ASCO News

The Benefits of International Educational Collaboration in Optometry – An overview of the discussion at the 2022 Annual ASCO International Educators in Optometry's SIG meeting

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In November 2022, the ASCO International Optometric Educator's SIG cohosted an annual meeting in San Diego with VOSH/International. Besides ASCO institutions, VOSH/International also invited faculty advisers from their chapters in Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) and the African continent. This diverse cohort allowed for a very rich discussion on the benefits of fostering more international collaborations among optometry educational institutions. An overview of the discussion and next steps from this meeting is shared in this report.

ASCO promotes the worldwide advancement of optometric education including professional degree programs, dissemination of academic materials, and continuing education through our International Optometric Education (IOE) Committee and International Optometric Educators Special Interest Group (SIG)[1]. The IOE SIG meets annually to maintain a continuum of ongoing programmatic activity and projects to support the development and advancement of optometry and its academic and clinical programs worldwide. The SIG members are faculties who manage or teach international optometric programs in their respective ASCO institutions.

In November 2022, the IOE SIG cohosted an annual meeting in San Diego with VOSH/International as many faculty working in ASCO institutions were also faculty advisers of the student VOSH chapters (SVOSH) within those schools. Besides ASCO institutions, VOSH/International also invited faculty advisers from their chapters in LAC and the African continent. This diverse cohort allowed for a very rich discussion on how to foster more international collaborations among optometry educational institutions.

In the past decades, global health has seen a paradigm shift of emphasizing equal South-North partnerships rather than unilateral "aid" being delivered from one country to another.[2,3] To be in line with this standard, the discussion at this SIG meeting focused on how international collaboration could be a win-win situation for all parties involved. The goal is to assess the potential benefits for each institution engaging in such collaboration by answering three main questions:

1. What are the potential incentives for schools to want to collaborate internationally?
2. What can each institution in the partnership contribute?
3. What do ASCO and VOSH/International each bring to the table?



Table 1. Summary of break-out group discussions. Click to enlarge

We divided the participants into three groups to tackle different aspects of educational collaboration, namely student collaboration, faculty collaboration and advancement and research collaboration. The groups were formed so that each one would have a mix of faculty coming from the global north and global south to allow for different perspectives. The outcome of the discussion is summarized in **Table 1**.

By sharing the result of the discussion, we wanted to bring to light the advantages for ASCO institutions to develop new or strengthen current international collaborations. According to the 2022 ASCO's "International Optometric Education Survey Report", 13 out of 25 schools who responded indicated they have a written agreement with an institution outside of the US or Canada.[4] In the same survey, schools were asked if faculty had expressed interest in international collaborations, and 18 schools answered yes. Those results suggest there is more interest by faculty than actual programs.

We hope this list of advantages can be talking points for faculty and administrators who would like to advocate for international partnership. Any faculty who has an interest in international programs are welcomed to join the ASCO OIE SIG and get in touch with the current chair, Dr. John Nishimoto. The SIG also developed a questionnaire for schools outside the US and Canada that would like to collaborate with ASCO institutions to promote more such exchanges. We hope our efforts can lead to elevating the profession of optometry worldwide.

The meeting also reinforced the importance of building synergies around agendas of common interest. The meeting concluded by establishing a working group made up of ASCO SIG IOE and VOSH/International members who have continued working on agreed actions emerging from the meeting and reported initial outcomes at the 2023 ASCO SIG IOE meeting. The partnership between ASCO-SIG-IOE and VOSH/International continues to evolve under the leadership of Dr. John Nishimoto.

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