Strategies to Advance Diversity and Reduce Structural Racism at Berkeley Optometry and Vision Science

Action Plan* - Draft

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University of California, Berkeley
School of Optometry & Vision Science Program

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Background:
Optometry has one of the worst diversity profiles amongst all of the UC health science programs with respect to Black and Latinx graduate students and faculty. The lack of diversity is also a national problem as identified in the table below, with only 2% of optometrists being Black, and 4% of optometrists being Latinx. Currently, 13% of the US population identify as Black and 19% as Latinx. Berkeley Optometry has only 2% Black students and 11% Latinx students. Of its faculty, 4% are Latinx and there are no faculty who identify as Black.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>United States Population/ODs¹</th>
<th>California Population/ODs</th>
<th>US Optometry: Students/Faculty²</th>
<th>UCB Optometry: Students/Faculty²</th>
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¹United States Census Bureau Quick Facts (July 2019); ¹Data USA (2018) & AOA (2018); ²ASCO survey (2019).

Under-represented groups (URGs) make up more than a third of the US population, and c.50% of the California population. The national and state demographics for optometry does not reflect this diversity. It is essential to increase URGs at Berkeley Optometry as the only public program in California. Diversity, equity and inclusion in the healthcare workforce helps to expand access, improves patient satisfaction and health outcomes, increases cultural competence among healthcare providers and stimulates research in areas of need. We believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential to achieve excellence and accomplish Berkeley Optometry’s academic, research and public service missions.

Berkeley Optometry is the top optometric training program in the nation. Our students consistently outperform other schools on national board exams, residency placement, and numbers of patient encounters. Our faculty are awarded more federal research funding than all the other optometry schools combined. As the US leader in optometric education we are well positioned to spearhead the charge to identify and support opportunities to improve diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging throughout the optometric profession.

To fulfill this mission, we propose four areas of focus: (i) pipeline and recruitment; (ii) retention and mentoring; (iii) climate; and (iv) measuring success and monitoring accountability. Within each area of focus we will engage with our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and local communities. We will partner with UC Health and national optometric organizations to extend our programmatic goals beyond the Berkeley Campus.
1. Pipeline and Recruitment:
Improving the diversity of doctors of optometry, resident doctors, faculty, and industry leaders begins with the pipeline and recruitment of a diverse pool of applicants to optometry school. According to the Optometry Centralized Application Service (OptomCAS), only 11% of applicants identified as Latinx and 5% as Black for the 2018-19 cycle. While there have been small increases in the number of Latinx applicants over recent years, the percentage of Black applicants has remained very low.

![Optometry School Applicants by Race](image)

To increase the number of applicants from URGs we must first increase their awareness of the optometric profession as a possible career path, while increasing access and reducing barriers to the application and admissions process.

1. Expand Outreach to Diverse Communities at the High School and College Levels.
   Avenues for increasing high school student engagement include:
   a. **MIMS (Mentoring in Medicine and Science program):** Berkeley Optometry will strengthen their relationship with this program by hosting visits by minority STEM students to increase awareness of optometry as a career path. We will also explore opportunities to engage in other similar programs (including AMGEN, Berkeley’s Expand Your Horizons program for young girls and West Oakland Health Center’s internship programs).

   b. **Vision Science division of Bay Area Students in Schools (BASIS):** We propose to partner with Berkeley Vision Science graduate students on this recent initiative; using it as an opportunity to increase awareness of the profession of optometry. Dr. Emily Cooper is faculty coordinator of this program. The [NSLC (National Student Leadership Conference)](https://www.nsclctraining.org/) also brings high school students interested in health careers to campus,
and thus represents another opportunity for engagement, e.g., through presentations that increase awareness of optometry as a rewarding profession in health care.

