Graduated from optometry school, now what? A survey of recent graduates to determine the most effective resources and methods utilized to find practice opportunities

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Recommended Citation
Cottrell, Kevin and Fehlauer, Tim, "Graduated from optometry school, now what? A survey of recent graduates to determine the most effective resources and methods utilized to find practice opportunities" (2002). College of Optometry. 1391.  
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Graduated from optometry school, now what? A survey of recent graduates to determine the most effective resources and methods utilized to find practice opportunities

Abstract
A sample of 200 randomly selected 1995 to 1999 graduates of Pacific University's College of Optometry were surveyed regarding the most effective resources and methods they utilized to find practice opportunities. Ninety responses were received, representing 45 percent of those surveyed. The results indicate that 77 percent of respondents have worked in at least two modes of practice since graduation. It was found that the three types of practice settings most commonly entered into after graduation were employment by an optometrist, self-employment as an independent contractor with an optical corporation, and employment by an optical corporation. The most commonly used resources and methods of finding this first mode of practice were: mailing letters of interest to practicing optometrists, utilizing contacts or employment information obtained from a preceptorship, the American Optometric Association's National Practice Resource Network (AOA's NPRN), and postings of employment opportunities at Pacific University. The resources that were ranked as being most effective in finding the first mode of practice were: word of mouth referrals, professors, preceptorship contacts, cold calling, and state optometric associations. The most common types of practice settings that the respondents are currently working in are solo practice, employment by an optometrist, and partnership with one or more optometrists. The most commonly utilized resources to find the most recent mode of practice were word of mouth referrals, state optometric associations, and cold calling. The resources rated as being the most effective in finding their current position were word of mouth referrals, the AOA's NPRN, and contacts made or information gained through a preceptorship.

Degree Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Science in Vision Science

Committee Chair
Denise Goodwin

Subject Categories
Optometry

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GRADUATED FROM OPTOMETRY SCHOOL, NOW WHAT?
A SURVEY OF RECENT GRADUATES TO DETERMINE THE
MOST EFFECTIVE RESOURCES AND METHODS UTILIZED
TO FIND PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

By

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TIM FEHLAUER, B.S.

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the
College of Optometry
Pacific University
Forest Grove, Oregon
For the degree of
Doctor of Optometry
May 2002

Advisor:
Denise Goodwin, O.D.
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Kevin is a fourth year Optometry student at Pacific University and will graduate in May 2003. His undergraduate degree in Human Biology was obtained from Brigham Young University. He plans on having a primary care private practice.

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Tim is a fourth year student at Pacific University College of Optometry and will graduate in May 2003. He earned his B.S. from the University of Wyoming in Zoology/Physiology. Tim hopes to eventually join a private practice in the western United States.
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Denise Goodwin, O.D. for the insight, encouragement, and guidance she provided throughout the completion of this project. We would also like to thank Amanda Terhes, Pacific University’s Alumni Coordinator, for her assistance in obtaining the names and addresses of recent Pacific University College of Optometry graduates.
Abstract

A sample of 200 randomly selected 1995 to 1999 graduates of Pacific University's College of Optometry were surveyed regarding the most effective resources and methods they utilized to find practice opportunities. Ninety responses were received, representing 45 percent of those surveyed. The results indicate that 77 percent of respondents have worked in at least two modes of practice since graduation.

It was found that the three types of practice settings most commonly entered into after graduation were employment by an optometrist, self-employment as an independent contractor with an optical corporation, and employment by an optical corporation. The most commonly used resources and methods of finding this first mode of practice were: mailing letters of interest to practicing optometrists, utilizing contacts or employment information obtained from a preceptorship, the American Optometric Association's National Practice Resource Network (AOA's NPRN), and postings of employment opportunities at Pacific University. The resources that were ranked as being most effective in finding the first mode of practice were: word of mouth referrals, professors, preceptorship contacts, cold calling, and state optometric associations.

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Introduction

Many optometry school graduates are confronted with the dilemma of finding practice opportunities. Moreover, this topic is not thoroughly discussed in the optometry school curriculum. At the time of graduation, a student often does not know how to take the proper steps to begin their career. There are multiple resources and methods optometrists can consult and utilize to obtain practice opportunities. The problem lies in the fact that a majority of graduates are unaware of these resources or how to properly access them. Many graduates randomly obtain employment resources and are not sure which ones are actually effective in finding their practice of choice.

