

July 8, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

We hope this letter finds you in good health. We are writing to you as recent 2020 graduates of SUNY College of Optometry, as former student leaders that served as presidents and executive members of various school organizations, and as practicing optometrists who care deeply about Black lives. It is no surprise that our country has a racism problem, which has only been highlighted in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black citizens who have senselessly lost their lives under the umbrella of systemic racism in our country. Unfortunately, the optometric community - no matter how small and welcoming - is not immune to this disease. This concern is something we wish to change with the support of the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO).

Recently, SUNY College of Optometry decided to host a webinar titled "Race in Optometry," which provided a necessary platform for Black optometrists to discuss the shared obstacles they have faced while growing up Black and entering a predominantly white profession. The doctors prompted us to investigate the boards of the ASCO, American Optometric Association (AOA), and American Academy of Optometry (AAO). To our disappointment, we find that every single member of the ASCO board - who predominantly serve as Deans or Presidents of our schools - are white. Furthermore, we find not a single Black doctor or, on a wider scale, not even a single underrepresented minority, on the above mentioned boards. While this lack of representation has undoubtedly resulted from years of systemic racism, the educators and leaders of our profession must make it a priority now to target and recruit minority talent, brains, and skills to join our leadership ranks. In turn, we need to create a more welcoming community to foster Black optometry students and clinicians, as equally as we do white students/clinicians, in order to attract and retain the necessary recruits who will advance our profession in a multitude of ways.

We are happy to see a promising first step as ASCO has paired up with the National Optometric Association (NOA) and AAO to present a diversity workshop at the October 2020 Academy meeting. However, upon further probing of the ASCO's position regarding diversity and inclusion within our optometry school community, we were disappointed with what we found on the diversity tab. There we discovered a short paragraph and three bullet points referencing the promotion of diversity. One of those bullet points merely states that diversity "is the right thing to do," which is simply not

enough. We were not able to find any recent initiatives to increase Black students in our optometry schools, with the latest relevant publication dating back to 2017. We were also not able to find recent contacts or resources for marginalized students to utilize in their search for schools that may aid in learning more about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within the ASCO community.

To break it down even further, on this same web page, ASCO states “Goals include developing an applicant pool, student community, faculty and profession that reflects the diversity of the U.S. population, while preparing future optometric clinicians for practicing in a multicultural and global society.” These goals, while well-intentioned, clearly have not been actionably met in the span of at least the past 14 years of publicly available data we found on ASCO’s website. Please note the following poignant findings to demonstrate the above assertion:

- According to the 2019-2020 ASCO report, only 3.2% of full-time optometry students were Black (while the reported population of Black Americans is around 13%). While this representation alone is abysmal, what makes it even worse is that Black students have *never* represented more than 3.5% of total optometry students. These numbers have been disappointingly steady and stagnant since 2006, according to ASCO’s “Diversity in our Colleges and Schools of Optometry” report from 2017. In 14 years, even with a thorough review in 2017, the representation of Black students hovers at 3% of our population. If one of our goals as a profession is to “develop a [student community] that reflects the diversity of the U.S. population,” then we have failed for over a decade.
- In the same 2019-2020 report, we learn that, unsurprisingly, Black faculty make up only 3.8% of total optometry faculty. Again, this fails one of ASCO’s stated goals.
- We assume that our Black applicant pool and number of Black optometrists hover around this 3-4% as well.

This data is glaring. It is even worse that we have failed, knowingly, and with explicitly stated goals of increasing diversity, for so many years. This lack of diverse representation is a disservice to many: to our Black patients, to our other patients of color, and to our fellow Black optometrists and optometry students who have had little to no familiar representation in their optometry schools. Disappointingly, our colleagues may not have had a fellow Black classmate or Black faculty mentor during their training. It may be hard for us white individuals to understand why representation matters, and, we will likely never truly and fully understand. However, we *urge* you all as leaders of

ASCO and of your respective schools of optometry to commit to improvement for the sake of our Black professional community, and equally importantly, for the sake of our Black patients.

