

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Optical Industry Sees Gains in Diversity, But More Work Is Still Needed



BY DANIEL BREEMAN / SENIOR EDITOR

The numbers are trending in the right direction, albeit slowly, but according to many experts, there's still much work to be done in gaining true diversity in the optometric field, whether in practice, industry or in attracting new students to the field of optometry. The passion to achieve these diversity goals take the shape of various initiatives and programs by an assortment of groups, with many citing collaboration as critical to success.

According to the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), during the 2023-2024 academic year, 7,220 students were enrolled full-time in optometry programs in the United States, and 164 were enrolled part-time. The student body was 48.5 percent White, 31.3 percent Asian, 8.8 percent Hispanic or Latino, 4.3 percent Black or African

American, 0.6 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.1 percent Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 3.4 percent two or more races, and 3.0 percent unknown.

The American Optometric Association (AOA), citing several studies, found that although about 13 percent of the U.S. population is Black, they are underrepresented in optometry, especially in practice. They represent about 2 percent of practicing doctors of optometry and just over 3 percent of full-time students in optometry schools and colleges.

With the numbers improving but not yet where the profession wants to be, *Vision Monday* spoke with a few organizations and optometry schools that have taken the lead in promoting diversity in optometry and asked them what they are currently doing to advance multicultural identity in the profession and attract students to optometry. *VM* also asked about what obstacles are yet to be

overcome in order to level the playing field for all individuals.

"There's always more potential for programs and initiatives in the DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) space. By listening to diverse voices and harnessing our efforts to ensure they have an impact, we're moving toward a better future by looking at things in new and creative ways," said American Optometric Association (AOA) trustee Marrie Read, OD, MBA, who serves on the AOA Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee. "One of the biggest opportunities we have is to partner together with other diverse and far-reaching organizations to work together to make an impact."

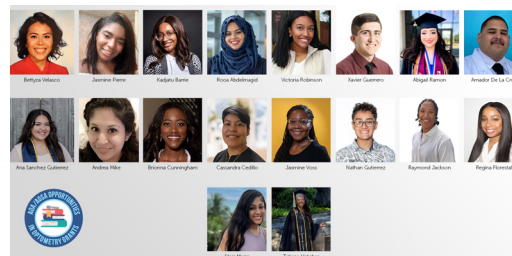
What follows is a closer look at just a few of the groups and schools actively promoting diversity in the profession and some of the current and future programs they have or intend to implement moving forward. ■

American Optometric Association's DEI Efforts Take Many Forms

The AOA's <https://www.aoa.org> commitment to furthering its diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts and initiatives has taken many forms over the last few years. From scholarships to the association's advisory committee, the AOA is steadfast in identifying ways to collaborate with members, partners, the profession and the next generation of leaders, according to AOA trustee Marrie Read, OD, MBA, who serves on the AOA Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee.



Marrie Read, OD



Winners of the AOA/AOSA Opportunities in Optometry grant program.



"As an authority and leader in this profession, we understand the responsibility of setting high standards and paving the way for the industry. The AOA is committed to spending the time and establishing the path at a national level that will lead the profession to a diverse future," Dr. Read said.

According to Dr. Read, continued ongoing activities that reinforce the AOA's diversity efforts include:

- Continuing to build a tradition of growth and giving through optometry grants.
- Establishing early pathways to practice success and career-long AOA-affiliate involvement for young professionals through programs such as the Leadership Institute.
- Advocating for proficiency in culturally competent care for all populations through collaboration with partners, public awareness campaigns and education through the EyeLearn program.
- The 13% Promise, started by Black Eyecare Perspective, was an integral part of the commitment the AOA is making to activate solutions to advance the profession. By amplifying the voices of AOA's partners, the organization is driving engagement and understanding across audiences.

• Increasing the diversity of the AOA's volunteer structure is a critical step the group has taken and progress is being made. For example, in the last two years, the AOA has grown its Black volunteer doctor participation by 2 percent. The AOA said it looks forward to continuing this trajectory.

- In 2025 and beyond, AOA's advisory committee, alongside its partners, is tasked with helping to guide the group to a brighter and more inclusive future.

To help promote the next generation of leaders and diversity in the optometric profession, the AOA's Opportunities in Optometry Grant program helps decrease barriers to underrepresented minority students applying to optometry schools, according to Dr. Read. Thus far, the program has awarded grants to 73 underrepresented pre-optometry students since its inception in early 2021, with 24 of the students having matriculated to optometry school to date.

Each recipient is awarded a \$1,500 grant to help offset the costs associated with applying to optometry school, totaling over \$100,000 to date. Additionally, the AOA's DEI Advisory Committee works together and engages diverse audiences to determine additional perspectives and identify opportunities for advancement.

"To get engaged, minority students need to see themselves reflected in the profession. AOA's Leadership Institute was developed to bridge the gap between the busy young professional and their desire to successfully thrive in volunteer leadership," said Dr. Read.

"The program seeks to energize and equip the next generation of diverse champions for optometry with valuable lessons and skill sets, which will allow them to confidently step in and lead at national and state affiliate levels. Through this program, AOA is building future diverse leaders that will inspire minority students to engage in optometry," Dr. Read said.

"Another way to ensure minority students pursue optometry is to introduce them to the profession and all the work doctors of optometry do. Today's students have such dynamic and diverse interests and we understand that it is a challenge to connect with them where and when they are looking for information for their personal lives or their future careers," she said.

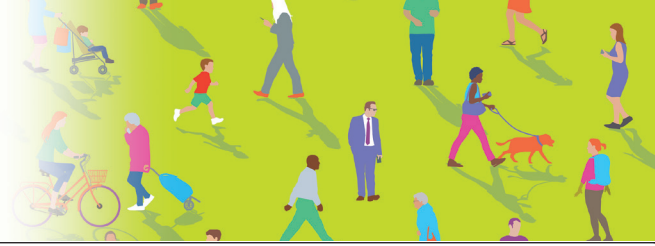
"We have our long-standing public awareness initiative, Eye Deserve More, and when we ideate on how we connect with audiences, parents as well as students, we are consistently looking at how our efforts can reinforce what a strong impact being a doctor of optometry can have in the community. Our most recent efforts to focus on the incredible technology we have in our eyes and vision system was designed to connect with those who are focused on technology—the next generation," Dr. Read said.