In order to determine which resources and methods are commonly used to find practice opportunities and to determine which of these are most effective, a survey was designed to draw from the experience of optometrists who have recently graduated. A survey was sent to 200 randomly selected optometrists who graduated from Pacific University College of Optometry between the years of 1995 to 1999. The 90 optometrists who responded to the survey reflected on their experiences and provided valuable practice-finding wisdom. The information derived from these respondents is intended to help optometry school graduates become aware of the most effective means of finding practice opportunities.
Methods

Two hundred surveys were mailed to a randomly selected sample of practicing optometrists in the United States who were 1995 to 1999 graduates of Pacific University's College of Optometry.

Doctors were surveyed regarding the most effective resources and methods they utilized to find practice opportunities. The doctors surveyed were asked to mark what resources they used and to rank the effectiveness of the resources they utilized in finding their first and their current positions. They ranked them from 5 to 1, with 5 being most effective, 3 being somewhat effective, and 1 being least effective. A list of resources the doctors were asked to rank can be found in the survey in Appendix A.

Further information was gathered about the following: year of graduation, gender, city and state he or she is currently practicing, number of practice settings they have been employed in since graduation, and number of years they remained in their first mode of practice. Respondents were also asked to describe their first as well as their most current practice mode. The choices offered were differentiated between employed or self-employed positions. The choices available under the self-employed category were comprised of: solo practice, partnership with optometrist, partnership with ophthalmologist, and shared expense arrangement. The choices available under the employed category included: associateship with an optometrist, employed by ophthalmologist or medical clinic, HMO employment, government or military employment, and chain or corporate employment. Survey participants were also given the choice to describe their mode of practice if it was not listed or if it fell within any other category.

To determine the graduate's scope of practice, they were asked to mark which services they routinely provide in their current practice. The services listed for them to mark were: spectacle lenses, contact lenses, pediatrics, sports vision, geriatrics/low vision, vision therapy, full
scope/comprehensive care, and pre and post-operative care/pathology. A space was provided for them to describe any other services that they provided that were not listed. Finally, the respondents were given the open ended question, “What advice would you give to graduating optometry students who are seeking career opportunities?”

Results

Of the 200 surveys sent out to graduates, 90 responses were received, representing 45 percent of those surveyed. Of the respondents, 43 were male, 46 were female, and one did not specify gender. The number of respondents from each graduating class is listed in Table 1 below.

| Table 1: Respondent’s Year of Graduation |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 13 | 18 | 13 | 29 | 16 |

The optometrists surveyed were asked to indicate how many practices they have been a part of since graduation. Seventy-seven percent of respondents have worked in at least two practices since graduation. The mean numbers of practice modes the respondents have been involved in since graduation was 2.25 for the class of 1995, 3.25 for the class of 1996, 1.7 for the class of 1997, 3.2 for the class of 1998, and 2.3 for the class of 1999. A distribution of the mean and median number of practice modes for each year of graduation is depicted in Figure 1 below.
It would be expected that the class of 1995 would have been in more practices than the class of 1999, simply because they have been practicing longer. Yet, Figure 1 indicates that 1995 and 1999 graduates have been in a similar number of practices since graduation. This may be due to graduates changing positions frequently in the first two years of practice and then finding their preferred mode. Another explanation may be that the classes of 1998 and 1999 are in more practice modes before finding their practice of choice than are the graduates of the class of 1995. If this is the case, it is likely that many graduates of the class of 1999 will continue to change positions. Further studies are needed to fully understand the relationships depicted in Figure 1.
Those surveyed were asked to indicate the mode of practice that best describes their first practice setting. The results of the survey indicate that graduates begin their professional careers in a wide variety of practice modes (Figure 2). The practice mode most frequently entered into was employment by another optometrist (41%). Sixteen percent of respondents began their career as an independent contractor for a corporation while a corporation directly employed eleven percent. Eight percent of graduates worked for the government, six percent performed residency training, three percent were employed by an M.D., four percent worked for a health maintenance organization, three percent were in a solo practice, four percent were employed by a hospital, two percent entered into a partnership with another optometrist, and one percent were involved in a shared-expense agreement. It is interesting to note that a very small percentage were self-employed in their first practice setting.