We don't believe this will be an easy endeavor. It needs to be tactful, specific, and to begin early on in the recruiting and hiring processes. But, each of us plays a role in our respective positions of the optometric profession to advance and strengthen our community because truly we are better together.

And while targeting diverse talent is the first step, inclusion is an entirely separate and possibly more important commitment that you as leaders of optometry schools must make today. It means nothing to recruit Black students and faculty if you have no means of keeping them - to welcome, to create safe spaces, and to truly *include* their voices and perspectives in culturally sensitive manners. All of this is your responsibility and action is needed now.

We have created a list of actionable recommendations that we stress you seriously consider implementing. Our nation is in a moment of crisis. History is being written as this letter is being read. What will history say of ASCO? Be a part of the solution. This is not a time for business as usual.

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

If it exists, there needs to be a revamping of the Diversity and Inclusion Department of ASCO. And if it does not exist, there needs to be a formation of such a group. An updated website with current resources, contact points, and a voice of true commitment is the bare minimum that we expect. This also includes, but is not limited to, increasing the representation of Black optometrists on ASCO's board. By taking the first steps, your actions will bring about change in other boards such as the AOA, AAO, and similar optometric organizations. Failure to allow students of minority populations to feel welcome, safe, equal, and fairly-represented in optometry schools will deny communities of inclusion and equal representation in both schools of optometry as well as in the profession at large. The above failure is a disservice to both our minority patients as well as to our fellow colleagues who represent Black and other underrepresented minority communities.

**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.**

Within the Diversity and Inclusion Department, a task force assigned to recruiting Black talent - both as students and faculty - would be a necessary jumpstart to address the disheartening stagnation of Black representation within optometry schools.

Many optometry schools have created Diversity and Inclusion Task Forces in the past, which may have unfortunately disintegrated due to lack of accountability or denial of their importance. We ask that not only ASCO, but that each school, be required to initiate such a task force. These groups should be overseen by ASCO, not only to ensure accountability, but so that schools may also collectively pool together resources and ideas to better offer initiatives that strategically attack the current troublesome Black student and faculty numbers within optometry schools.

Thirteen percent of the U.S. population identifies as Black, therefore the percentage of optometrists should also hover in that range. Black Eyecare Perspective (BEP) has created a 13% Promise, where they are asking for 13% equity of Black representation within eyecare companies, Colleges of Optometry, and optometry boards. BEP will work with everyone to create a specified plan to get the numbers up to 13%.

We will not accept another decade of 3.5% Black representation in the profession, which does not reflect the US population.

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

In 2018, SUNY Optometry had a diversity hackathon that addressed the specific issue of “How can optometry increase the diversity of its student body?” From that event came a 14-page report that highlighted various actionable steps that could be taken to bring about change. These steps could benefit all of the optometry schools, as well as ASCO, in creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community for Black students. For more information: [SUNY Diversity Hackathon 2018](#)

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

HBCUs are institutions that were designed to support African American students by providing an educational learning environment that caters to their unique challenges and cultural understandings. HBCUs are able to provide an inclusive environment that plays a vital role in closing the health disparity gap among racial groups. Therefore, they promote better patient-doctor interactions and further respect for cultural sensitivity by providing a welcoming education for African Americans. Optometry has always sought to be on the cutting edge of healthcare. If that is going to continue to be the case, we must do everything we can to provide communities of color with the high quality healthcare they deserve.

Comparable health professional schools, including dentistry, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and physician assistant schools, all offer degree programs with affiliated HBCUs. Studies show that Black doctors practice in areas where there are predominately more Black residents, compared to their non-Black colleagues. Racial and ethnic disparities run rampant within health care, including eyecare, and these disparities disproportionately impact communities of color. Because of this, increasing the representation of Black doctors within optometry has a direct correlation to improving visual outcomes within minority and underserved communities. This increase in representation can be achieved by strengthening the HBCU to Optometry School pipeline.