The AOA also understands and promotes the value of partnerships in helping to achieve diversity goals.

"A key to success is listening, and we rely heavily on voices outside of our organization that are leading the profession forward. Their hard and amazing work has inspired the profession to take action—driving our industry to the forefront and setting an inspiring example for the next generation. We value their leadership and commitment to partnering with the AOA to advance our shared goal," Dr. Read concluded. ■

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ASCO Supports Member Institutions to Bolster Diversity in Optometry

There are multiple ways that the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (<https://optometriceducation.org/>) (ASCO) has supported a multicultural identity within the profession to attract students to optometry, according to Dr. Fraser Horn, OD, FAAO, ASCO president and dean of the Pacific University College of Optometry. Dr. Horn updated *Vision Monday* on what the organization is currently doing to support its member institutions and the profession of optometry in the realm of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

“ASCO has embraced the concepts of diversity and multiculturalism by providing resources around our goals. On our website <https://optometriceducation.org/diversity/>, we have resources that include an Eye on Diversity Initiative that was sponsored by Johnson & Johnson Vision,” he said. According to Dr. Horn, this series provides multiple resources, including:

- **Cultural Competence in Eye and Vision Care:**

A Toolkit: This resource can be used for training in classrooms and during meetings for discussions.

- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging:**

A Virtual Cultural Competency Workshop where Dr. Keisha Elder, Dr. Ruth Shoge and Dr. Gary Chu provide an on-demand training resource.

- **Voices of Diversity:** This is a video of firsthand accounts of individuals who describe how prejudice and bigotry have impacted them.

- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Speaker Series:**

Features a series of videos from world-renowned experts from outside of optometry who share their impactful insights. These videos were only available for a limited time.



Fraser Horn, OD.

In addition to this impactful initiative, ASCO provides resources to its member institutions around diversity and inclusion resources; anti-racism resources; and more, according to Dr. Horn.

Within ASCO’s organization structure, it has two groups that are focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. The Diversity and Cultural Competency Committee is a standing committee that promotes diversity and supports member institutions on their commitment to diversity and inclusion as well as a DEI Special Interest Group. The Chief Diversity Officers Group is a group of individuals who lead DEI initiatives in their program, and can work together to discuss issues and work collaboratively on possible solutions.

“In addition to the DEI work that is ingrained in our organization, we also support DEI presentations for our member institutions,” said Dr. Horn. “We truly believe that supporting every member of

our community and growing the representation of multicultural identities makes optometric education and optometry stronger.

“We also partner with other organizations to support initiatives and ways to make a difference. For example, we have a wonderful relationship with the National Optometric Association (NOA), which currently has an initiative to work closer with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to recruit more students for optometry from these programs. We have also promoted the wonderful events from Black Eyecare Perspectives,” Dr. Horn said.

“We’ve seen an increase in organizations that are supporting affinity groups and we will have a panel discussion with the various organizations and the ASCO board of directors so we are all aware of their initiatives and can identify ways that we can all work together. Our goal will be to work with these organizations to increase applicants who identify as being a part of the affinity group.”

As far as student recruitment, ASCO has worked with its member institutions and industry partners to create an initiative to increase its applicant pool, called Optometry Gives Me Life (OGML). “While many allied health professions have seen a decrease in applications for their programs, we have seen an increase in applicants for optometry. In fact, 2023-2024 was the largest applicant pool that we have seen since we started these metrics. This is very exciting for us,” said Dr. Horn. “Another way that we are encouraging more applicants is through our Eye Opener Sessions, where providers can sign up to meet with prospective students who are interested in optometry.”

Along with mentorships and partnerships playing critical roles in diversity and attracting more students to the profession of optometry, Dr. Horn also cited several potential obstacles that can impede this progress.



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“I think there may be a variety of obstacles, depending on the individual. Ultimately, it is awareness and the support to get students to consider coming to optometry schools. Those who have access to eyecare are exposed to optometry; however, what about all of those individuals who don’t get an eye exam? They may not be aware of the amazing profession of optometry. There are also some who do not consider this profession based on the time and money that they have to invest. If they reach out to our programs, they may find out about scholarships and other opportunities to help them throughout their time in optometry school. Not to mention the possible loan repayment opportunities that are available to help offset the cost of going to optometry school.

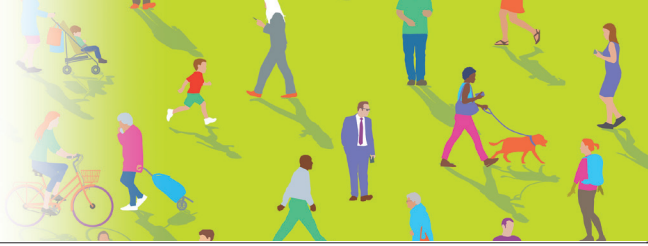
He continued, “I think that one of the best ways

for us to overcome these barriers is to ask our alumni to promote optometry with our young patients. For example, when we do our student-athlete vision screenings, I talk with almost all of our first years about how they should consider optometry. Many laugh my suggestion off, but there are a number who are intrigued and ask more questions.

“The power of suggestion and the opportunity for us to express our passion for our profession can make a difference in the trajectory of our high school and college students. I think that we all need to do our part to promote this amazing profession and know who to contact if students have questions,” Dr. Horn said. ■

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Black EyeCare Perspective Increases Eyecare Diversity ‘One Percent at a Time’

Black EyeCare Perspective <https://blackeyecareperspective.com/> (BEP), founded by optometrists Adam Ramsey and Darryl Glover, was designed and created to cultivate and foster lifelong relationships between Black eyecare professionals and the eyecare industry. Black EyeCare Perspective said it is redefining the color of the eyecare industry 1 percent at a time by creating a pipeline for Black students into optometry through its Black EyeCare Perspective Pre-Optometry Club (BEPOC) and other initiatives.

