In Memoriam

Dr. Brenda Armstrong died on October 7, 2018. Dr. Brenda Armstrong was the Senior Associate Dean for Student Diversity, Recruitment, and Retention, and was a Professor of Pediatric Cardiology at Duke Medicine. Dr. Armstrong served over 20 years as Associate Dean of Medical Student Admissions at Duke Medicine. In her illustrious career, Dr. Armstrong established a legacy of remarkable excellence. Her steadfast commitment to inspire excellence, improve African-American health, and increase the diversity of the American physician workforce has led to unquantifiable impact.

Dr. Armstrong was a pioneer throughout her life and career who fulfilled the command of her favorite quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” She was the only African-American woman in her medical school class at St. Louis University, and the second African-American woman physician to become board certified in pediatric cardiology in the United States. There is no doubt that she has blazed a trail for others with her accomplishments in medical admissions and education, without which the current progress towards of equity and diversity in medical education could not have been met.

The daughter of the late Dr. Wiley T. Armstrong, a past President of the National Medical Association, Dr. Armstrong came from a tradition of exemplary leadership and service. Enduring an early life in the segregated south, Dr. Armstrong matriculated to Duke’s Women’s College in 1966 as part of only the third class to matriculate African-American students. Leading the Allen Building Takeover in 1969 as a stand for equity for African-American students, Dr. Armstrong demonstrated that she was destined to lead change from within. In all of the years since, she has remained dedicated to the ideals of social justice. It was often through her very honest and sobering critiques, that she was successful in leading efforts to improving inclusiveness and diversity. She understood that the path to greatness could only be made by expanding access to education for a broader cross-section of students. In her past efforts as the Dean of Admissions and more recently as Senior Associate Dean at Duke, she placed a heavy emphasis on improving diversity. As a pediatric cardiologist, she initiated efforts to improve health of young children. For example, one outcome of her efforts, the Durham Striders Track Club - a program that aims to help mostly young African-American students learn self-discipline in diet and exercise- was created to raise awareness of the need for heart-healthy lifestyles.

Guided by a deep sense of great pride in Durham, Dr. Armstrong was a local and national leader whose impact extended well beyond the walls of Duke. Her efforts have redefined the role of the admissions dean, as one who was not only essential to selecting a qualified student body, but one who also prepared and recruited candidates for medicine. Having served six years as faculty in residence in the Duke dormitory, she understood the plight of students and the support they need to succeed. Indeed, her pioneering pipeline programs for STEM education produced the next generation of underrepresented and disadvantaged candidates to go into the profession of medicine.

Dr. Armstrong was arguably one of the most influential contributors to expanding the diversity of the American physician workforce. Through her tireless pipeline enhancement work, the proportion of underrepresented minorities in medicine (UIM) has increased substantially and the inclusion of a broad range of marginalized populations to medicine. Indeed, the entering UIM medical students at Duke Medical School has increased to approximately 25-30% in recent years. In 2017, Dr. Armstrong was inducted into the Hall of Heroes by the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the SNMA’s most prestigious recognition,
honoring physicians, administrators, and others who champion the cause for a diverse physician workforce. As a testament of her impact on education, Dr. Armstrong was awarded numerous teaching awards during her time at Duke, including the Golden Apple Teaching Awards, the S. L Katz Pediatrics Outstanding Faculty and Teaching Award, and the Duke University Distinguished Faculty Award. In August 2018, she received the National Medical Association Council on Concerns of Women Physician’s 2018 Woman of Medicine Award.

Dr. Armstrong was widely respected by her peers and inspired many to follow in her shadow. While her physical stature was diminutive, her tenacity, heart and impact were gargantuan. We, the undersigned Deans of Admissions of US Medical Schools are proud to have served with her and are deeply saddened by the loss of Dr. Armstrong.

Sorrowfully submitted,

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