Addressing Cultural and Racial Diversity in Professional Schools and Colleges of Optometry
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Abstract
Optometry, amongst other healthcare professions has indicated a need for greater racial and ethnic diversity in schools and the workforce. For decades, the enrollment of underrepresented minority (URM) groups has remained low. With the U.S. minority population steadily increasing, optometry is seeking to expand its efforts toward diversifying its schools and profession, respectively. This way parallels with the accelerating cultural changes in the U.S and prepares optometry students to practice in diverse pluralistic environments. This literature review provides an overview of the cultural diversity enrollment issue in optometry schools and discusses efforts to work toward sustainable solutions.

Keywords: optometry, cultural diversity, enrollment, underrepresented minority, eye care, URM, optometry schools

Background
Low representation of minorities in health professions and educational programs such as medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry, has been a recurring issue for years. This includes optometry, which has shown a significantly low presence of underrepresented minorities (URM) within its schools and eye care workforce. The number of URM groups, including African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Alaskan Native/Alaskan Islanders, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, enrolled in optometry schools and colleges of optometry does not mirror the increasing minority population in the U.S. Educators and professionals in higher education, including optometry, have agreed that a diverse academic environment adds positive benefits to the academic and social experiences of all students enrolled in various respective institutions.

Purpose
In order to diversify optometry schools and the eye care profession, we must analyze all aspects that impact this enrollment disparity of minority groups. The purpose of this poster is to discuss advantages of a diverse student body in optometric institutions and address recruitment and admissions of URM students.

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Systems Approach
In order to understand the problem within optometry, we have to take a step back and change our perspective on this staggering issue, taking a systems thinking approach. While promoting a culturally diverse student body is the task at hand, investigating only the superficial levels will only provide temporary solutions. The problem of low enrollment of URM students into optometry school occurs long before the application cycle. Areas to explore for sustainable solutions include: recruitment strategies, college to optometry pipeline, increase URM representation in leadership faculty and professionally, expanding admissions criteria, increase profession and career awareness, create positive relationships with collegiate pre-health advisor teams, continue to enhance diversity through interprofessional education and cultural competency.

References
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