

BUILDING THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY BY INTRODUCING SCIENCE TO THE UNDERSERVED

By AMP Staff

Dr. Antiño Allen's path to becoming a world class physician, scientist and researcher at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences was anything but conventional. When he was in college, a mentor recommended that he shift his focus to biology, a suggestion that has provided Allen with a lifetime of greater purpose.

After graduating cum laude from Jackson State University and earning his master's and doctorate degrees at Indiana

University, Allen served tours of duty with the U.S. Army between 2004 and 2010. He would draw on that real-life experience as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California at San Francisco.

It was his military experience that opened Allen's eyes to the value of diversity. "The Army brings people together from all kinds of backgrounds," he said. "Not only did I learn how to work with a diverse group of people, I came to understand the value of how a variety of perspectives can help solve problems."

An Arkansas Research Alliance (ARA) Academy member, Allen's research focuses on the effects of radiation on brain function, specifically on normal tissue response, cognitive impairment and neurogenesis. But his passion is building a research and science community comprised of talented people who do not always receive opportunities to develop their interest in innovation and discovery.

Allen leads the Summer Research Institute (SRI), a program administered by the UAMS Division for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion that provides practical laboratory and science experience to underserved high school juniors, seniors and college students who are interested in pursuing careers in research and health care. While SRI gives young scientists valuable experience in the laboratory, the program curriculum extends well beyond microscopes and petri dishes.

"Science is so much more than what happens in the lab," Allen said. "We teach you how to write an abstract. How to create a poster. How to give a talk. The essential skills needed to become scientists."



Dr. Antiño Allen

Allen noted that while these skills are useful for a career in science, they are also critical to succeeding in business, which is why it is important for students to have mentors from a variety of positions and perspectives.

Mentors participating in SRI are UAMS faculty members spanning a variety of departments, from cancer biology and nursing to public health, pharmaceuticals and bioinformatics. Allen underscores how important it is to show SRI stu-

dents the rich diversity of career opportunities in science.

"I love working in the lab. It puts a smile on my face," he said. "But the lab isn't for everyone. There are so many career fields in Arkansas that require a background in science, and a key aspect of SRI is to expose young people to those opportunities."

Through SRI, Allen, whose research is recognized with numerous awards and grants, is helping to build a stronger science community in Arkansas and populating that community with Arkansans who do not always have the clearest path to a science degree or training.

"Think how difficult it is for a first-generation college student to pursue a post doctorate without resources, without mentorship," Allen said, recalling the mentor who directed him to biology so many years ago. "There are many science careers in Arkansas. We just want to make sure that everyone has the chance to seize those opportunities."

As the name implies, the Summer Research Institute is made available to students every summer. Online applications open in November. Each student receives a stipend, and the program starts in May and concludes in August. 

Discovery Economics is a monthly feature highlighting the work of the Arkansas Research Alliance (ARA) Academy of Scholars and Fellows, a community of strategic research leaders who strive to maximize the value of discovery and progress in the state. ARA recruits, retains and focuses strategic research leaders to enhance the state's competitiveness in the knowledge economy and the production of job-creating discoveries and innovation. Learn more at ARAlliance.org.