. But it has not been an easy road – even though he’s had support along the way. And partly because of all that support, he’s also spent the last 19 years giving something back in return.

He says, “We have to come to grips with the fact that many of the difficulties and problems that African-Americans and other ethnic minorities face is because of historic racism in America. Around 1945, when my mother wanted to go to medical school, there really were only two medical schools she could go to. Now there are more options. But still those historic problems blocked the number of ethnic minorities from moving through the pipeline in terms of academic medicine.”

Dr. Laurencin points out that the same issues have led to unfortunate health disparities in America. To address and redress those disparities, he sees increasing the number of ethnic minorities in academic institutions as critical, “because they’ll be more cognizant and mindful of these issues and will be able to impart that knowledge and training to others around them.”

That’s where the Fellowship Program in Academic Medicine for Minority Students comes in. From the start, the program’s principal aim was to help increase minority representation among physicians on medical school faculties and in biomedical research.

The Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation has been the sole funder of the program for the past decade, first becoming involved in 1990.

Thus far, more than 500 fellows have received support, have created a network



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among themselves and many have gone into academic and research careers. At their most recent gathering, 35 first- through third-year minority medical students received fellowships, based on proposals to conduct research over an 8-12 week period under the mentorship of a medical school faculty member.

At the program’s annual gathering at Bristol-Myers Squibb’s Worldwide Medicines Group headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey, four fellows, who over the years have been mentored by Dr. Laurencin, gathered to talk about the importance of mentorship – and specifically Dr. Laurencin’s guidance – in advancing their own careers and the Academic Medicine Fellowship program.

“There are too few natural mentors for underrepresented minority students in academic institutions, where only 4 percent of the faculties are underrepresented minorities. This program provides opportunities to gain these mentorships,” says Duron Lee, M.D., who completed his M.D. training and is now working on his Ph.D. at Drexel University College of Medicine.

Adds Saadiq El-Amin, M.D., who completed an M.D./Ph.D. program at Drexel, “Without Dr. Laurencin’s guidance and his success, I would have chosen a different path. I grew up in an area where there weren’t many professors or doctors of color to encourage minority students to go into medicine and science, so having Dr. Laurencin around has been very key.”

“When I look at Dr. Laurencin, I see a great role model,” says Paul Gittens, M.D., who just received his M.D. degree at Drexel. “He’s one of the most well-rounded individuals that I know. I think the biggest thing I learned about being a mentor is leading by example. And Dr. Laurencin has definitely demonstrated that for all of us. He’s a great family man, he has a great relationship with his wife and kids, he has an excellent commitment to the people of Philadelphia, as well as being an excellent clinician and researcher.”

Finally, says Dr. Ruby Skinner, also a former fellow in the program and someone Dr. Laurencin mentored back in the early 1990s, and now assistant professor in the department of general surgery at the Northwestern University School of Medicine, “The year I

was in the program was the first year of presentations. Going through the process with Dr. Laurencin was a very valuable experience and a growing experience for me. I think it had a significant effect on my decision to pursue academics.”

But what does it take to be a great mentor? “It takes dedication to the person, to the person’s goals and the ability to listen to that person,” Dr. Laurencin says. “It really takes a great deal of devotion in working with that person, and a commitment to be a part of that person’s life for a long period of time. It’s not a ‘this week’ or a ‘this month’ or a ‘this year’ process. It’s really a lifelong commitment.”

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And what does one get from it? “When you look at life, really one of the most important measures of fulfillment is the lives you positively touch. While my work has great meaning and impact, it is my family and those that I mentor who are extensions of my family that in many ways define who I am and what I am accomplishing.” Dr. Laurencin points out that one of his own mentors, Dr. Henry J. Mankin, who was chief of orthopaedics at Massachusetts General Hospital, once wrote, “The greatest benefit to the teacher is the immortality of his or her contribution. If one is truly a teacher, your students are also your children and your immortality is dependent on what they accomplish, in part at least, as a result of what they learned from you.”

As Dr. Mankin and Dr. Laurencin have proven, from generation to generation, from fellow to fellow, the Fellowship program has depended on what Dr. Gittens calls “the method of each one, teach one.” He says, “Dr. Laurencin taught me so I teach others.” And out of that can come a way to bring more diverse viewpoints into a health care system in need of them.

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