

## Guest Editorial

# On Diversity in Optometry, Progress, but More Work to Be Done

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This themed edition of *Optometric Education* focuses on diversity, cultural competence and cultural humility. A diverse and inclusive optometric environment produces many organizational and healthcare benefits. Diversity is associated with improved performance, innovation, creativity, access to care, patient satisfaction, patient health outcomes, student persistence and positive student outcomes.<sup>1-3</sup>



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### Ongoing ASCO Initiatives

Since the previous similarly themed edition was published in fall 2017, the field of optometry has continued to work to increase diversity. As optometric educators, we are in a unique position to influence the trajectory of diversity in the optometric profession. We have the ability to recruit students and faculty members who are more representative of the U.S. population.

One of the top priorities in ASCO's strategic plan is to increase the quantity, quality and diversity of the optometry school applicant pool through initiatives such as the *Optometry Gives Me Life* public awareness campaign. Additionally, the ASCO Diversity and Cultural Competency Committee has hosted multiple town halls and has partnered with organizations such as the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) and the National Optometric Association to further educate the optometry community about diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, discuss challenges facing optometry, and provide tools for navigating the changing profession. A pilot program was also launched in the 2020-2021 academic year to promote careers in academia to Black optometry residents. This program will be expanded to include other minority racial and ethnic groups in the 2022-2023 academic year.

### Where We Stand

With ongoing effort, change has begun. Since the 2017-2018 academic year, the percentage of full-time Black or African American optometry students in ASCO member schools and colleges has increased from 2.7% to 4.0%.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of Hispanic or Latino optometry students has increased from 6.4% to 7.8%. The percentage of Native American and Alaska Native optometry students has increased from 0.5% to 0.6%. The percentage of Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander optometry students has remained constant at 0.2%. During the same period, the percentage of White and Asian optometry students has decreased from 52.2% to 50.0% and from 30.7% to 29.9%, respectively. The percentage of racial and ethnic minority optometric educators at ASCO member schools and colleges is also slowly increasing.<sup>5</sup> In the past year, the percentage of full-time Black or African American faculty has increased from 3.6% to 3.8%. The percentage of Hispanic or Latino faculty has increased from 5.7% to 5.8%, and the percentage of Asian faculty has increased from 19.7% to 20.6%.

Unlike the incremental changes in the racial and ethnic composition of optometry schools, a large gender

shift has occurred in the optometric profession. According to the American Optometric Association (AOA) Survey of Optometric Practice, from 2009 to 2016 the percentage of female optometrists increased from 29% to 43%.<sup>6</sup> Data collected by Women in Optometry in January 2021 showed that 45.1% of practicing optometrists in the United States, Guam and Puerto Rico are women.<sup>7</sup> Optometric leadership is finally mirroring the change in the proportion of male and female optometrists: 39% of the deans of the schools and colleges of optometry in the United States are female; 45% of the AOA Board of Trustees members are female; and 50% of the Board of Directors for the AAO are female.

## Where We Need to Go

As the racial and ethnic demographics in the field of optometry continue to shift, the leadership roles will eventually catch up. I was recently named dean of the University of Missouri-St. Louis College of Optometry, effective Sept. 1, 2022. I am excited to lead the college in this capacity. However, I am astounded that it is 2022, and I will be the first Black female to serve as dean at a U.S. school or college of optometry. Why did it take this long for our profession to meet this milestone? For optometric leadership to reflect the totality of our profession, we must be intentional about recruiting racial and ethnic minority optometry students and grooming them to become optometric educators. Only then will all of our students see representation in optometric education.

Although this editorial focuses on racial, ethnic and gender diversity, the optometric profession should be prepared to embrace many other facets of diversity including gender identity, sexual orientation and religious beliefs. The intersection of an individual's dimensions of diversity is what makes each unique. When we as a profession are willing to embrace and accept our students and colleagues as their authentic selves, we will be able to cultivate a true environment of inclusion and belonging.

## References

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Dr. Elder, an Associate Editor with *Optometric Education*, will assume the role of Dean of the University of Missouri-St. Louis College of Optometry On Sept. 1, 2022. Dr. Elder was previously an Associate Professor, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and Director of the Externship Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry.