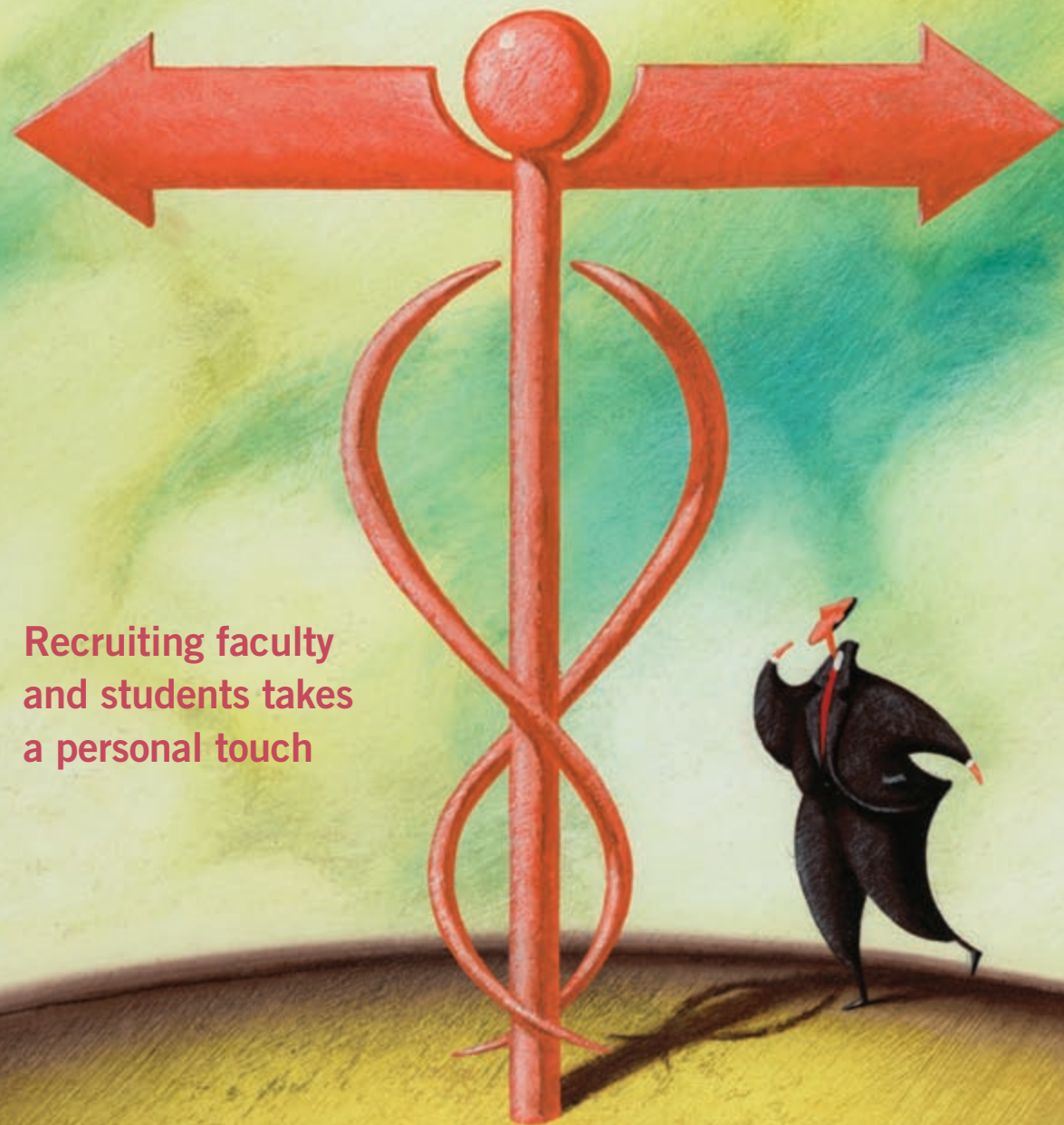


keeping the best and brightest

by Karen Burbach and Tom O'Connor



Recruiting faculty and students takes a personal touch

After graduating from UNMC, Jill Poole, M.D., left Nebraska to do her internal medicine residency at one of the country's most prestigious medical schools – Washington University School of Medicine and Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis.

