Pre-health:

Building Bridges:
SNMA/MAPS

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There are many institutions and programs in place that serve to advance the rights and opportunities made available to people of color as well as remaining keen on the issues that face this community of individuals. The Student National Medical Association, or SNMA, is one such organization and strives to increase the number of minorities that enter health professions while also actively serving minority and under-served communities by promoting their health and access to care.

SNMA was established in 1964 though a collaborative effort of the National Medical Association, or NMA, and a group of medical students at the historically black institutions of Howard and Meharry Medical Colleges. The students had a vision of a union that would serve as a collective voice and an active representative body both for minorities in medical school as well as those in pursuit of health-related professions. For the next seven years, the organization began to grow and eventually gained recognition as an independent and incorporated entity in 1971. Due to the increase of minority medical students between 1971 and 1975, SNMA was recognized by the government and other representative bodies. In now celebrating its upcoming 40th anniversary in 2004, SNMA has grown to become the nation’s oldest and largest independent organization that focuses on addressing the issues and needs that face minority medical students as well as the general health of people of color. In addition to the medical students who run the organization, SNMA has expanded its scope of interest to better represent the broad spectrum of “pre-health” students interested in pursuing a career as a medical doctor.

Currently, SNMA embodies over five thousand medical and pre-medical students in over 140 medical schools and undergraduate institutions throughout the United States and the Caribbean. The organization also garners additional support from graduated students, health care professionals, political leaders, institutional heads, corporate affiliates, and academics from various colleges and universities. The essence and appeal of SNMA spans these professional boundaries and also transgresses racial confines. Although the Student National Medical Association consists primarily of African American members, its membership also includes individuals from various cultures and ethnicities such as Africans, West Indians, Latinos, Asians, and individuals of European decent.

The perspectives and individual contributions of these diverse members of SNMA collectively add to the effectiveness of the organization in enacting change and providing an arena for discourse concerning many health related issues. Its members also serve to add new dimensions to the ways in which the organization implements its objectives. The goals of SNMA are specific but highly comprehensive. SNMA has prided itself on fostering an compassionate and competent health care professionals that are dedicated to serving minority and indigent communities. These communities most often suffer from a variety of racial and socio-economic health care disparities in comparison to the majority of the population. For example, although African Americans account for only 12% of the U.S. population, they account for half of all new cases of HIV infection in the United States that were reported in 2001 (1). When calculated according to gender statistics, African-American men accounted for 43% of all newly reported HIV cases among men in 2001 while African-American women accounted for an astounding 64% of newly reported cases among women (1). Consequently, the Student National Medical Association has generally endeavored to identify the factors causing these types of health care disparities, disseminate information related to minority issues, educate communities about general health, provide equal access to health care and preventative medicine, and foster levels of communication and advocacy between political actors and under-represented communities.

The strong influence of the Student National Medical Association within the political arena stems from its solid administrative structure. Its national headquarters is located within the National Medical Association Building in Washington, DC, a location that facilitates political advocacy and brings attention to important minority issues. The organization is divided into ten regions. The newly established SNMA Chapter at Dartmouth Medical School is located in Region VII. Other institutions in this region include University of Connecticut, Yale University, Brown University, University of Massachusetts, Boston University, Tufts University, and Harvard University.

Community service is essentially the “heart and soul” of the Student National Medical Association (2). The main objectives of chapters located throughout the country are to implement the various programs and protocols on the national agenda. With a vast array of different community service and outreach protocols, SNMA strives to directly provide health care, or at the very least, educate communities and provide individuals with information to improve the quality of their health. One such protocol, called HIP Corps or HIV Intervention Prevention Corps, was established in response to the alarming statistics of HIV infection within minority populations in 2001. This community service outreach
works to reduce the occurrence of newly diagnosed HIV infection among minority and under-represented youth through a massive campaign to educate youth in targeted areas. The program is currently in operation at fifteen medical schools nation-wide, including Region VII Yale Medical School. HIP Corps is headed by a Site Coordinator who is certified by the American Red Cross to provide Starter Facts Practices, which are informative methods on teaching people how to stop the transmission of HIV by protecting themselves, deal with those who currently live with HIV, and apply the facts about HIV in altering their own behavior that may put them or others at risk for infection (3).