Graph 2: Practice Settings for the First Mode of Practice

After describing their first mode of practice, the optometrists were asked to list the resources they used to find this position. The resources that were most frequently used were as
follows: mailing letters of interest to potential employers, utilizing contacts made in a preceptorship, cold calling potential employers, exploring opportunities posted at Pacific University through student resources, and utilizing the AOA NPRN (Figure 3). Resources that were not frequently used included: Optcom.com, college websites, and national associations. It is important to note that many respondents may have associated the AOA NPRN and national resources as being the same.
For each resource used, graduates were asked to rank them on the basis of how effective they were in helping them locate practice opportunities. The optometrists ranked them from 1 to 5, 1 being least effective and 5 being most effective. As seen in Figure 4 below, the resources ranked most effective were word of mouth referrals, cold calling, using information provided by state associations, professors, and utilizing contacts or information gained from a preceptorship. The resources considered least effective were career fairs, mailing letters of interest to potential employers, and Optcom.com.
After providing pertinent information about their first practice setting, the optometrists were asked to describe their current practice setting. As can be seen in Figure 5 below, a large percentage (29%) of respondents indicated that they are currently solo practitioners. Twenty-one percent are currently employed by another optometrist, fifteen percent are in a partnership with an optometrist, twelve percent are independent contractors for corporate practices, twelve percent are employed by M.D.s, four percent are directly employed by a corporation, and two percent are employed by a hospital. The remaining four percent of respondents are currently working in a residency, HMO, in a shared-expense arrangement, or for the government. A comparison of the number of optometrists currently working in each practice mode is provided in Figure 5 below.
When asked to list the resources used to find their current position, the respondents indicated that word of mouth referrals, information obtained from state associations, and cold calling potential employers were frequently used. Resources that were less often used included career fairs, college postings, professors, college web sites, and optom.com. Figure 6 below indicates the number of optometrists using each resource.
For each resource used to find their current practice, graduates were asked to rank them on their effectiveness. The optometrists ranked them from 1 to 5, 1 being least effective and five being most effective. As seen in Figure 7 below, the resources ranked most effective were word of mouth referrals, the AOA NPRN, contacts made during a preceptorship, and optom.com. The resources considered least effective were career fairs, college websites, and professors.
As a secondary interest in the study, respondents were asked to describe the services offered in their current mode of practice in order to determine the graduates' scope of practice. Of the 64 optometrists that responded to questions concerning services provided at their current practice, sixty indicated that they provide contact lens services. Fifty-six respondents provide spectacle corrections, fifty-nine provide comprehensive eye care, fifty-five provide co-management/pathology services, forty-five provide pediatric optometric services, twenty-seven provide specialty services in geriatrics/low vision, fifteen offer vision therapy services, and four provide sports vision. Figure 8 depicts the services currently provided by these recent Pacific University graduate respondents.
Discussion

Students upon graduation are confronted with the issue of how to go about finding and beginning a career. The main reason for this study was to determine which resources and methods are commonly used to find practice opportunities and to decide which of these are most effective in finding practice opportunities. Often graduates use many different resources without knowing which are effective. Figure 9 shows that many more resources were used by graduates in finding their first mode of practice. The 90 respondents used a total of 246 resources in finding their first practice opportunity averaging 2.7 resources used per person. A total of 100 resources were used in finding their current position, which averages 1.1 per person.

Graduates seemed to use more of a shotgun approach in finding their first position (i.e. try many resources and see what happens). However, in obtaining their current position respondents used less resources, likely due to having a better idea of what type of practice they want to be in and which resources would be most effective. It can be inferred that many respondents were not satisfied in their first position because on average a respondent was in 2.7 practice settings since graduation, and only 29% stayed in their first position. Furthermore, of the 68 graduates who had more than one position, they remained in their first position a median of only 1.5 years before moving on. It is hoped that the data collected in this study will help graduates realize what resources are available and what the most effective resources are so they can more easily find an opportunity they are satisfied with.
Figure 10 below gives a comparison of the mean usefulness of resources used in finding the first and current practice modes by respondents. The graph indicates that ten resources were listed better than moderately effective (higher than level 3) in finding the first mode of practice. Listed in the order of effectiveness, these resources are: word of mouth referrals, cold calling, state associations, college postings, contacts made during preceptorships, professors, family, newspapers/journals, contact lens or frame representatives, and national associations. As for the current mode of practice, the following were rated higher than moderately effective: word of mouth referrals, the AOA NPRN, contacts made during preceptorships, optom.com, family, state associations, cold calling, contact lens/frame representatives, unsolicited letters from potential
employers, mailing letters of interest, and newspapers/journals. Resources that were found to be more than moderately useful in finding both the first and most current mode of practice were: word of mouth referrals, contacts made during preceptorships, state associations, cold calling, family, contact lens/frame representatives, and newspapers/journals. The most effective resource overall, rated as "highly effective" for finding both the first and current modes of practice, was word of mouth referrals. Of interest were the discrepancies in effectiveness between the resources used to find the first and current mode of practice. On the one hand, professors and the college web site were found to be much more useful in finding the first mode of practice. This is a logical finding considering new graduates have greater access to these resources. On the other hand, the AOA NPRN and optom.com were much more effective in helping optometrists find their current mode of practice. It is important to note that optom.com was underutilized in finding primary and current practice opportunities. The seven times that optom.com was used, it was found to be effective.