The inquisitive hazel-eyed blonde from Grand Island, Neb., the first Nebraskan to be named to USA Today's All-USA College Academic Team, had known she wanted to be a doctor since fourth-grade.

She just didn't know where.

Following her residency, she elected to do a fellowship in allergy, asthma and immunology at perhaps the leading program in the country in treating respiratory problems, the National Jewish Medical and Research Center/University of Colorado Health Sciences Center at Denver. At the end of her two-year fellowship, she decided to spend an additional year doing research.

But, when it came time to weigh job offers, she chose her alma mater, UNMC. It was the personal touch that made the difference.

Keeping the best and brightest students in Nebraska is no small feat. It's equally difficult when it comes to recruiting new faculty, yet UNMC continues to boast success thanks to its unique programs, outstanding reputation among academicians, researchers and clinicians, and communication with students that begins as early as fourth grade.

Admission to the health care professions at UNMC is highly competitive, said Chancellor Harold M. Maurer, M.D. "Approximately 85 percent of our students are Nebraskans as we aim to provide the health professions workforce for Nebraska," he said. "Recruiting the best and brightest students, faculty and staff assure Nebraskans a talented pool from which to draw."

James O'Dell, M.D., likes the personal approach.

"One of the ways we can and should prevent the ultimate brain drain – people leaving Nebraska and never coming back

– is by keeping in touch with them," said Dr. O'Dell, '77, professor of internal medicine, chief of the section of rheumatology and immunology and internal medicine residency program director.

"Working directly with students, coupled with our keen interest in their careers and close lifelong ties with them after graduation, provide a unique personal experience that helps attract and retain them in the state," Dr. Maurer said. "The personal touch, plus the vision for world-class status of an upward-bound medical center, is apparent during their recruiting visit – and convincing."

Hardly a day goes by that Mary McNamee, Ph.D., isn't writing notes, sending e-mails or visiting with students – past, present or potential enrollees. "Connections are what relationships are all about," said Dr. McNamee, assistant vice chancellor for academic affairs and director of the Office of Student Equity and Multicultural Affairs.

Those connections begin through a variety of UNMC programs, including rural outreach, campus tours and the Youth Learning Center, where more than 300 fourth- through 12th-graders visit each month to learn about the health sciences. The center's Community Academy Exploration Program exposes middle and high school students to careers in the health sciences and has sparked health careers for many.



“I would not have wanted to come back if I hadn’t met the extraordinary physicians and had such a positive experience here.” Jill Poole, M.D.

people they met here and the dedication they saw. They’ll speak well for us and get a lot more people familiar with Nebraska and UNMC. You can’t buy that kind of advertising.”

Some even return as faculty.

From the beginning, Dr. Poole was a star recruit. She compiled a perfect 4.0 grade point average at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, published a research paper in the *Journal of Parasitology*, a rare feat as an undergraduate, and excelled in medical school at UNMC.

UNMC faculty took notice.

“Jill is the whole package,” Dr. O’Dell said. “She’s good with people, very bright and a great scientist and clinician. It was obvious she was going places. We had to find a niche for her at UNMC.”

To make that happen, Dr. O’Dell would page or call Dr. Poole every six months during her residency to see how she was doing and make sure she knew that a faculty position would be waiting for her at UNMC when she made her ultimate career decision.

It’s a strategy he learned first-hand from one of UNMC’s legendary physicians – Michael Sorrell, M.D., ’59, professor of internal medicine and the individual for whom the new UNMC education building is named.

Years ago, before Dr. O’Dell finished his residency training at UNMC and went to the University of Colorado, Dr. Sorrell took the UNMC graduate to dinner. He wished Dr. O’Dell well and then checked in periodically during his fellowship.

“It made an impression on me,” Dr. O’Dell said. “I’ve tried to do the same thing with a number of students and residents.”

Dr. Poole, too, was impressed.

“That personal connection played a huge role in my decision,” Dr. Poole said. “There’s a lot of trust that goes on when you take a new job, so having known many of the physicians and researchers here and knowing they were people who would keep their word gave me a lot of security when I was exploring my research options.”

Her education at UNMC also played a pivotal role, she said. “I would not have wanted to come back if I hadn’t met the extraordinary physicians and had such a positive experience here.”