The Healthy People 2010 Health Fairs is another community service protocol in which SNMA members get the opportunity to become better acquainted with their surrounding communities. During the fair, individuals are invited to obtain free screenings for potentially life-altering health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, vision problems, kidney disease, obesity, and cancer. They also can obtain helpful information about mental health, nutrition, neonatal care, STDs, and the dangers of tobacco. The goal of the program is to reduce health disparities facing minority communities by providing health screening and education (2). Other SNMA-sponsored programs like TODER, or Tissue and Organ Donation Education and Recruitment, strives to educate minority communities about the importance of enrolling in tissue and organ donation, especially in the wake of a lack of sufficient organ donors within minority populations. SNMA members are also very active in the Sexual Health Awareness program, which educates teenagers about their bodies and ways in which to improve self-esteem and foster healthy relationships in the overall attempts to lower the incidence of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. It is also very important to educate them about issues concerning child molestation, sexual assault, as well as information about abortions and other available medical options.

SNMA is the umbrella organization for many educational organizations. They reflect the medical association’s additional overall goals to “sponsor programs for minority youth in order to encourage their entrance into the medical profession, raise the level of minority student recruitment, admission and retention in schools training medical professionals, [and] to provide the undergraduate pre-medical student with information pertaining to careers in medicine” (2). In accordance to such objectives, SNMA has established three main Education Pipeline Programs for the implementation of these goals.

The Youth Science Enrichment Program, or YSEP, was instituted as a means of targeting minority students in elementary school in order to expose them to the fields of medicine, science, and technology. An answer to the question of why minorities are most often under-represented in health-related professions, may lie in the lack of visibility of those minority health care professionals to minority youth. Most often, they adopt ambitions of becoming like individuals whom they interact with in their social environment and who are visible to them through television, advertisement, sports, and entertainment. Though YSEP, however, students are encouraged to foster their interests in these subjects from an early age through fun and interactive sessions as well as mentoring programs that provides them with the exposure to later pursue health or science related professions. The expectation is that such investments in the lives of minority youth will cultivate an enduring mindset towards a love for learning and excellence.

Through the Health Professions Recruitment and Exposure Program, or HPREP, minority students primarily in the 10th and 11th grade are educated about opportunities and careers available in the health profession as well as steps they must take in attaining these goals. Students become more aware of these opportunities and benefit from exposure to different health care environments, lectures from health care providers, group discussions, workshops on study skills, tours of various facilities, and especially college entrance counseling.

The final Education Pipeline Program is of particular interest to many undergraduate students here at Dartmouth College. The Minority Association of Pre-Health Students, or MAPS, is a sub-organization of SNMA, which primarily consists of undergraduate minority pre-health students but is inclusive to students of all races and sex. Within the past year, Dartmouth Medical School established its own SNMA chapter, which consequently made Dartmouth College eligible to establish a MAPS Chapter according to the stipulations of SNMA guidelines. The organization is recognized by the Committee on Student Activities and consists of an executive board headed by Omolara Olowoyee, President, David Jiles – Vice President, Anita Johnson – Secretary, Renee Hutchens – Treasurer, and Henry Andoh – Parliamentarian. Through collaboration with its SNMA Chapter sponsor, the MAPS Organization strives to implement many of its own objectives. The overall purpose of this organization is to provide under-represented pre-health students with knowledge, skills and experiences that are both prerequisite to and affiliated with becoming a professional in health care fields. MAPS strives to produce competitive candidates for health-related programs in order to facilitate and increase the matriculation of under-represented minorities into these professions, with a primary emphasis on medical...
fields. These goals are executed by promoting interaction between MAPS members, health professionals, and medical or health students. MAPS students receive mentors who instruct them about admission processes, coach them about entrance examination preparation such as the MCAT, and additionally serve as a source of encouragement through the rigors of the pre-health curriculum. The members of the Minority Association of Pre-health Students at Dartmouth have worked relentlessly for the past year to establish the organization on campus through the support of the Office of Multicultural Affairs located at Dartmouth Medical School headed by Shawn O’Leary. The office was highly instrumental in providing funding for students to attend the SNMA National Conference held in Washington, DC in April 2003. At the conference, Dartmouth undergraduate participants had the opportunity to interact with medical students, graduate students, doctors, health care professions, regional officers, and other fellow pre-health students from all races and cultures. Students also attended various lectures such as those addressing affirmative action in medical school entrance, health care disparities, and public health field in third world countries. A pre-health career fair was also held in which participating members could directly interact with admission officers and recruitment personnel from various health-related institutions.

The Minority Association of Pre-Health Students embodies the strength and unity evident in SNMA that adequately represents the collective goal of entering the health profession, serving underserved communities, and addressing issues surrounding the health of minority communities which are still encroached in racial, socio-economic, and political confines. As a collection of several different community-based service programs, both SNMA and MAPS continues to be a major resource for both to its members, and the under-represented minority population it actively serves. Students interested in joining this organization are encouraged to contact the executive board by emailing MAPS@dartmouth.edu.

REFERENCES