According to Dr. Glover, efforts to increase diversity in optometry have gained significant momentum, led by initiatives from BEP. Through its 13% Promise, a commitment to increase the representation of Black and African Americans in the eyecare industry, BEP is working to align Black representation in optometry with the U.S. population. This initiative has inspired optometry schools such as the New England College of Optometry, Salus University and Indiana University to partner with BEP in fostering diversity, he said. These schools have launched mentorship programs, scholarships and support systems to create more inclusive environments for minority students.

“BEP’s partnerships extend beyond academic institutions, including collaborations with industry leaders like Johnson & Johnson Vision, VSP Vision and Transitions Optical,” said Dr. Glover. “These companies have supported BEP by offering scholarships, hands-on training, mentorship and shadowing opportunities that give students practical exposure to the profession.”

“In addition, BEP’s IMPACT HBCU program is working to raise awareness of optometry as a career within historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The program includes virtual career days, on-campus events and mobile clinics that expose students to real-world experiences in the eyecare profession. Furthermore, BEPOC ensures that Black students are supported and prepared for optometry school, meeting monthly with peers and mentors in an inclusive environment,” Dr. Glover said.



Adam Ramsey, OD, (l) and Darryl Glover, OD, co-founders of Black EyeCare Perspective.

BEP hosts its Virtual IMPACT HBCU event in October, continuing to offer support and opportunities to students considering careers in optometry.

“Through these partnerships and initiatives, BEP is transforming the profession, creating pathways for underrepresented students, and ensuring that optometry becomes more inclusive and reflective of the diverse communities it serves,” said Dr. Glover.

Both partnerships and mentorships that expose students to real-life optometry situations are also a key to success, according to Dr. Glover.

“Mentorship is an essential driver of diversity in optometry, and its impact cannot be overstated. For many minority students, the path to optometry can feel isolating, with challenges such as navigating admissions, overcoming financial barriers, and finding role models who reflect their own experiences,” said Dr. Glover. “Black EyeCare Perspective addresses these gaps directly through its Pre-Optometry Club (BEPOC), which offers



Darryl Glover, OD.



Dr. Darryl Glover, co-founder of Black EyeCare Perspective, with Emely Minino Soto, New England College of Optometry.

a transformative mentorship experience. BEPOC connects students with industry professionals who understand the unique hurdles minority students face.

“Partnerships are crucial to advancing diversity goals in optometry, and they amplify the impact of our efforts at Black EyeCare Perspective. By bringing more diverse students into optometry, we can grow the number of practicing optometrists, addressing the ongoing shortage of eyecare professionals. This not only improves access to care in underserved communities, but also helps fill the critical demand for more optometrists across the country,” he said.

More diverse doctors means better care for diverse populations, and their unique perspectives can lead to more innovative approaches to patient care. Additionally, increasing diversity will drive demand for a broader range of products and services from suppliers, pushing the industry to develop more inclusive solutions for patients of all backgrounds,” Dr. Glover concluded. ■

Latinos en Optometry Breaks Down Cultural and Language Barriers

Founded in 2021 by Diana Canto-Sims, OD, and Lawrence Chavez, Latinos en Optometry <https://latinosenoptometry.org/> seeks to gain a broader representation of Latinos within the optometry and larger eyecare professional community, along with increasing ECPs' knowledge and understanding of unique cultural differences within the Latino communities they serve. The group notes that racial and ethnic diversity among health professionals promotes better access to health care, improves health care quality for underserved populations, and better meets the health care needs of an increasingly diverse population.

“Cultural competence plays a significant role. Language barriers and cultural differences can make it difficult for Spanish-speaking patients to receive optimal eyecare,” said Dr. Canto-Sims. “The lack of exposure to information about eyecare, vision and the importance of yearly eye exams in their native language is imperative to care for our patient’s eyes. Culturally, Latinos have one of the highest rates of vision loss and blindness caused by diseases like diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma.

“It is important for non-Latinos to improve their Spanish language communication skills, especially if they are practicing in areas where most of the patient population speaks Spanish and/or has limited English proficiency. Latinos en Optometry seeks to be a conduit for resources for doctors and staff who want to provide better care for their Latino and Spanish-speaking patients,” Dr. Canto-Sims said.

According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, by 2040 one of every four Americans will be of Latin-American culture. Currently, only 5.2 percent of U.S. optometrists are Latino, according to research from the career resource site Zippia. For the 2023-2024 cycle, the Optometry Centralized Application Service (OptomCAS), a service of the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), shows a decline in the number of Hispanic/Latino appli-



Diana Canto-Sims, OD.

cants to U.S. schools of optometry from the previous year.

“Latinos en Optometry seeks to gain a broader representation of Latinos within the optometry and larger eyecare professional community, along with helping eyecare professionals deliver eye health care in a culturally mindful manner through ongoing education and resources to help them better serve the Latino community,” said Dr. Canto-Sims. “Membership is free to all students interested in a career in optometry or related eyecare profession, those currently enrolled in a certified college of optometry, allied health profession, education and rehabilitation program, or in an optometric residency or a fellowship program.

“Our ‘Road to Optometry’ webinar series, sup-

ported by Transitions, features interviews with our board members in which they share their experiences and offer advice to support and inspire students to consider a career in optometry. We will be introducing some new initiatives soon,” Dr. Canto-Sims said.

Mentorships and scholarships are critical to advancing diversity in optometry, noted Dr. Canto-Sims, while trade shows and medical conferences play an important role in helping to educate practitioners, optical staff, students and others.

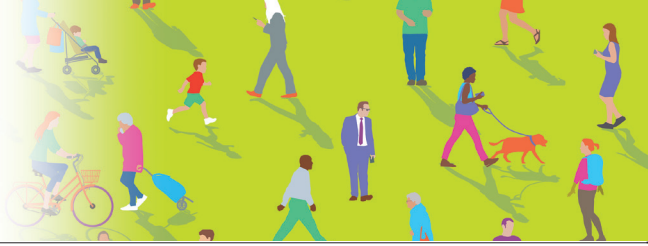
Educating teens and young adults about career opportunities in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) fields is also vital.