c. Berkeley Optometry Opto-Camp: developed in 2005 as a one week, summer-enrichment program for undergraduate students with interest in pursuing optometry as a career path. While it is geared toward underrepresented groups and last year (AY 2019-2020), the 60 participants included 10% Black and 13% Latinx “campers”, it has historically required a registration fee of ~$200. Traditionally, around 15% of the incoming Berkeley matriculants are Opto-Camp alumni, and 90% apply to national optometry programs. The COVID-19 pandemic enforced a timely experiment with remote delivery this year. With amazing support from our current OD students serving as Berkeley Optometry Ambassadors (BOAs) and small group leaders, our Admissions and Student Affairs (ASAO) team hosted a highly engaging, successful program for 84 campers, with registration fees waived. Based on this success, future camps will be delivered using a hybrid model with online attendance open to everyone.

d. Beyond Opto-Camp: We propose a new program whereby BOAs will continue to play an important role in hosting Staying Connected events, by way of maintaining strong relationships with campers. ASAO staff works with BOAs to offer webinars on strategies for building a strong application and answer questions regarding the student community and resources within and outside the school. As cost is a major driving factor to access, Opto-Camp participants, whether onsite or online, will now receive a $66 fee waiver on their application to Berkeley Optometry.

e. Berkeley Virtual Pre-Optometry Club: While many of the larger college campuses have pre-optometry clubs, many of the smaller ones do not. To target pre-health undergraduate students on the latter campuses, we will facilitate the development of and host a web-based alternative, which will have regular virtual meetings and elected officers (once adequate membership has been achieved), who will direct club activities. Activities will include webinars, advice on applications, essay writing workshops, and other networking opportunities.

f. Local Campus Student Engagement: We will work with existing Berkeley campus organizations that have significant involvement with undergraduate students belonging to URGs to increase awareness of Optometry as a career path. Outreach will include faculty and alumni presentations (see h below) and peer support (via the BO Ambassador program). Campus organizations include:
   - Educational Opportunity Program
   - Transfer Student Center and Re-entry and Transfer Student Association
   - Black Students in Health Association
   - Chicano(a)s/Latino(a)s in Health Education

gh. Optometry Pipeline Program modeled after the Dental Pipeline Program: This program proved to be highly successful in improving the recruitment of URG students to the
dental profession. To this end, we will leverage our existing relationships with community health centers in the Bay Area to place trainees in community settings, by way of educating all of our students about health disparities, cultural competency, and the negative impact of social determinants and implicit bias on health and wellness. We will realign our fourth year rotation sequence to ensure that all students get a minimum number of clinic days/weeks delivering eyecare services to patients in such settings.

h. URG Alumni as a National Recruitment Army: For many of our students, the spark of inspiration to pursue optometry came from their optometrist. We will engage our alumni to educate and mentor their student patients about our profession, and also to reach out to racial and ethnic minorities within their local communities.

2. Engage with National URG Optometric Organizations.
   a. Black Eyecare Perspective (BEP): Created in February of 2020, BEP’s mission is to expand the representation of Black people in the eyecare industry. BEP established a membership of ~350 members in just 2 weeks and created a Virtual Pre-optometry Club for Black undergraduates to assist them in their career search and application process. We will promote Opto-Camp through this organization and have already started a mentorship program to advise interested students. We will also partner with them in their outreach efforts to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) this Fall (Day of Action, October 6, 2020)

   b. National Optometric Association (NOA): This 50 year old organization has as its primary mission, to advance the ocular/vision health of minority populations. There is already a student chapter (NOSA) within our school, the leaders of which will serve on our Council for DEI&B and liaise with NOA to find networking opportunities and scholarships for undergraduate students. The NOA President speaks at our Opto-Camp program on a regular basis and we will continue to collaborate with and find opportunities to promote Berkeley Optometry via NOA. Berkeley Optometry was the NOA School of the Year, 2016.