Graph 10: Comparison of Resources Used in Finding the First and Current Mode of Practice
Conclusion

It is important for recent graduates to be aware of the many resources that are available to find practice opportunities. Students are often exposed only to career fairs and college postings during their education. However, career fairs were rated as being ineffective, and college postings as being only moderately effective in finding practice opportunities. It may be surprising to graduates looking for opportunities that there are many other resources that can be effective in helping them begin their careers. The best approach may be to use multiple resources, keeping in mind which ones have proven to be more effective. This study has also indicated that a majority of graduates work in more than one practice setting before finding their preferred mode of practice. One of the more enlightening aspects of the study was the personal recommendations that the respondents added to their surveys. A list of these recommendations from experienced optometrists who have been through the challenge of finding practice opportunities is located in Appendix B.
Appendix A: Survey

Survey to Determine the Most Effective Resources Utilized in Finding Practice Opportunities

Pacific University College of Optometry
c/o Dr. Denise Goodwin
2043 College Way
Forest Grove, OR 97116

What was your year of graduation from optometry school? 

What is your gender? 

In which city and state are you currently practicing? 

How many practice setting have you been employed in since graduation? 

Which of the following would best describe your FIRST practice mode after graduation?

- SELF EMPLOYED
  - Solo Practice
  - Partnership with one or more optometrist (Joint Ownership)
  - Partnership with one or more ophthalmologist (Joint Ownership)
  - Shared-Expense Arrangement (Drs. Sharing overhead w/ separate practices.)
  - Other: 

- EMPLOYED
  - Associateship (Employed by an Optometrist)
  - Ophthalmologist / Medical Clinic (Employed by an MD)
  - HMO (Health Maintenance Organization). Name of HMO: 
  - Government / Military
  - Chain or Corporate. Name of Corporation: 
  - Other: 

How many years did you stay in this mode of practice? 

Indicate all resources you utilized in finding your first position. Of those selected, please rate them from 1 to 5 with 1 being least effective to 5 being most effective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources Utilized</th>
<th>1 = Least Effective</th>
<th>3 = Somewhat Effective</th>
<th>5 = Most Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preceptorship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career fairs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold calling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper or magazine classifieds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mailing letters of interest to practicing O.D.s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsolicited letter from potential employer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Obtaining practice opportunities from contact lens, frame, or other representative</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>College postings through student resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Associations</td>
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<td>State associations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOA, National Practice Resource Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>College of Optometry Web site</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.optcom.com">www.optcom.com</a> (Vistakon sponsored)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Internet:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Which of the following would best describe your CURRENT practice mode?

**SELF EMPLOYED**
- Solo Practice
- Partnership with one or more optometrist (Joint Ownership)
- Partnership with one or more ophthalmologist (Joint Ownership)
- Shared-Expense Arrangement (Drs. Sharing overhead w/ separate practices.)
- Other: ___________

**EMPLOYED**
- Associateship (Employed by an Optometrist)
- Ophthalmologist / Medical Clinic (Employed by an MD)
- HMO (Health Maintenance Organization). Name of HMO: ___________
- Government / Military
- Chain or Corporate. Name of corporation: ___________
- Other: ___________

Of the areas listed below, mark all those services you routinely provide:
- Spectacle Lenses
- Geriatrics or Low Vision
- Contact Lenses
- Full Scope or Comprehensive Care
- Pediatrics
- Vision Therapy
- Sports Vision
- Other: ___________

Indicate all resources you utilized in finding your current position. Of those selected, please rate them from 1 to 5 with 1 being least effective to 5 being most effective

**Resources Utilized**
- Professors
- Preceptorship
- Career fairs
- Family
- Cold calling
- Newspaper or magazine classifieds
  - Please specify ___________
- Mailing letters of interest to practicing O.D.s
- Unsolicited letter from potential employer
- Obtaining practice opportunities from contact lens, frame, or other representative
- College postings through student resources
- National Associations
  - Please specify ___________
- State associations
  - Please specify ___________
- Internet
  - AOA, National Practice Resource Network
  - College of Optometry Web site
    - Which college(s) ___________
  - www.optoc.com (Vistakon sponsored)
  - Other Internet: ___________
- Other: ___________
- Other: ___________

What advice would you give to graduating optometry students who are seeking career opportunities?