“While U.S. schools have taught basic math and science for many decades, many do not provide students with opportunities to learn about other STEM areas and career opportunities. But that is beginning to change,” she said. “A growing number of states and school districts now require students to take career exploration classes in middle school. We need to expose more students to potential careers in optometry so they can see how it might fit into their passions, interests, skills, and lifestyle and career aspirations.”

She continued, “I believe that optometry is working to increase diversity and inclusion in the field through a variety of initiatives, including education, mentorship and partnerships. Schools of optometry are incorporating education on diversity, inclusion and belonging into their curricula. The Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry and others are offering mentorship programs to help nurture the next generation of diverse eyecare professionals. The industry is working closely with groups such as Latinos en Optometry to support these efforts.

“Overall, I think some progress has been made, but we still have a way to go to boost the visibility of underserved communities and mirror the representation of minority communities within our profession,” Dr. Canto-Sims concluded. ■

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NECO Continues to Evolve Its DEI Efforts and Commitment

The New England College of Optometry (<https://www.neco.edu/>) continues to recognize the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) on its campus as it pushes to strengthen its DEI commitment to its students while working toward building a professional workplace that better meets the needs of patients, according to Howard Purcell, OD, FAAO, president and CEO of NECO.

“Optometry as a field has increasingly recognized the importance of fostering diversity and inclusion, and various efforts have gained momentum in recent years,” said Dr. Purcell. “Schools and professional organizations are prioritizing a more holistic approach to recruitment and retention, which emphasizes diversity in cultural background, geographical representation and socioeconomic status. This is crucial not only for enriching the educational environment but also for serving the diverse needs of patients in an increasingly multicultural society.”

Dr. Purcell continued, “Many institutions are working actively to increase Latinx/Hispanic, Black/African American and multicultural/multiracial student populations. This shift is supported through targeted outreach, inclusive admissions practices, and a variety of financial aid options, both internally and in collaboration with external partners.”

According to Dr. Purcell, one notable initiative is the Sponsored Pathways Program, which he said aims to address two significant challenges: rising student debt and geographical disparities in health care access. “By forming partnerships between students and future employers, the program creates a win-win scenario where students receive financial support for their education in exchange for post-graduation employment commitments, primarily in underserved areas,” Dr. Purcell said.

“Moreover, 3+4 program partnerships are designed to create a streamlined pathway for students entering optometry. These partnerships offer conditional acceptance to optometry schools while students are still undergraduates, which not only



NECO students celebrate the school's annual Student Olympics, a favorite event during orientation week.

NECO | New England College of Optometry



Howard Purcell, OD, FAAO, NECO president and CEO.

attracts high-achieving students but also ensures they are well-prepared for the rigors of optometric education,” he said.

Dr. Purcell also pointed to the Optometry Gives Me Life (OGML) awareness campaign, launched by the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), which is designed to promote optometry as a fulfilling and viable career choice for prospective students. The campaign aims to raise awareness with a diverse audience about the profession by highlighting the rewarding aspects of being an optometrist, such as helping people improve their vision and quality of life.

The campaign includes a mix of digital media, social media engagement and personal testimoni-

als from practicing optometrists to inspire the next generation. The initiative emphasizes the balance of work-life, opportunities for personal and professional growth, and the positive impact optometrists make on their communities, Dr. Purcell said.

Despite multiple efforts, challenges remain, especially around access, both geographically and financially, according to Dr. Purcell. Optometry schools are often located in urban centers, which may pose a barrier for students from rural or underrepresented areas. Additionally, the financial burden of attending optometry school can be prohibitive, even with the addition of scholarships and financial aid, especially in the 30 states without an optometry school.

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National Optometric Association Strives to Advance Multicultural Identity in Optometry

The National Optometric Association <https://nationaloptometricassociation.com/> (NOA) has been active in advancing multicultural identity in optometry since 1969. On a daily basis, the organization is active in recruiting and mentoring underrepresented minority students in the profession of optometry. “With minority populations suffering disproportionately from an increased risk for sight-threatening conditions like glaucoma, diabetic eye disease and cataract, the NOA believes strongly that a diverse optometric workforce is important to address the long-standing and continuing disparities in eye and vision health,” said Mark Orso, OD, president elect of the NOA.

With its mission “to advance the visual health of minority populations,” and through dedicated programs, the group actively recruits students into the field of optometry, but has faced some challenges along the way.

“By way of our many programs, we are able to present a diverse presence to high school and college students during discussions of optometry as a career choice. Our initiatives have been instrumental to increasing the number of minority applicants to the schools and colleges of optometry,” Dr. Orso said.

He continued, “However, financial support of our programs has been our biggest challenge. Insufficient funding has limited our ability to interact and collaborate on a sustained and personal basis with career counselors and STEM coordinators at high schools and undergraduate institutions with high minority student enrollments. The recent SCOTUS decisions impacting diversity, equity and inclusion have hampered some of our efforts, but the NOA remains optimistic about its efforts to innovate new strategies to increase minority representation in optometry.”

According to Dr. Orso, the NOA, along with Black Eyecare Prospective (BEP), has many programs in place to recruit and retain minority optometric students. One such program, “Visioning the Future,” allows the NOA to visit historically black colleges



Mark Orso, OD, president elect of the National Optometric Association.

and universities (HBCUs) and expose students to the optometric profession via pre-optometry clubs and mentoring opportunities. BEP has similar programs such as Impact HBCU, which works to raise awareness of optometry as a career.

“This program has a goal of increasing the number of Black optometrists in the U.S. to 13 percent of the total optometrists in the country. Over the last year, the NOA has given out more than \$130,000 worth of scholarships to pre-optometry and optometry students,” said Dr. Orso.

