

## **SUNY Optometry pursuing new ways to diversify**

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As New York state's education conversations whirl around increasing diversity at top elementary and high schools, state university officials are looking for ways to do the same at graduate-level programs where they say the need to enroll minority students is just as urgent.

At SUNY Optometry in New York City, for example, the college is on an aggressive push to recruit and enroll black and Latino students, who make up only about 6.3 percent of its 415 students.

The college has been more actively trying to feed minority and economically disadvantaged students into the optometry program, through intensive internship and summer courses and specific social media tactics, since at least 2012. Underrepresented minorities are even more underrepresented in optometry than other health fields, according to the college's 2016-2020 diversity plan. On average, representation in optometry is about 5 percentage points below medicine, pharmacy and dental schools.

Still, in 2018, just 11 underrepresented minorities matriculated of the 52 that applied to SUNY Optometry. While that's an increase from the single underrepresented minority that matriculated from the college in 2009, it's not nearly the bump the school would like, said SUNY Optometry's president, David Heath.

The college's patient clinics serve more than 67,000 patients annually. Part of the college's 2018-2023 strategic plan is to make the program "broadly accessible to all" in order to better serve diverse communities, Heath said.

"There is a dearth and a real challenge to get doctors to practice in upstate and lower socioeconomic communities," Heath said. "The whole diversity goal is to have [the] workforce more reflective of the citizens they serve."

Last Friday, in a new approach, SUNY Optometry hosted a hackathon — a rapid paced brainstorming session — for about 70 diversity and inclusion experts across the country to collectively seek alternate solutions for recruiting and enrolling students of color. The attendees formed teams and composed draft plans which they presented in a competition at the end of the day.

"When you have a problem or a challenge that is hard to crack or move forward, it's often embedded in institutional culture or practice," Heath said, adding the event was about confronting the traditional ways of thinking and operating that are barriers to change.

The winning presentation was a collaborative effort by a team of professionals representing Stony Brook Social Welfare, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, Fordham University, and the SUNY system.

The plan they cobbled together focuses around guaranteed admission for high performers at schools of interest such as historically black colleges or universities, affordable on-campus housing options SUNY Optometry lacks, flexibility in curricula for non-traditional students, better advertising around inclusive environments, free or discounted public transportation passes and a stronger full-ride scholarship program.

It also includes exposure for middle and high school students through eye screenings and information sessions at NYC schools. The next step is for the college's student affairs team to review and organize the proposal by themes and assess whether or not some of the ideas are feasible.

SUNY Optometry is part of a group of 21 SUNY campuses operating programs under the Performance Investment Fund to increase student access, completion, and success rates. What SUNY Optometry discovers in its diversity push will be spread through the SUNY network for customized adoption by other PIF campuses, SUNY Chief Diversity Officer Carlos Medina said.

It is one of the few graduate programs in the 21-campus PIF community of practice, thus making it a vital component for discovering new ways to diversify, officials say.

Graduate students are often those who later become faculty, SUNY's Board of Trustees Chairman Carl McCall said, making diversity in the programs key to degree completion rates.

"We're not going to have a diverse student body if we're not going to have a diverse staff," McCall said.

McCall said SUNY Optometry is an example of the entire system becoming more diligent and creative in attempts to diversify, especially with a federal administration that has signaled it would not actively pursue such policies.

"This is not just political slogan or checking off a box," McCall said. "It is central to country where people get the sense that wherever they came from they can still move ahead."

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