California State Board of **Optometry**

June 2021 President's Message

How Can We Solve California's Disparities in Access to Optometric Care?

In my October 2020 President's Message, I noted the dismal 2018–2019 enrollment numbers for the state's optometry schools—zero—for African American students for the second-year class. This reflects the racial and ethnic disparities in health care in the state: disparities we have seen causing devastating numbers during the pandemic.

After the October message, I reached out to each of the state's three schools of optometry and the profession to find out what strategies or tools they found to be effective to begin to address the disparities.

To be fair, as the schools informed me, they face a number of challenges. There are challenges with the pipeline to optometry school. There are already too few students from underserved communities seeking to pursue careers in the health care professions generally. Those pursuing a career in optometry are a small percentage of an already small number. The low numbers of minority faculty in the schools also make it difficult to attract minority students.

But some strategies provide hope. Dr. Lawrence Thal, UC Berkeley School of Optometry clinical professor and retired assistant dean, wrote to me about Opto-Camp sponsored by UC Berkeley. (Full disclosure: While my day job is with the UC Regents, the views expressed in this President's Message are my own.) Opto-Camp is a five-day "in residence" program that gives participants opportunities to learn about the profession of optometry and the process of becoming an optometrist.

"A goal of Opto-Camp is to provide in-depth information about optometry as a career track to those who are under-represented in the profession and/or who are first-generation college students to introduce under-represented pre-health science majors to optometry as a career and to prepare them to be successful applicants to optometry school," he said. "Housed in student dormitories, Opto-Campers attend lectures, tour the facilities, meet optometry faculty and students, and receive a free eye exam. Current first-year students are their counselors and companions."

According to the most recent survey statistics available to Thal, over 50% of Opto-Campers actually attended or currently attend optometry school.

Western University College of Optometry (WUCO) told me about a partnership with Pomona Unified School District and Cal Poly Pomona to create the "Career Ladder." According to WUCO, "The Career Ladder will identify math and science scholars in Pomona schools, guide them through an undergraduate health/science degree at Cal Poly Pomona, and into any of the professional training programs at Western University through a program-based network of outreach, guidance, mentoring, and financial assistance. The ultimate goal is to produce health care professionals who will serve the Pomona community. Participating scholars can plan on careers as physicians, dentists, veterinarians, physical therapists, physician assistants, podiatrists, optometrists, pharmacists, and more."

WUCO is also seriously studying the problem of getting qualified minority applicants to apply and enroll and utilizing data analytics to come up with some solutions. It has studied where in the application process otherwise qualified interested individuals fall out the application process. Using those analytics, it is trying plug those leaks.

Decades of disparities in the optometric care cannot be addressed in a few years. The Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry annually publishes a report of matriculation statistics. The diversity numbers, particularly for African Americans, continue to be disappointing, to say it politely.

One school has enrolled **zero** African American students three years in a row.

Keep watching what the California schools are doing. Ask what needs to be done to improve access to optometric care to our underserved communities.

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Sincerely,

Mark T. Morodomi

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President, California State Board of Optometry