There are currently 23 optometry schools, yet there has not been a drastic spike in the number of Black optometry students - in fact, as mentioned before, there has been no growth in the last 14 years. You can significantly impact the health outcomes for millions of people by supporting the creation of optometry schools in HBCUs and recruiting talent from such universities. While creating a new optometry school is not an easy feat, here are some alternative actionable steps to start increasing Black representation in optometry schools via HBCUs:

- Create 3 + 4 Accelerated Bachelor's-to-Optometry Programs affiliated with HBCUs
  - Many existing 3 + 4 accelerated programs recruit students who are in their freshman or sophomore year of their undergraduate careers to optometry school, but none are currently affiliated with an HBCU. These programs provide an advantage to undergraduate students by allowing them to apply early to optometry school.

Upon acceptance, these students are able to complete their first year of optometry school and their final year of undergraduate studies concurrently, so that both the Bachelor's and Optometry degrees are completed over the course of 7 years instead of 8 years. The benefits of 3+4 accelerated programs should be extended to students at HBCUs.

- Create a 4+4 Bachelor's to Optometry Program affiliated with HBCUs
  - Optometry schools should form partnerships with HBCUs to form 4+4 programs, which recruit students in their junior and senior years of their undergraduate careers to optometry school. These programs will provide an advantage to prospective optometry students by guaranteeing an interview and admission to an affiliated optometry school so long as they ultimately fulfill the admission requirements. This allows Black students to complete their Bachelor's degree with the knowledge that they have secured a seat in an optometry school class upon their successful completion of their Bachelor's degree.
- Increase presence of optometry admissions staff at HBCUs' Career Forums and pre-health professions clubs
  - Because of the statistics mentioned earlier in this letter, we believe HBCUs need to be prioritized over Primarily White Institutions (PWI) for recruitment of optometry students. This targeted approach provides a straightforward entrance point for Black students into the profession.
  - Black Eyecare Perspective (BEP) has created the Impact HBCU initiative in which representatives will simultaneously reach out to all 107 HBCUs on October 6, 2020 in a career-forum type fashion with a goal of introducing undergraduates to the career of optometry, educating on the admissions process, and ultimately increasing Black applicants. This valuable initiative needs the support of ASCO, along with partnerships from optometry schools and corporate sponsors.
- Create a passageway between Post-Baccalaureate Programs affiliated with HBCUs and acceptance into optometry school
  - A Post-Baccalaureate is utilized after receiving an undergraduate degree to obtain one's pre-health prerequisite coursework or enhance one's current science coursework, thus increasing chances of graduate school acceptance.

- Students who pursue such programs show great commitment to the profession they are aiming for; these students are completing coursework that is not degree-seeking in order to gain admission into a health professional school - optometry included.
- Optometry schools can actively recruit students from Post-Baccalaureate programs, specifically those completing these prerequisites at HBCUs or other highly diverse institutions. People with this level of dedication to their studies should be candidates optometry schools want to recruit.

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

Due to over 400 years of systemic racism, many marginalized communities do not have adequate access to extra coursework preparation, such as paid lecture programs or abundant study supplies. For prospective students that have expressed interest in optometry but are having a difficult time obtaining an acceptable entry score, current admissions staff should counsel and support these students until they reach a competitive score and gain entrance into a program. Organizations like BEP and NOA are already working on these initiatives and need the support of ASCO, who should work closely with each school to afford these prospective students an equal chance at admission.

