



July 21, 2020

**Via Email**  
**nmercho@sunyopt.edu**

Dear Drs. Mohammed, Mercho, Creadore, and accompanying signatories,

Thank you for your thoughtful and action-oriented letter dated July 8, 2020, to the ASCO Executive Committee and ASCO Board. Your time and dedication to these long standing and important issues are greatly appreciated. Please be assured that as President of ASCO I share your concerns, and know that the current ASCO Board of Directors is anxious to do all that we can to be change makers with respect to diversity in our schools and colleges, and ultimately within our profession. We are focused on the issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and cultural competency, and how they relate to future colleagues of African American descent.

We agree with you regarding the ASCO website. ASCO's Diversity and Cultural Competency Committee (DCCC) and ASCO staff members have been working to make immediate changes. More changes will appear. Clearly, the ASCO website has not promoted the many initiatives, programs and scholarships offered by its member institutions in their attempts to improve diversity, nor does the page on Diversity and Inclusion promote the major national initiatives that ASCO has launched over the last several years, in particular the *Optometry Gives Me Life* campaign.

Thank you for your "list of actionable recommendations." I will discuss each in turn.

### **1. Revitalize or create a Diversity and Inclusion Department within ASCO.**

ASCO has a dynamic and active standing committee on Diversity and Cultural Competency. The volunteer members meet regularly, currently weekly, and are working tirelessly to provide guidance to the Board of Directors and to me as ASCO's most recent President. The DCCC includes a liaison to the National Optometric Association, and consists of faculty from across the country. Examples of the DCCC's agenda include:

- i. Cultural competency workshops that are offered to each of the member institutions. The most recent audience was the ASCO Board of Directors in Atlanta in early March. They are working on being able to offer the courses virtually for the coming academic year.
- ii. New Special Interest Group (SIG) for Diversity and Cultural Competency that meets annually at the Academy meeting.
- iii. Request for proposal for a Diversity Consultant to help ASCO identify the best path forward on a national level, including how best to spend resources to improve optometry's diversity. National coordination is needed, as are metrics for success and a plan for individual institutions' accountability. A discussion of diversity, equity, inclusion, cultural competency, and systemic and institutionalized racism, concluded that all are within the purview of the Diversity Consultant. It was noted that equity must include mentorship in and preparation for, the optometry curriculum, including clinic rotations. In addition to recruitment it was considered vital to include issues of inclusion and cultural competency. The consultant's report should be action-oriented.

- iv. The DCCC has an active member of the Applicant Pool Task Force, the group within ASCO responsible for overseeing the *Optometry Gives Me Life* campaign.
- v. The DCCC is responsible for the various annual surveys that provide the important metrics around diversity of applicants, matriculants, graduates and faculty.
- vi. They play a leading role in developing mentorship opportunities for minority students and faculty, and the development of leadership training and promotion of future faculty.

In addition, the President of the NOA is now a liaison to the ASCO Board. This important development will help inform board discussion and decision making.

## **2. Creation of a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force for recruiting Black prospective students and faculty, both within ASCO as well as within each optometry school or college.**

ASCO has both a standing committee on Diversity and Cultural Competency, as described in section 1, but also has an Application Pool Task Force that has guided the multi-million dollar *Optometry Gives Me Life* campaign, aimed at increasing undergraduate students' interest in the profession of optometry and the diversity of the applicants. Again, there is representation on this task force from both the NOA and ASCO's DCCC.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, ASCO has no jurisdiction over the 23 Schools and Colleges of Optometry. We collect and collate metrics; organize centralized admissions (OptomCAS, ORMatch); coordinate national campaigns; meet and collaborate with other national organizations (e.g., AOA, AAO, NBEQ, ARBO, NOA); provide the authoritative voice of education in optometry; organize training and mentorship opportunities, including leadership and future faculty; offer national committees and SIGs for interest areas within the schools and colleges, for example Student Affairs Officers, Clinic Directors, Residency Directors, Development Officers, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officers; and provide an important venue for the Deans and Presidents to discuss common issues and national policy.

ASCO cannot require any of its members to do anything other than pay national membership dues. ASCO cannot hold any of its members accountable, nor do we govern their activities. ASCO can encourage, promote and influence. Only the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education (ACOE) can require a school or college to meet specific, Federal or optometry-specific standards in order to maintain accreditation as a degree-granting professional program.