3. Decrease Barriers to Admission.
   a. Eliminating Standardized Tests: Our initial triage of applicants uses an academic index derived from their grade point average (GPA) and Optometric Assessment Test (OAT) score, with students now allowed to substitute other standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), as a less expensive option to help reduce barriers to admissions. As a practical solution to the challenges in accessing testing centers in the current pandemic, standardized test scores have been made optional for the coming admissions cycle. At the same time, the enforced switch to a more holistic approach to evaluating applications will provide important data on the impact of the standardized test requirement on the diversity of our applicant pool and admitted students. It is expected that both will benefit, as URGs typically do not perform as well on standardized tests due, in part, to a lack of access to expensive preparatory courses. These data will be important for decisions by Berkeley
and the broader Optometric educational community as to whether the standardized test requirement can and should be eliminated permanently.

b. **Entrance & Graduate Opportunity Scholarships**: Scholarship funds to support URG students will be sought through our school and national organizations, including NOA. Berkeley Optometry, in its 2018/19 Strategic Plan, committed to doubling the number of Graduate Opportunity Program (GOP) scholarships, which are awarded on an annual basis to students demonstrating significant financial need, and backgrounds, interests, and/or goals that enhance diversity in the graduate community. Specifically, we will offer eight GOP scholarships by 2021/22, up from Optometry’s current campus allocation of four. Seven GOP scholarships were awarded to the incoming class of 2024, Black students being two of the recipients.

4. **Faculty Recruitment:**
   a. **Faculty Mentorship**: URG clinical graduate students and residents will be actively mentored, to expose them to academic career options, including clinical and tenure-track positions, as well as more research focused options.

   b. **Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO)**: This national organization has a Diversity and Cultural Competency Committee, with one of its initiatives being to expose clinical URG students to academic careers. To this end, a Future Faculty Program has been established with UCB faculty member Dr. Mika Moy, and Dean John Flanagan, who is ASCO’s current President, serving as co-chairs. The program will help sponsor interested minority graduate students and residents to attend a related conference, which will also be used as an opportunity to identify and organize visits of potential future faculty to the Berkeley campus. In addition, we will facilitate visits by our own URG students and residents interested in academic careers to other schools through this program.

   c. **UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program**: To improve the representation of URGs among our ladder rank faculty, we will review annually participants within this pipeline, to identify those with vision research interests.

II. **Retention and Mentoring:**

   In the 2019-20 Annual Report from UC Berkeley’s Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health (CACSMH), “CACSMH members noted worrisome increases in academic stress, social isolation, basic needs, stressful and unsafe living situations, mental health concerns, job market stress, xenophobia, and racism.” Due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities, 42% vs. 30% of underrepresented graduate and professional students, respectively, are “concerned or very concerned about their ability to pay for food, medical expenses, or other basic needs during this crisis” and nearly half of all respondents anticipate the need for mental health services during the pandemic.

While concerns about student wellness impact our entire student population, URG students are particularly susceptible to imposter syndrome and fear of failure. As outlined below, we have identified several important ways to improve climate, reduce bias and create a strong sense of
belonging within the Berkeley Optometry Community. Furthermore, we must and will provide students with the resources needed to succeed academically. At Berkeley Optometry we are committed to a school-wide mindset shift away from “can a student be remediated?” to focus on “what resources do we need to provide to ensure that we graduate proficient, successful clinicians?”

To accomplish the above goal, we must guarantee all students access to appropriate academic support services, career development programs and mentorship. Thus, we will engage with our current students, faculty and alumni to create a clear path to success by:

i. Developing a structured and highly supportive program for training and as necessary, remediation, which partners students with individual faculty and peer mentors;

ii. Identifying safe and supportive spaces to promote wellness and guide academic success within and beyond the Optometry community on the campus; and

iii. Implementing new learning objectives that emphasize learner wellness and performance success over grades.

1. Create the Berkeley Optometry Pathway to Success (OPtoS) Program.
   Led by the Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs (Dr. Nancy McNamara), Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs (Ms. Jessica Rivers), and Student Affairs Faculty Advisor (Dr. Mika Moy), the Berkeley OPtoS program will provide a safe and supportive space for students seeking academic support. The program leadership will identify a faculty coach and peer mentor who, together with the student, will identify specific areas that are challenging and develop a defined program to address them, be they didactic and/or clinical deficiencies. Participation in OPtoS will be confidential. Development of the OPtoS program will be guided by the Berkeley Student Council for DEI&B (see below) to ensure it remains true to its mission.

