

# UNMC leaders express concern over affirmative action ban

by Jo Giles



Photo: Jim Colburn

When Myrna Newland, M.D., was a medical student, she was one of five women in the College of Medicine at UNMC. That was 1964.

“At that time, few women thought to enter medical school,” Dr. Newland said. “Those of us who did focused on getting high grades.” Fast forward 40 years.

As director of UNMC’s Equity Office, Dr. Newland has seen the number of women increase in medical school as a result of affirmative action programs.

A report from the American Association of Medical Colleges shows a steady increase in the number of women medical students. In 1966, graduating medical students who were women totaled 6.9 percent nationwide. By 2007, women were 49.1 percent of the medical school graduating classes nationwide.

However, a measure currently introduced in the Nebraska legislature would remove the very programs that encouraged qualified women and minorities to seek higher education and other employment options.

State Sen. Mark Christensen recently introduced Legislative Resolution 233CA that would prohibit schools and other publicly funded entities from using gender, race, national origin and other factors in a variety of publicly-sponsored programs and activities, including initiatives that encourage students to pursue fields where they have traditionally been underrepresented, such as minorities in medicine and men in nursing.

Chancellor Harold M. Maurer, M.D., expressed concern that the legislation could impact the university’s ability to recruit top talent.

“We continuously seek to bring the best and the brightest to Nebraska to contribute to our world-class image,” Dr. Maurer said. “This amendment could portray our state as unwelcoming of people with diverse thoughts, experiences and cultures.”

“The troubling part of the legislation is that the language is misleading,” said Bob Bartee, UNMC vice chancellor for external affairs. “It appears to be civil rights friendly but it has a devastating hidden impact.”

Rubens Pamies, M.D., vice chancellor for academic affairs, said if passed the effects proposed by the legislation will be far-reaching and disastrous.

“We are training health professionals to work in a global environment,” Dr. Pamies said. “It is critical to the future of health care that all of our students learn from a diverse faculty and from other students with varied perspectives.”

These students from UNMC’s 2007 Summer Medical and Dental Education Program (SMDEP) may be the last to participate in a nationwide program if LR 233CA passes. UNMC is one of 12 SMDEP sites across the United States that provide enhanced educational experiences for college freshmen and sophomores.

UNMC scholarships would be affected as several awards are based on donor criteria including preference for males, females and minorities.

“Scholarships and other affirmative action programs have made a significant difference in the UNMC community,” Dr. Newland said. “By opening the doors of opportunity to qualified students and staff, it has changed the lives of women, minorities and their families.”

If the legislative initiative is adopted, it could affect accreditation.

The Gender Equity committee, and annual reports on the number of women, minority students and faculty, began with a North Central Accreditation Report in 1987.

The Board of Regents adopted gender equity goals and strategies in the early 1990s to increase the number of women and minorities on campus.

While women are now graduating from medical school at higher rates, they still lag behind their male counterparts in reaching the level of full professor. At UNMC, 82 percent of full professors are men; only 18 percent are women. The numbers are even smaller for members of underrepresented minority groups.

“What the civil rights legislation of the 1960s did was allow anyone with the qualifications to get an equal chance of being accepted,” Dr. Newland said. “It’s made all the difference.” ☺

## The devil’s in the details

UNMC Vice Chancellor for External Affairs Bob Bartee said the wording of LR 233CA is misleading and could leave voters believing the initiative is civil-rights friendly.

In actuality, Bartee said, the initiative, which is opposed by UNMC’s faculty and student senates, could be extremely detrimental to diversity efforts at UNMC and throughout Nebraska.

LR 233CA reads, “The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.”

**LR 233CA is scheduled to be heard by the Judiciary Committee on Feb. 27. For updated information on this legislation, go to [www.nebraskalegislature.gov](http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov).**