“This was accomplished with corporate and foundation support from such partners as the National Optometric Foundation (NOF) and The Marvin Poston Foundation headed by Marlene Bell and VSP. We are very appreciative of such support, but we need much more from our corporate partners. Partnering with other organizations (AOA, ASCO, AAO, NBEO) brings greater awareness of the low-minority representation in optometry and the urgent need to open up more avenues and strategies for improving minority representation,” he said.

The NOA holds an annual convention in July to facilitate camaraderie among its OD members, support its student members and collaborate with its corporate sponsors. Next year’s convention will



Mark Orso, OD, attends a career fair at Hartwell elementary school.

be held July 17-20, 2025, in Columbus, Ohio. The number of NOA’s trade partners increases each year, but the group said it needs more support from large optical equipment companies in order to showcase its membership’s buying power.

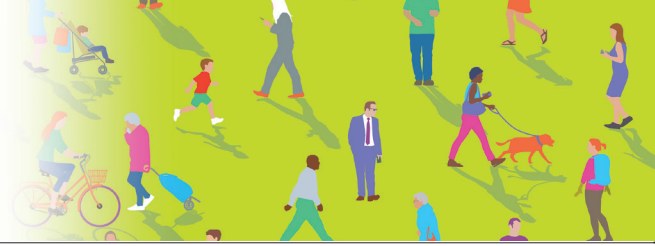
Every year at the annual convention, the NOA and other sponsors award multiple scholarships to National Optometric Student Association (NOSA) members based on their service, leadership and academic achievements. All dues-paying members have the opportunity to apply.

“After assuring that a potential optometry school candidate is well-educated, we feel that mentoring and exposing a student to the profession of optometry is paramount in making a student feel empowered and confident to achieve success in this great profession,” said Dr. Orso. “We feel that observing someone who looks like you and has some of the same cultural beliefs as you, enhances one’s belief that they can achieve the same goals.”

He added, “The NOA is firmly committed to exposing the low-minority representation in the field of visual health for the purpose of improving the overall well-being of our society. By increasing optometrists of color, we can provide greater access to health.” ■

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SUNY College of Optometry Deepens Its Commitment to Diversity Initiatives

SUNY College of Optometry <https://www.sunyopt.edu/> has been at the forefront of pushing for equitable representation of minority communities for years and that momentum continues to move forward today, says Dr. Joy Harewood, OD, FAAO, Dipl ABO, chief diversity officer and associate clinical professor at the college. SUNY recently received the Insight Into Diversity 2024 Health Professions Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award for the second consecutive year.

“Our goals for increasing equity, inclusion and diversity in campus are fully integrated into the strategic plan for our institution,” Dr. Harewood said. “Our commitment to promoting diversity includes organizing programs with high schools, hosting open houses on campus, offering summer experience programs and employing targeted recruitment strategies. We prioritize fostering an inclusive campus environment through training in cultural humility, inclusive communication and civil discourse.”

Dr. Harewood continued, “Our extensive optometry eye clinic, serving a highly diverse patient population, highlights the importance of this work. We collaborate with alumni, optometric organizations, and our long running “Race in Optometry” series to raise awareness and facilitate national conversations on racial representation. Furthermore, we prioritize supporting all students on campus, ensuring that minoritized students feel at home. Cultivating a strong sense of belonging empowers students to achieve academic and personal success, ultimately leading to thriving careers as optometry professionals.”

According to Dr. Harewood, organizations like Black Eyecare Perspective (BEP) and the National Optometric Association that have a foothold in historically excluded communities have been important partners in this work. She noted, however, that recent legislative actions and last year’s SCOTUS decision blocking racially conscious admissions has impacted momentum. “It is important to clarify that no student has ever been admitted based solely on their race. Each candidate has always been



Joy Harewood, OD, FAAO, Dipl ABO, chief diversity officer for SUNY College of Optometry.

considered holistically, with their background being just one element of their application.

“However, the SCOTUS decision has made people more cautious about considering the importance of equitable representation within their student body, creating a chilling effect on these efforts. Despite these challenges, progress is being made, as evidenced by the highest number of Hispanic/Latinx applicants to optometry schools last year. We are moving forward, driven by data-backed progress and a commitment to diversity,” she said.

Among the challenges that remain in attaining DEI goals, according to Dr. Harewood, are a lack of awareness and the high cost of education.

“In the eyecare profession, a significant challenge lies in the lack of awareness. To overcome this, we must spread the message about the beauty of eyecare in historically excluded communities,” she said. “Increased awareness often leads to greater interest, so it is crucial that we actively communicate the benefits and opportunities within the field.”

She continued, “Another major obstacle is the high cost of education, which can be prohibitive for many. To make eyecare education more accessible, we need to provide more grants and scholarships to not only help students enter the field, but also ensure their retention and successful transition into their professional careers. By addressing these is-



sues, we can create a more diverse and inclusive eyecare community that better serves our population’s needs.”

According to Dr. Harewood, partnerships are vital to this work. Those partners should be optometry schools, vendors, optical retailers as well as community organizations and professional optometric organizations. Mentorships also play a pivotal role in the growth of students and in supporting practicing professionals from minority backgrounds. “Our data reveals that personal interactions with practicing optometrists often inspire individuals to pursue a career in the field,” she said.

Dr. Harewood concluded, “A diverse student body and professional workforce benefits all of us. Diversity fuels curiosity, innovation and critical thinking while fostering connections across differences. These elements are vital for building a sustainable profession that provides quality care for people from all backgrounds.

“We can each contribute to creating a more diverse profession by engaging with others, advocating for equity within the field, and continuously educating ourselves to serve people from diverse backgrounds. Through collective effort and individual actions, we can shape a more inclusive and effective optometry profession that truly serves the needs of our increasingly diverse communities,” Dr. Harewood said. ■

Transitions Diversity Advisory Board Extends Its Reach to ECPs

Transitions Optical, Inc., part of the EssilorLuxottica group, in collaboration with the Transitions Diversity Advisory Board (DAB), is committed to advancing diversity in the optical industry. Through both collective board initiatives and individual projects, DAB is working to create a more inclusive profession with efforts and initiatives focused on outreach to minority students, providing school grants, and partnering with organizations to raise awareness about optometry as a career.

