Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Underrepresented Minority Students at the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine

Rose O. Wadenya, B.D.S., M.S., D.M.D.; Susan Schwartz, M.Ed.; Naty Lopez, Ph.D.; Raymond Fonseca, D.M.D.

Abstract: In 1989, the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine (UPSDM) found there was an urgent need for new programs that would be effective in recruiting highly qualified and talented underrepresented minority students and ensuring their retention. Major efforts focused on leadership, financial support, institutional commitment, and the creation of an inclusive environment. UPSDM also offers an accelerated program leading to combined bachelor's and dental degrees and has agreements with several undergraduate institutions, including Xavier University in Louisiana and Hampton University, to enroll students in this program. UPSDM encourages minority retention through a Peer Mentorship Program, a Minority Mentorship Program, and course offerings that focus on diversity. Over the past thirteen years, these efforts have successfully garnered a fivefold increase in the number of underrepresented minority students at UPSDM.

In 1989, the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine (UPSDM) had only eleven underrepresented minority (URM) students enrolled, and retention was poor. Like most U.S. dental schools, the school was failing in enrolling students from underrepresented minority groups at rates in proportion to their number in the general population.

A systematic analysis of the recruitment and retention programs in place revealed numerous shortcomings. There was an urgent need for new programs that would be effective in recruiting highly qualified and talented minority students and ensuring their retention. With the institution of these programs, the desired increase was achieved. In 2002, total URM enrollment reached fifty-six (Table 1).

Major efforts to ensure successful recruitment and retention of URM students at UPSDM have focused on the areas of leadership, financial support, and institutional commitment to ensure the creation of an inclusive environment—all of which complement each other.

Leadership

Endorsement and active support from the top is crucial. A dean who is committed to a diverse student body fuels the mission and creates an environment where minority students feel empowered.

Assured of a strong commitment from the administration, minority students become more active in the recruitment and retention efforts of the school.
Financial Support

With the high cost of dental education, providing financial support to URM students is critical. Approximately 80 percent of all URM students attending UPSDM receive some form of financial aid.

While most students borrow primarily from federal sources, the dean has introduced a number of scholarships based on scholastic and financial need to assist students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. These scholarships have enabled the school to recruit talented and highly qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds who previously viewed attending the school as beyond their financial reach.

Ten one-half tuition scholarships and additional need-based grants are available each year for entering URM students (Table 2). These students continue to receive scholarships throughout their four-year enrollment at the school (Table 3).

The scholarships are largely responsible for reaching a critical mass of fifty-six URM students (Table 4). This critical mass becomes a recruitment tool that attracts additional quality students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of these students bring strong leadership abilities and a mission to increase diversity in the school. This in turn creates an environment that is academically and socially supportive.

The critical mass also provides the students with a strong voice that enables them to play an integral role in the school’s recruitment and retention initiatives. These initiatives and the support of fellow classmates contribute significantly to the school’s 100 percent URM retention rate.

Institutional Commitment

The offices of Admissions, Student Affairs, Minority Affairs, International Relations, and Academic Affairs work together to create an environment that is inclusive of different cultures. This is achieved through the Bio-Dental Consortium Program for high school seniors, peer mentorship, minority mentorship by alumni, and integration of cultural diversity in the curriculum.

Bio-Dental Consortium Programs for High School Seniors. UPSDM offers an opportunity for high school seniors with strong science backgrounds to apply to an accelerated program. Students apply to the program through the participating undergraduate school, but must meet UPSDM admissions and prematriculation requirements in order to enter the D.M.D. program. Students must maintain a minimum undergraduate GPA of 3.2 and score a minimum of 16 in all areas of DAT. This program enables qualified students to earn both the B.S. and D.M.D. degrees in seven years.

Building on its commitment to recruit more underrepresented minority students, UPSDM signed an agreement with two historically black institutions, Xavier University in Louisiana and Hampton University, to join the Bio-Dental Program. This brings the total number of institutions participating in the program to seven (Table 5). Participants who successfully complete the academic requirements can matriculate to UPSDM after the third year of their undergraduate education and receive their baccalaureate degrees after successfully completing the first year of the dental curriculum.