2. Identify Safe and Supportive Spaces.
   To guide student academic success and promote wellness within and beyond the Berkeley Optometry community.

   a. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI&B) Student Council: In collaboration with our student body, a DEI&B Student Council has been created with a view to improving the recruitment, retention, experience and mentorship of underserved, under-represented groups. Their Mission is: To provide a safe space for students to mobilize efforts for sustainable changes that increase diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within the Berkeley optometry and vision science community. Leaders of the OPtoS program will work with the student council to brainstorm and advocate for novel approaches that build upon other initiatives to improve student retention.

   b. Berkeley Alumni Student & Resident Mentoring Program: We are partnering with our alumni to create a support network for our graduate URG students. URG alumni have committed to provide individualized mentoring and career advice to our students. These efforts will be spearheaded by the newly formed Berkeley Optometry’s Black Advancement Initiative Council (BAI), led by Berkeley Optometry alumni Drs. Joy Harewood, Sheryl Guillory, Farah Gulaid and Cristen Adams. To enhance DEI&B amongst our Berkeley community and its alumni, the BAI Council has developed a Five Point (Five R’s) action plan:

      • **Review:** Work with Berkeley Optometry’s Admissions and Student Affairs Office to identify the needs of current underrepresented students and recent alumni.
• **Recruit:** Work with Berkeley Optometry’s Developmental Relations Office and faculty to recruit a diverse and inclusive alumni group to provide mentorship to underrepresented groups.

• **Retain:** Work with the Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs to develop support structures that strive to retain underrepresented students and faculty through individualized mentorship and identifying mechanisms to provide ongoing support (e.g., financial, social, and physical/mental health).

• **Realize:** Create an external alumnus review board to assess current initiatives and advise on future initiatives.

• **Recognize:** Utilize the same external review board to ensure accountability.

We envisage reaching out to our Latinx alumni to establish a similar network. In addition, we will train and support volunteer alumni to mentor:

i. STEM students as they prepare their applications;

ii. Optometry and Vision Science URG graduate students, as they negotiate their academic programs.

c. **Berkeley Optometry’s Peer-to-Peer Program:** In an effort to improve peer-support amongst our students, we will build upon an existing Big-Sib program by training a select group of upperclassmen as peer advisors for 1st and 2nd year students. Peer advisors are not intended as a substitute for, but rather will complement, the counselling work of the Admissions and Student Affairs Office (ASAO), as well as of the Associate and Assistant Deans for Admissions and Student Affairs. Advisors will be expected to be knowledgeable of relevant campus resources and offer a safe space for students with issues related to self-esteem, navigating financial hardships, personal relationships, and challenges unique to students who identify as URGs, LGBTQ, first generation, and/or disabled. In relation to academic challenges, they will also work closely with Berkeley Optometry’s Student Chapter of Beta Sigma Kappa, an international Optometric honor society that offers academic support through well established tutoring programs that are available to all Optometry students.

d. **Small Group Coaching Program:** At the beginning of their first year, each class will be assigned two didactic and two clinical faculty members who will meet in small groups with students throughout their four years of optometry school. They will also liaise with the Associate and Assistant Deans for Admissions and Student Affairs as necessary to ensure access to the necessary resources for students in need.

e. **Emphasize Learner Wellness and Performance Over Grades:** We are pursuing a curricular change that shifts away from the traditional letter grading system to one that emphasizes learner wellness and performance over grades. There is now an extensive literature demonstrating the benefits of a satisfactory/unsatisfactory (pass/no pass) grading scheme in professional health care programs, with the UCSF Schools of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry, all having made this transition, with overwhelming support for the shift. Benefits include reduced competition and increased collaboration among classmates, improved performance, and improved mechanisms for student retraining and return to good academic standing. We have discussed this option at length with our current student body, and by informal survey over 80% are in favor of the change. A related proposal will be presented to our Berkeley Optometry faculty at its Fall faculty meeting after which, assuming the response
is favorable, a formal proposal will be developed for review by UC Berkeley Grad Council, COCI, DIVCO, R&E, and the Division.