The board was originally formed in 2010 to help guide the company's multicultural initiatives and further strengthen its ability to help eyecare professionals provide culturally and linguistically appropriate vision care to a diverse patient base, according to Transitions.

"At Transitions, we've revitalized the Transitions Diversity Advisory Board with a renewed focus on creating meaningful change. Our mission is to increase diverse representation across the optical profession, ensuring that optometry better reflects the populations it serves," said Arlene Barringer, senior marketing manager, trade communications, Transitions Optical.

The DAB noted significant strides in several areas:

- Developing and presenting the American Board of Optometry (ABO) and COPE-accredited courses designed to equip practicing professionals with the skills to better serve a multicultural patient base.
- Creating resources to help eyecare professionals engage with students and connect more effectively with their diverse patients.
- Launching the inaugural Transitions Diversity in Optical Grants in 2024, offering financial support to students enrolled in optical programs.
- Partnering with Black EyeCare Perspective to execute the HBCU Light Intelligent Tour, visiting historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to raise awareness about optometry and encourage students to join the Black Eyecare Perspective Pre-Optometry Club.

- Collaborating with Latinos en Optometry on the "Road to Optometry" webinar series, spotlighting a different OD and modality in each session to showcase the vast opportunities within the optical industry.

- Two new initiatives with Latinos en Optometry. The first initiative will provide 16,000 middle and high school educators with an optical-focused curriculum, made available through the Young Minds Inspired network via a customized microsite. The second is a partnership with Jobson Research to create resources that will equip high school counselors and college advisors with the tools to educate their students about a career in optics.

After identifying lack of awareness as one of the major obstacles to a viable career path in optometry, particularly among minority communities, Transitions said it has created resources like the American Education Week presentation that eyecare professionals can use, personalize with their own story and present to students from elementary to high school.

There's also the challenge of access to financial resources, such as scholarships or grants, which can hinder minority students from pursuing higher education. "We launched the Transitions Diversity in Optical Grants to provide some financial relief for diverse students in ophthalmology, optometry and opticianry programs," said Barringer.

Additionally, there is a need for more mentors and role models from diverse backgrounds within the field. Addressing these issues requires sustained effort from the entire industry, including educational institutions, professional organizations and corporate partners, Transitions said.

"It's important to emphasize that diversity is not just about recruitment, but also about retention and development," said Barringer. "Once minority students enter the profession, we need to ensure they have the support and resources to succeed and thrive. This means creating inclusive environments in schools and workplaces. Achieving true diversity is a continuous process, and it requires commitment from everyone in the industry." ■

Transitions™
Light
Intelligent
Lenses



Arlene Barringer, senior marketing manager, trade communications, Transitions Optical.



Diversity Advisory Board members volunteered at one of the OneSight EssilorLuxottica Foundation vision clinics hosted during Transitions Academy 2024 in Orlando, Fla.



Transitions partnered with Latinos en Optometry at Florida International University to engage and support students from underrepresented backgrounds.

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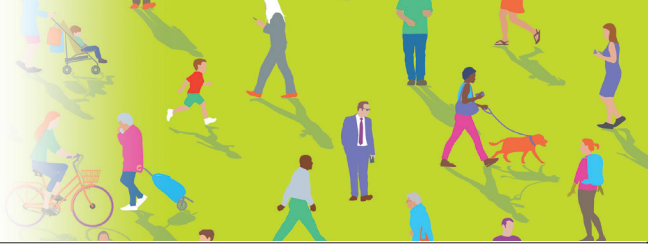
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OCTOBER 2024

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion



United Opticians Association Is Committed to Advancing Diversity in Opticianry

The United Opticians Association <https://www.opticians.org/> (UOA) is committed to advancing the inclusion of diverse groups within the professions of spectacle and contact lens opticianry and the related ophthalmic professions, the organization said. Currently, there is a strong and growing emphasis on advancing multicultural identity within the UOA and each of its areas of focus, including membership, industry relations, education and government relations, according to James M. Morris, Esq., chief executive officer and general counsel for the UOA.

In March of this year, the Opticians Association of America (OAA) and the National Federation of Opticianry Schools (NFOS) completed a merger, with continuing funding provided by the American Board of Opticianry & National Contact Lens Examiners (ABO & NCLE), that created a opticianry association representing over 80,000 opticians and contact lens professionals throughout North America.

“UOA has increasingly recognized the value of creating an inclusive workforce that reflects the diversity of our society. Indeed, when UOA was formed, by bringing together all of the major national opticianry-related organizations, one of the bedrock principles was inclusion, equity and access for all diverse groups,” said Morris. “UOA is actively implementing initiatives to foster multicultural identity and attract both apprentices and students from a wide range of backgrounds with a focus on underserved populations. UOA’s scholarship and mentorship programs are designed to offer financial support while also creating pathways for mentorship.

Morris also told *VM* that UOA recognizes the critical importance of early awareness about opticianry as a viable and rewarding career option for middle school, high school and college students.

“To this end, we have launched outreach and awareness campaigns and formed partnerships with industry leaders, schools, community organizations and career fairs to highlight the importance of vision care, and the key role that opticians play in the delivery of quality vision care—especially in locations where there is a limited amount of vision care

available, including, most often, underserved populations,” he said. “Additionally, our collaboration with industry partners plays a key role in advancing multicultural identity and student interest in opticianry, as these partnerships support various initiatives, events, scholarships and outreach programs focused on the inclusion, equity and access for all diverse groups within the opticianry profession.”

He added, “In the past year, we have personally seen an increase in the momentum behind social justice issues, coupled with the growing recognition for a more inclusive workforce. Professional organizations and educational institutions reported a stronger commitment to fostering diversity in the field. As a growing organization, we are shaping our initiatives to meet the needs of communities across the country and beyond, ensuring that opticians reflect the diversity of populations they serve and provide the highest level of care to all patients.”