Jill Poole, M.D., reflects on her 1994 selection to USA Today’s All-USA College Academic Team, which included a trip to the USA Today headquarters in Alexandria, Va. Dr. Poole’s memorable application prompted USA Today officials to ask: “Who’s the Worm Woman?” The nickname stemmed from her honors thesis on the unique regeneration capabilities of earthworms.

UNMC also connects with bright young minds through its summer research opportunities, high school and college visits, annual scholars day and fall luncheons that reunite high school principals with their former students who are newly admitted UNMC students.

“I’m the aunt to a whole lot of students here and their success is important to me personally,” Dr. McNamee said. “We develop strong relationships with students and the people we want to attract to our program. Everyone is getting enough junk mail, but it’s about being sincere and personal – sending a note saying ‘I was thinking of you and wondering how was last semester?’ or ‘I’m visiting your campus next month and hope to see you.’”

Through each program and contact, friendships are formed, benefiting UNMC. “Even if they choose to go elsewhere, they’re still going to have fond memories of Nebraska and speak highly of our programs,” Dr. McNamee said. “Many may say the turning point for them was the summer they spent here in the lab, the

As Dr. Poole finished her third year in Denver, she decided she wanted to be an allergist. Even though this meant she wouldn’t be joining Dr. O’Dell’s team of rheumatologists, he wasn’t about to give up in recruiting Dr. Poole.

He turned to Joe Sisson, M.D., professor of internal medicine and chief of the section of pulmonary, critical care, sleep and allergy medicine, who assured Dr. Poole they could find a faculty position for her in his section, even though it would mean creating a position.

Dr. Poole was impressed that two of UNMC’s leading research physicians were working so hard to entice her back to Nebraska. In spite of a job offer from the University of Colorado, she elected to take the faculty position at UNMC, where she had earned her medical degree in 1999.

It’s proven to be a worthwhile investment. Dr. Poole already has earned a five-year young investigator’s grant for \$780,000 from the National Institutes of Health. She’s studying organic dust and how it affects responses by the immune system, and her research has direct applications to the respiratory problems encountered by Nebraska farmers.

Tina Flores, M.D., also felt her home state pulling her back.

Despite deep roots in Nebraska, Dr. Flores loved San Antonio and the cultural activities she found while doing her family medicine residency in the eighth largest city in the United States.

The Omaha native attended North High School, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the UNMC College of Medicine, before moving to San Antonio, where she became fluent among its Spanish-speaking patient population.

Although physicians tend to practice relatively close to where they complete their residency, Dr. Flores chose to practice 940 miles away in Omaha, where she has been recognized for her work to improve the health and well being of Latinos.

“It was a tough decision to leave,” said Dr. Flores, an assistant professor of family medicine in the UNMC College of Medicine, whose conversations with patients shift seamlessly between English and Spanish. “I had established a practice there and had a feel for the medical community.”

In the end, family considerations, including a then 1-year-old daughter and family support system in Omaha, pulled the 2001 UNMC alumnus and her husband back to Nebraska.

¿Habla usted español? Tina Flores, M.D., does. The Omaha native is one of few UNMC family medicine physicians fluent in Spanish. Dr. Flores honed her Spanish speaking skills during her residency in San Antonio and now serves Omaha’s Latino population.

She also credits regular e-mails, calls and support from Paul Paulman, M.D., ’77, professor of family medicine, who encouraged her to join UNMC. As a result, she signed a contract with UNMC six months before graduating from her residency program. “It’s flattering to have someone back home recruiting you and recruiting you early in your residency,” she said.

UNMC’s growing slate of national rankings – from U.S. News and World Report to 100 percent pass rates on licensure and certification exams – also attracts top-notch students from across the state and beyond.

Tyler Smith is one of them. The Omaha native did his undergraduate work at Texas Christian University and then applied to three dental schools, including two in Texas.

Smith had the option of attending any one of them, but chose UNMC’s College of Dentistry, where entering students have had the highest grade point average of any dental school in the nation 11 of the past 15 years, said John Reinhardt, D.D.S., dean of the College of Dentistry in Lincoln. *(Continued on page 25)*

