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CDC Internships Give Hispanic Students a Healthy Dose of Experience

**HSHPS Program Augments Classroom Learning
With Real-Life Lessons in Public Health**

WASHINGTON, DC – As long as he can remember, 23-year-old Robert Martinez has always wanted to be a doctor – a career choice that surprised his family in El Paso, TX, many of whom opted to head into more familiar terrain: the military.

Today Martinez is well on his way to realizing his lifelong dream. Last year he graduated with a B.S. in biochemistry from the University of Denver and now is studying at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in Lubbock to be an orthopedic surgeon. For him, this is the summer of “making a journey to mecca.”

Mecca is what he calls an emerging internship program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The Hispanic-Serving Health Professions Schools Inc. sponsored the innovative program, which runs this summer. “This is an awesome opportunity for me,” Martinez said. “If you were a baseball player, it would be like playing for the Yankees.”

The Hispanic-Serving Health Professions Schools (HSHPS) program allows students to conduct public health research and get a firsthand understanding of the CDC. The CDC’s mission includes protecting the health and safety of people in the U.S., providing and promoting health information and education, and developing and applying disease prevention and control.

The internship program started three years ago when HSHPS Executive Director Yanira Cruz and other officials there sought to provide students a chance to get real-life experience at the CDC. “We know the CDC is the leading agency that deals with public health in the world,” Cruz said. “By working with the CDC, our students are being exposed to a major player in public health and building a commitment to public service.”

The HSHPS works to improve the health of Hispanics through academic and student development, research initiatives and training and other programs. Since 1996, the nonprofit organization has been helping students to develop skills related to prevention research, surveillance, public health policy and program development. Through the internship program, medical and public health students gain knowledge about the federal government and its career opportunities.

“By increasing the number of Hispanics in medicine and public health, we can improve the overall health of all Americans,” Cruz said. “We’re investing in the future health of our country one student at a time.”

This summer, 22 students are benefiting from the HSHPS program – up from 5 in 2003 and 3 in 2002. “As we grow every year, we want to open more doors for more Latinos to develop skills in the areas of research and public health in general,” Cruz said.

Intern Maria Dominguez of Miami welcomes those opportunities. The CDC internship is helping Dominguez, 25, supplement her education at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, NY, which is known for its Hispanic Center of Excellence.

“In line with our own efforts, programs such as the CDC internship offer students valuable experiences where they can gain a firsthand perspective of how public health concerns are identified and addressed,” said Dr. Dominick P. Purpura, the Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz dean of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

Helping people is a subject dear to Dominguez, who became interested in being a doctor when she watched her stepfather die of lung cancer and her aunt struggle with diabetes, a debilitating disease. “It was very frustrating to watch these people suffer, and the frustration got me to thinking, what can I do so I could not feel so helpless?” said Dominguez, who is focusing on cardiology and clinical research. “The more I learned about their diseases, the more I could empower myself with that knowledge.”

Not all interns plan on becoming doctors but all are devoted to public health. Intern David Garcia of Houston, TX, is focusing on medicine, research and preventive health care. At the CDC, he is learning more about setting up an infrastructure to help educate Latinos on prevention in the areas of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, which infects a disproportionate number of Latinos.

“I’m not interested in being a medical doctor,” said Garcia, 30. “I want to concentrate more on prevention and curing people. I think there are not enough Latinos in the medical field and certainly not enough of us there to build a proper infrastructure for Latinos.”

HSHPS’ membership comprises 22 U.S. medical schools and Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, the University of North Texas at Fort Worth School of Public Health and Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. The internships also benefit HSHPS member schools and their communities.

“This (internship) program is helpful in increasing students’ – such as Robert Martinez’s – knowledge of public health and research to topics related to Hispanic related issues,” said Dr. Richard V. Homan, dean of the Texas Tech School of Medicine. “Over time it is our hope and goal to recruit these students as faculty to further develop their interests and research capabilities to improve the health of all Texans. Given the demographics of Texas, which has an under representation of Hispanics in the health profession workforce, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center has committed to increasing the numbers of Hispanics in the state and by doing this will improve the care in this large and growing community.”

Martinez is ready to be a part of that future. “I think with the Hispanic population increasing, Hispanic health is something we have to look at. The HSHPS internship program at the CDC is one of the effective ways to do that.”