Morris also identified some of the potential obstacles that make obtaining diversity in the profession a challenging task in general and for his group.

“One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of access to resources and information about career opportunities within opticianry for underrepresented communities. Many young people from diverse backgrounds may not be aware of opticianry as a viable and rewarding career option,” he said. “Additionally, financial barriers, including the cost of education, disproportionately impact minority students. Another critical issue is the limited representation within the profession itself. When students from minority backgrounds do not see themselves reflected in the field, they may feel isolated or discouraged from pursuing careers in opticianry.”

Morris continued, “Geographic and socioeconomic disparities present another challenge, as students from rural areas or economically disadvantaged communities often face difficulties accessing quality education and training opportunities in the optical field. This exacerbates the underrepresentation of certain groups within the profession. While there have been growing efforts to provide mentorship and support, there is still a need for a more ro-



James M. Morris, Esq., chief executive officer and general counsel for the UOA.

bust network that can effectively support students and professionals nationwide.

“At UOA, we understand that without strong support systems, individuals may struggle to navigate these obstacles. Access to professional development opportunities and mentorship play crucial roles in whether underrepresented groups stay in the field and move into leadership roles. That is why UOA is working to address these issues by engaging in direct community outreach and early education efforts designed to identify potential candidates for a career in the opticianry profession,” Morris said.

“UOA has established numerous scholarships designed to assist applicants from underrepresented and underserved communities, and has needs-based financial assistance available for study materials and examination costs, which are also designed to assist in promoting this career pathway for candidates coming from these underserved communities. Finally, UOA is actively working with opticians from diverse backgrounds to assist in matching students and apprentices with visible role models to assist in becoming an optician,” Morris said. ■

The Vision Council Offers Platform for Diversity Growth in the Optical Industry

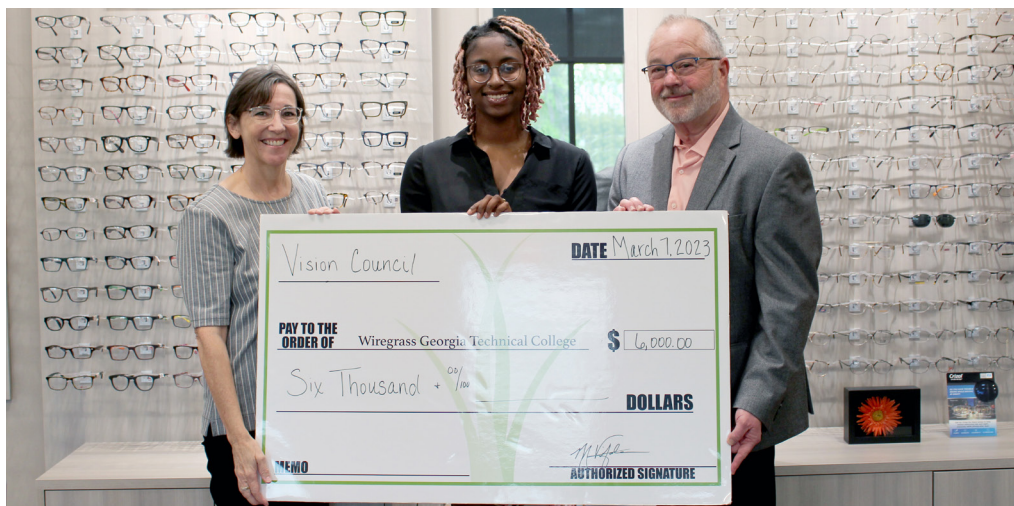
Earlier this year, The Vision Council <https://thevisioncouncil.org/> announced the re-launch of its philanthropic arm, The Vision Council Foundation. Formerly known as the Better Vision Institute, the 501c3 non-profit is dedicated to enabling better vision for better lives through eye health educational programs and optical industry career training support, The Vision Council said.

A key workforce development program, its Opening Your Eyes Scholarship (OYES) Fund offers students a first step into the optical industry by alleviating tuition and educational expenses for opticianry students from underrepresented communities. Since its inception in 2021, the OYES Fund has sponsored the education of more than 30 students at National Federation of Opticianry Schools around the country, according to The Vision Council.

In response to the growing demand for skilled eyecare professionals and the critical need for a more diverse workforce, the group plans to expand this program and offer additional resources including an interactive career pathways tool. Currently, the dashboard includes education requirements, expected salary ranges and job description information on medical-focused optical professions, but the goal, according to the organization, is to expand this resource in the coming months to include the broad range of opportunities available.

With additional funding, The Vision Council hopes to further attract students to the optical industry via community and corporate partnerships, as well as communication campaigns informed by The Vision Council's inSights Research team.

"Building a more diverse workforce for the optical industry starts with education," said Chelsea Pillsbury, vice president of marketing and communications at The Vision Council. "Letting people know what a rewarding career there is to be found in the optical industry—both personally and financially—is one of our biggest goals as we create our



Opening Your Eyes Scholarship recipient Amaya Moore (c) accepts her scholarship check from Lisa Griffin (l), program coordinator of Opticianry at Wiregrass Georgia Technical College and The Vision Council's Michael Vitale (r).



multi-year strategy for the Foundation."

Pillsbury continued, "We think it is critical to get in front of students at a young age—making sure that optical industry careers are part of career days, inviting professionals as classroom guests, getting information into the hands of school and community counselors, these are all critical to reaching students from diverse backgrounds."

The Vision Council's Opening Your Eyes Scholarship Fund is designed to provide financial assistance and career opportunities to students from underrepresented communities pursuing a career in the optical industry as a licensed optician. The scholarship provides \$6,000 toward tuition and certification exam fees to students pursuing an associate degree in ophthalmic dispensing and participating schools within the National Federation of Opticianry Schools. Interested students can apply directly through their school of choice. The organization is currently looking for partners and donors to help it continue and expand this program.