ASCO agrees with you that the low proportions of Black optometry students and Black faculty are unacceptable. In addition, it is beyond comprehension that less than 2% of US optometrists are Black, when 13% of the US population are Black and 9% of science STEM students are Black. We all need to do more.

## **3. Reference the findings of and implement the proposed actionable solutions outlined in the 2018 report from the SUNY College of Optometry Diversity Hackathon.**

ASCO is proud of SUNY and its 2018 Hackathon. The resulting report has been widely distributed and discussed by ASCO members and committees. ASCO had representatives participate in and observe the Hackathon. We share your enthusiasm.

## **4. Create a pipeline of Black optometrists through Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).**

I share your enthusiasm for the potential of partnership with HBCUs. ASCO look forward to partnering with NOA and BEP on their initiatives with HBCUs, and we are particularly excited about the October 6<sup>th</sup> outreach program. There have been occasional partnerships between ASCO members and HBCUs, similar to the ones you propose, but they have unfortunately not proven sustainable. With the partnership of the NOA and BPE, it is hoped that future programs may be more successful

### **5. Standardized Test Preparation (OAT, GRE) Assistance.**

ASCO looks forward to partnering with BEP and NOA, a 50-year old organization who has long promoted and partnered such initiatives, to ensure accessibility. In addition, over the last two years, 19 of the 23 optometry programs now accept alternative standardized tests, such as the much-less-expensive Graduate Record Examination (GRE), to the OAT.

### **6. Utilize NOA to support Black students throughout optometry school, including but not limited to, funding grants/scholarships and fostering a sense of community.**

I could not agree more. Inclusion and belonging are essential to the success of any programs that achieve greater representation of Black students and other minorities. Many ASCO members are engaging their Black alumni and are grateful for the assistance of the NOA and NOSA chapters, in helping establish the support and community required for successful recruitment and retention of Black students and faculty.

If optometry had access to the targeted, Federal and state support for scholarships aimed to improve diversity that medicine has enjoyed over the last 30 years, we would likely be in a very different place. We need to find ways to support scholarships to improve access, support Black matriculants, support Black residents and support Black faculty. We also have to acknowledge that, although it may be hard to believe, there are States where such targeted support is currently illegal.

### **7. Implement mentorship programs for Black high school students to pair with current Black and Persons of Color (POC) optometry students/alumni/faculty.**

Again, I am in total agreement. ASCO is in conversation with BEP to offer coaching and mentorship of their nascent virtual Pre-Optometry Club. Many ASCO member institutions have programs that reach out to high schools and college STEM students. Every optometrist needs to accept their responsibility for community mentorship and promotion of the profession to prospective students. The most consistent reason for a student considering a career in Optometry, is their exposure to individual optometrists in their community. We all need to take responsibility.

### **8. Increase representation of Black students and faculty in ASCO social media campaigns.**

ASCO's multi-million dollar campaign, *Optometry Gives Me Life*, is a social media based campaign, and is specifically aimed at recruiting diverse applicants. ASCO agrees with your request.

### **9. Require at least three hours of anti-racism courses for students per year.**

ASCO is in agreement with your call for a minimum of 3 hours of anti-racism courses for students of optometry. ASCO plays no role in school accreditation or required curriculum, and because of this, cannot require members to institute this recommendation. The ACOE is the accrediting body for the profession.

### **10. Require at least three hours of anti-racism courses and implicit bias training for faculty and staff per year.**

ASCO cannot require anything, however, we are in agreement that such training is important for our faculty and staff. Only ACOE can require training if it is made to be a standard for accreditation.

ASCO is grateful for your impassioned and constructive letter. I hope you have a better understanding of the role and powers of ASCO and ACOE, and other optometric organizations. Your thoughts and demands are important for consideration by the entire profession of optometry. ASCO looks forward to working with all partners in these essential initiatives.

Please work with your local societies, State associations, the AOA, your schools and colleges, and the NOA to ensure that the mood of the nation can help optometry in its quest to be more diverse and truly represent the population of our country.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Flanagan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

John G Flanagan PhD, FCOptom, FAAO  
President

Cc: Dr. William Reynolds, AOA President  
Dr. Barbara Caffery, AAO President  
Dr. William Ratcliff, ACOE President  
Mr. Alexander Bennett, AOSA President  
Dr. Sherrol Reynolds, NOA President