3. Faculty Retention and Mentoring.
The key role of mentoring in the retention of young faculty from URGs is well recognized at Berkeley and beyond. When their numbers are low, the role of a faculty mentor must necessarily extend career guidance to protector, to ensure that they are not overwhelmed by committee work at the expense of other activities, including research and teaching, that are key to achieving tenure and/or promotion. To this end, such faculty will be assigned two mentors from within the school, one of whom will be either the school’s equity advisor, faculty chair, or associate dean of academic affairs, and the other being a senior faculty member of choice aligned by either teaching or research interests, and an external mentor identified through ASCO. The mentor model involving internal and external faculty will be modelled on the highly successful global mentoring program of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO), which has a requirement of structured monthly meetings over 1-2 years, to set goals, review progress and trouble-shoot.

III. Climate.
Foster a Sense of Community and Belonging: Key to the success of all students and faculty is a sense of belonging. As diversity within our community is increased, we need to ensure that all feel welcome and are given every opportunity to succeed. To that end, we have formed several groups to proactively create a climate of inclusion and belonging.

   This newly established council (BOC-DEI&B), has as its mission to identify and support opportunities to improve diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within Berkeley Optometry.
   It will be led by a newly appointed Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, and include representatives from all student groups and units within the Berkeley Optometry community: Senate Faculty, Clinical Faculty, Senior Assistant Dean for Finance and Operations, Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs, Clinic Staff, Optometry Student Leadership, Vision Science Graduate Students, Postdoctoral Fellows, National Optometric Students Association (NOSA) Presidents, NOA Faculty Representatives, Berkeley Optometry Alumni Representatives, Dean, Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, and Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs.

   The council will:
   a. Identify opportunities to improve DEI and Belonging (DEI&B)
   b. Recommend actions and activities that will embrace diversity throughout the Berkeley Optometry Community
   c. Support school outreach initiatives in admissions, student affairs and local communities
   d. Identify opportunities to recruit minority faculty and staff
   e. Consider strategies to ensure inclusion and belonging
   f. Update the Strategic Plan to include a specific section/s on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, in addition to the current overarching Guiding Principles. This will ensure action and codify future accountability.
   g. Analyze and report effectiveness of DEB initiatives
   h. Inform Dean on DEIB priorities
i. Ensure formal diversity training (Mandatory 1-2 hour training for Faculty, Staff, Students) to foster cultural competency, combat implicit bias, and deepen interracial dialogue  

j. Identify and leverage campus and systemwide resources and support systems

2. Clinic Climate Committee.
This committee will comprise key clinical faculty who do not hold administrative positions and representatives from each class of optometry students. Its mission is to create a supportive working and learning environment, and a safe space for students to relay concerns.

3. Guides to Reducing Barriers to Campus Community, Wellbeing, and Mental Health Resources.
On this list for development is a quick guide for students to campus and community resources, including self-help resources, and for URG students specifically, URG organizations groups that offer community support outside of our school including:

i. UC Berkeley Black Student Union  
ii. UC Berkeley African American Student Development  
iii. Black Students in Health Association  
iv. Black Graduate Student Association  
v. Chicano(a)s/Latino(a)s in Health Education  
vi. Graduate Students de la Raza  
vii. Hermanos Unidos.

IV. Measuring Outcomes as a Means for Monitoring Accountability.

Our goals lend themselves to quantifiable outcome measures including:

a. Data on recruitment programs, including attendance at recruitment webinars and future in-person presentations  
b. Number of undergraduates enrolled in our Virtual Pre-Optometry Club, including those from URGs  
c. Number of applicants from URGs and matriculants compared with national statistics  
d. Graduation rates of all students, with special interest in those from URGs  
e. Number of faculty recruited from URGs  
f. Improvements in climate-based surveys of students, staff and faculty. A mid-year, student climate survey was implemented 2 years ago and will serve as baseline data.

Data will be collected annually by the Director of DEI&B and evaluated by an external review board comprising Berkeley Optometry Alumni, which includes representatives of the BAI Council, who can hold our school accountable for meeting our objectives. Based on their findings, this review board will make recommendations to the Dean.