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

The National Optometric Association is “composed primarily of underrepresented minority optometrists and students of optometry (particularly African-American)” and has worked tirelessly for over 50 years to provide scholarships to students within optometry school, especially for students who are eager to provide care in underserved communities. NOA provides resources that are already accessible to students that ASCO needs only to amplify. These resources can be of great aid to the success of Black optometry students, and schools of optometry can use NOA as a helpful tool. Additionally, there needs to be stronger effort at each of the optometry schools to assist Black students to get involved in NOSA, which may foster a more culturally sensitive academic environment and provide a safe space for minority students.

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

Many recommendations listed are actionable at an undergraduate or graduate level; however, there is significant value in mentorship early in the pipeline to optometry that is severely lacking in most communities. Black Eyecare Perspective (BEP) has created a Pre-Optometry club to create a pipeline for students that are interested in optometry. Organizations like BEP should be supported by ASCO to ensure that no one gets left behind. While action to address this recommendation must occur more at the level of individual schools of optometry, we include it here because we find ASCO plays a large role in applying pressure to implement such strategies to attract Black interest early on, as the board is made up of Deans and Presidents of the schools.

As another example, NOA has partnered with the Poston Family, of which Dr. Marvin Poston is the Co-Founder of VSP, to provide a mentorship program to Black students within their sophomore year of college. This mentorship program ranges from shadowing experiences to a scholarship that aids them in the admission process to optometry school. This is a good example of early outreach that individual optometry schools as well as ASCO can implement in order to gain more Black applicants and students in our profession.

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

Social media allows a widespread and innovative reach, which, when targeted and strategically implemented, can attract diverse prospective students and faculty. This recommendation should extend to each school of optometry and its respective media accounts including Facebook, Instagram, webpages, and even public ad campaigns.

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

Because of ASCO's role in school accreditation, we deem it necessary that in order for optometry schools to receive proper credentials and maintain accreditation, each school must require at least three hours of anti-racism coursework or workshops per each academic year for the first three years of schooling (while students remain on campus, for a total of 6 hours in the first 3 years). Without such educational requirements, we do not feel that it can be ensured that optometry schools are effectively dedicating time to addressing systemic racism,



which we feel clearly and negatively impacts the healthcare outcomes of Black and other minority communities. These courses should incorporate, but not be limited to, racism in healthcare and optometry, how to be actively anti-racist, and should also include and compensate Black voices to properly relay this sensitive information. These workshops should operate similarly to ethics courses currently taught in schools, but would operate separately in the sense that they explicitly teach anti-racism coursework.

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

Similarly, we deem it necessary that in order to receive proper credentials and maintain accreditation, each school should require at least three hours of anti-racism coursework, implicit bias training, and inclusivity workshops for all staff and faculty each year. These courses are not only important for inclusion within the campus and the fostering of safe communities for our Black students, but it will also directly impact how we interact with patients from all backgrounds, including those from underserved regions thus improving patient care. Like the previous point, these courses should include and compensate Black voices to properly relay this sensitive information.

We know that together as the optometry community, we can do much better than we have in the past. Not only can we do better, we *must* do better, and are so obligated under the Optometric Oath we all took upon graduation. Black lives don't only matter, but Black minds, Black futures, Black talent, Black patients, and Black optometrists *more* than matter. Diversity only enriches our communities, and marginalized groups are long overdue for *true* equality in healthcare. It is time for serious introspection within each of our institutions, within ASCO, and within ourselves - how do we knowingly and, more importantly, unknowingly perpetuate systemic racism? How do we fail our Black students, Black patients and the whole community? What conversations need to be had now more than ever? Although severely late, we must still show up. It is never the wrong time to do the right thing. Again, we urge you to consider our thoughts, assertions, and recommendations for improving our patient care, community, and future in optometry. We welcome all within the optometry community, or those close to it, to endorse this letter.

**[A list of signatories can be found here:](#)**

Sincerely,

Monique Mohammed, O.D., M.S  
SUNY Optometry Class of 2020

Nicole Mercho, O.D.  
SUNY Optometry Class of 2020

Kristina Creadore, O.D.  
SUNY Optometry Class of 2020