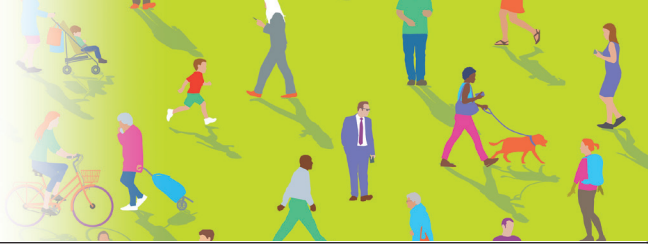
Maya Terry, Camden County College, class of 2026.

The group noted that it relies on donors and partners to fund its scholarship program as well as educational communication campaigns, so their support is critical to achieving diversity goals.

Organizations like The Vision Council and The Vision Council Foundation are critical as a bridge between industry and the wider public. By using data from its inSights Research team to inform its goals, strategy and outreach, the organization is able to offer an unbiased platform from which to advocate for the importance of diversity for growth within the optical industry. ■

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Diversity, Equity & Inclusion



VSP Vision Empowers Diversity Through Collaboration and Education

At VSP Vision <https://www.vspvision.com/>, the challenge of empowering diversity at the company, and in the workforce, gains momentum by reaching back to its history while keeping an eye squarely focused on the future.

“One of VSP Vision’s founders, Dr. Marvin R. Poston, was the first Black American optometrist on the West Coast, so empowering diversity is embedded in our culture and is why we’re committed to investing in a more diverse future for eyecare,” said Marvin Davenport, who joined VSP Vision in September of 2020 as the company’s first chief diversity officer. “We also understand that this is a journey that cannot be completed overnight and takes a strategic approach as well as collaboration across the industry.”

According to Davenport, that’s why VSP Vision works with organizations such as Eyerie Academics, the National Optometric Association and Black EyeCare Perspective to:

- Introduce the optometric profession to undergraduate students that otherwise may not have considered a career in optometry.
- Help underserved communities understand the impact eye health and vision care has on education, employment, quality of life and overall health.

“Since the creation of Black EyeCare Perspective in 2020, an organization designed to cultivate and foster lifelong relationships between Black American eyecare professionals and the eyecare industry, there has been an increase in the number of applicants from both Black and Latino students applying to optometry school,” said Davenport. “While we’re still working toward achieving a representation of 13 percent and 20 percent, respectively, for the Black and Latino populations, we are proud of the progress we’ve made thus far.”

Davenport also knows that achieving his company’s DEI goals means overcoming day-to-day

and long-term challenges. That’s where financial support from companies like VSP Vision can make a huge difference.

“I think one of the biggest obstacles for some people may be the investment required to attend optometry school. In addition to tuition costs, optometry students are responsible for obtaining costly optometric equipment,” he said. “That’s why it’s so important that we offer annual scholarships that will help champion diversity in the profession to deserving students, such as the Empowering Equity Scholarship and the Dr. Marvin R. Poston Leadership Award.”

The Empowering Equity Scholarship, created in collaboration with Black EyeCare Perspective, awards \$15,000 in scholarships, and in addition, five students are granted \$4,000 each in honor of Dr. Poston.

“In addition, last fall we pledged \$50,000 to the Dr. Edward Hernandez Endowed Scholarship, Mentorship & Leadership program. The program benefits Latino students by providing scholarship money, as well as funds for students to attend local, state and national optometric meetings,” Davenport said.

According to Davenport, during the last three years at VSP Vision, there has been an added focus on real-time and in-person connections with students at historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

“It’s through this engagement, we are reaching a student population that may not have even considered a career in optometry,” he said. “In addition, I think we need to encourage people, especially those living in communities where there is an unmet need for optometric care, to understand the importance of eye health and vision care.”

Davenport continued, “Our Visioning the Future Mentorship Program for students at HBCUs, in collaboration with the National Optometric Association (NOA) and the Dr. Marvin R. Poston Foundation, is fueling diversity in the optometric profession. In addition, we have partnered

vsp VISION™



Marvin Davenport, chief diversity officer for VSP Vision.



with educational institutions like The Ohio State University, the State University of New York, and the University of California, Berkeley, to help strengthen the future of vision care by ensuring a pipeline of diverse candidates enter the field to better reflect the patient population now and in the future.”

VSP Vision also seeks to provide its current network of providers with opportunities for education and growth around diversity, equity and inclusion. In the spring, it partnered with HUED, a learning and development company that creates equitable and inclusive health care content, and offered cultural competency and humility training.

“This type of training is so critical because it sets the stage for inclusive patient communication and improved treatment in health care settings—especially for communities with an unmet medical need,” Davenport said. ■

NECO Continues to Evolve Its DEI Efforts and Commitment

Continued from page 46

NECO is incorporating more robust training in cultural competency, addressing social determinants of health, and offering ongoing continuing education (CE) programs on these topics. Beyond curriculum changes, NECO has created culturally relevant curriculum committees that ensure cultural competency training is embedded across all four years of education, Dr. Purcell said. Additionally, partnerships with local schools, particularly in diverse areas, are being cultivated to introduce optometry to younger students through hands-on experiences at health care centers, further supporting early exposure to the profession.

“Lack of representation and awareness within the profession itself is another key obstacle,” Dr. Purcell said. “Seeing someone from a similar background in a professional role can inspire students

to pursue that path, but the current lack of diversity in the field creates a gap in this visibility. Awareness campaigns, mentoring programs and partnerships with community organizations can play a significant role in addressing this. NECO is focused on creating an environment where all feel welcome and that they belong.

“Achieving true diversity in optometry requires a multi-pronged approach that encompasses recruitment, retention, partnerships and long-term strategies. By focusing on early awareness, financial accessibility, representation and mentorship, optometry schools and the broader profession can continue to build a more diverse and inclusive field. Through collaborative efforts, industry events and innovative programs, the push toward diversity is gaining momentum, but much work remains to be done to address the barriers still in place,” Dr. Purcell concluded. ■



Students representing PRISM, NECO's LGBTQ+ student group, marched in Boston's annual Pride Parade.