UPSDM is working with schools in the Bio-Dental Program to identify strong candidates from their student bodies who demonstrate interest and academic potential for a career in dentistry to be nominated for a special prematriculation/summer enrichment program. These students will then be considered for enrollment in either the seven-year Bio-Dental Program or the school’s regular admission program. This initiative will enable UPSDM to increase the number of minority students who will

---

Table 2. Dean’s minority scholarships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>2002-03 Academic Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-half tuition scholarships</td>
<td>$614,389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need-based grant awards</td>
<td>$ 97,389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total scholarship awards</td>
<td>$711,778</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Minority scholarships by academic year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class of</th>
<th>Half-tuition scholarships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Composition of URM students, 2003-06

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class of</th>
<th>Class of</th>
<th>Class of</th>
<th>Class of</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
enter the school through the Bio-Dental Consortium Programs.

**Peer Mentorship Program.** UPSDM students work with the offices of Admissions, Minority Affairs, and Student Affairs to develop programs to increase enrollment of URM students. Students take an active role by participating in college career fairs, communicating with pre-health career advisors, attending and making presentations at national minority organization meetings, hosting minority applicants when they come to campus for interviews, and advising prospective students before and after matriculating at the University of Pennsylvania. When freshmen matriculate at UPSDM, minority upperclassmen assume a big brother/sister role and guide the new students through the transition phase. This relationship continues throughout the student’s enrollment at the dental school.

**Minority Mentorship Program.** The value of social and academic support cannot be overlooked. Sources of support include UPSDM minority faculty and a network of UPSDM alumni. Through the initiatives of the school’s minority students, together with the offices of Minority Affairs and Student Affairs, the relationship with minority alumni was recently formalized into a Minority Mentorship Program. This program was developed to create an opportunity for URM students at UPSDM to network with minority alumni volunteers. Enrolled minority students are paired with a mentor according to students’ preference of gender, specialty, and geographic location. Alumni act as mentors and role models, provide academic and clinical support, and invite students to spend time in their practice. They also provide guidance during the students’ application to postdoctoral study and transition to practice. Students realize the genuine commitment on the part of the minority alumni and value this opportunity and potential experience.

**Course Offerings.** Diversity of the student body alone is not enough to sensitize students to important cultural differences among fellow students and the patient population at large. UPSDM incorporates discussion of diversity into the curriculum throughout the four years of dental school. The offices of Academic Affairs and International Programs and the Department of Community Oral Health work collaboratively to develop opportunities for the student body to gain a better understanding of diversity and how to practice effectively in such an environment.

During orientation, new students meet with the directors of the International Programs Office and Minority Affairs. The introduction to basic clinical dentistry course includes lectures on understanding and living in a diverse environment. An eight-hour elective course, Cross Cultural Communication, also helps students understand cultural differences and how to communicate more effectively with colleagues and patients across ethnic boundaries.

Additionally, clinical experiences in the PENNSmiles van and other community partnerships provide valuable settings for expanding students’ clinical and community-based education, while at the same time promoting visibility. Through a grant from the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), PENNSmiles provides oral health education, screening, and treatment to minority children in West Philadelphia neighborhoods utilizing a fully equipped dental van. The objective of the program is to provide access to care to those children in the community, especially ethnic minorities, who otherwise would not be able to receive care. The director of Minority Affairs is an active participant in this program, providing care and serving as a positive role model.

**Conclusion**

Financial support is essential to achieve a critical mass of URM students. This critical mass, achieved over time, is a highly effective tool for both recruitment and retention of URM students. The leadership of a committed dean and supportive faculty and students, combined with institutional initiatives, create a positive and welcoming environment and ensure a diverse and dynamic student body. Over the past thirteen years these efforts have successfully garnered a fivefold increase in the number of URM students at UPSDM. Maintaining the vision that created this program is critical to sustain and enhance the depth of the school’s URM enrollment.