

Lighting a Pathway: The Minority Ophthalmology Mentoring Program

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Racial disparities in eye health and health care are well documented. An ophthalmology workforce that better represents the diversity of the US population can impact the access and delivery of quality eye care. The American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) and the Association of University Professors in Ophthalmology (AUPO) have partnered to create the Minority Ophthalmology Mentoring (MOM) program, which aims in part to increase the diversity among ophthalmology trainees by introducing and recruiting underrepresented-in-medicine (UiM) premedical and medical students to this specialty.



Despite an increasingly diverse US population, the proportion of individuals in ophthalmology from UiM racial-ethnic groups has remained low.

A diversified workforce would help decrease healthcare disparities for several reasons:

- Non-white physicians disproportionately care for underserved and sicker patients
- A growing body of literature in primary care has documented associations between physician/patient racial-ethnic and language concordance (speaking the same language), increased patient satisfaction, and trust in the healthcare system
- UiM researchers are more likely than their peers to study problems that disproportionately affect underserved communities

African Americans, Latinx individuals, Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders make up **1/3** of the US population

In 2015 African Americans, Latinx individuals, Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders made up **6%** of the practicing US ophthalmology population - unchanged from a decade earlier.

Today, **2/3** of physicians know that disparities exist in specialty services but believe the problem is not widespread.

Less than **29%** believe the healthcare system treats people unequally on the basis of race. As such, at a minimum, greater communication and education about these issues are needed to reduce health disparities and inequities.

However, education and communication alone are insufficient.

Many complex factors contribute to racial health inequity:

- individual experiences
- structural barriers
- unconscious (implicit) biases
- lack of culturally competent care



There is an underscored need for greater diversity in ophthalmology; the MOM program aims to increase UiM applicants to US ophthalmology-residency programs.

The program helps to make participants competitive applicants in the ophthalmology residency-selection process, targeting premedical college seniors and 1st/2nd year medical students self-identifying as African American, Latinx, Native American or Native Alaskan, or Pacific Islander.

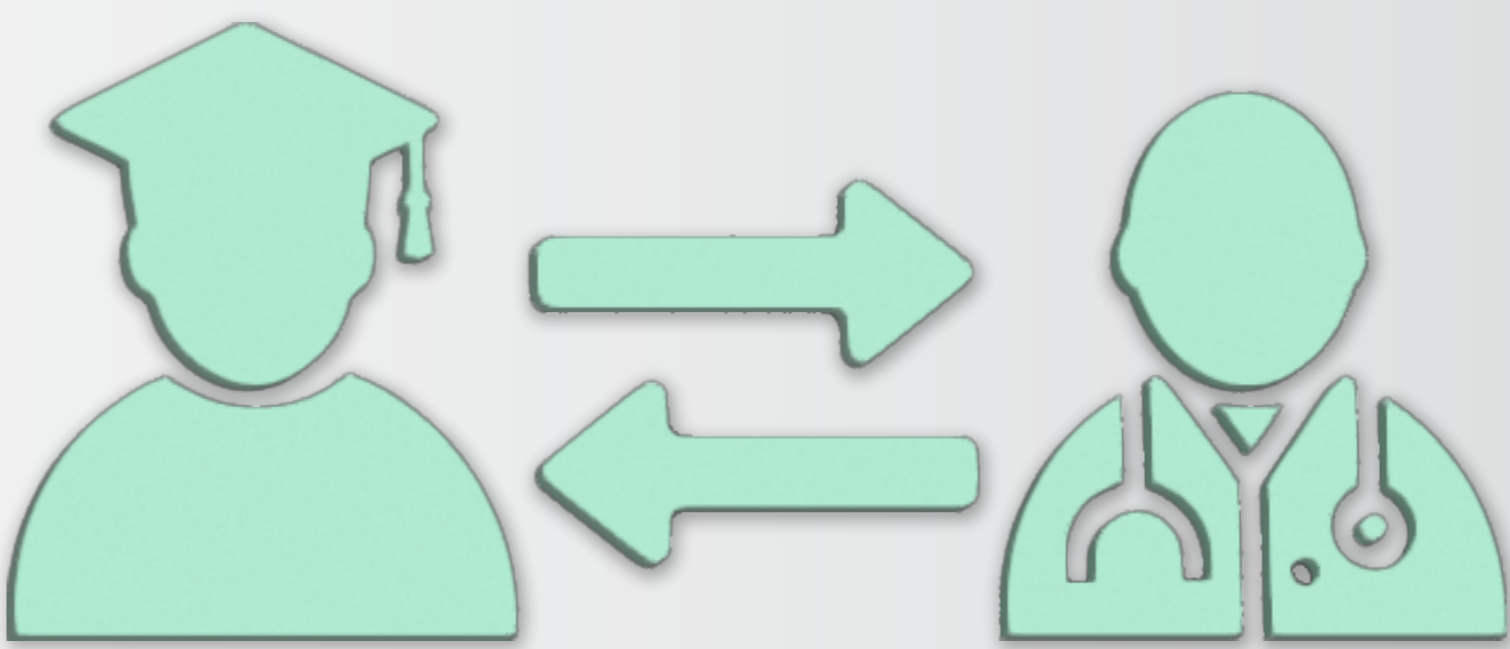


The mission of MOM includes raising awareness among residency-training programs about the low numbers of UiM ophthalmologists and trainees. MOM also encourages the creation and implementation of a more holistic residency-selection process, in which decision makers receive training about unconscious bias.

MOM partners with historically Black colleges and universities and national organizations with a high enrollment of minority premedical or medical students:

- American Association of Medical Colleges [aamc.org]
- Rabb-Venable Excellence in Ophthalmology Research Program [rabbvenable.org], offered through the National Medical Association [nmanet.org], Ophthalmology Section, and supported by the National Eye Institute
- Student National Medical Association [snma.org]
- Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science [sacnas.org]
- Latino Medical Student Association [lmsa.site-ym.com]
- Association of American Indian Physicians [aaip.org]

Student participants in MOM are each paired with an ophthalmologist mentor, exposed to research opportunities, and offered resources to prepare for medical board examinations. Student participants are also provided with information and support to become competitive applicants for ophthalmology-residency selection.



The mentors and research preceptors in MOM are chosen on the basis of their experience in postgraduate selection and training and its selection process. Toolkits are available for AAO members who are interested in conducting community educational events. [<https://www.aao.org/minority-mentoring>]



Conclusions

Diversifying the ophthalmology workforce will enhance the awareness of health disparities, direct research resources toward understudied medical problems affecting minority communities, and help provide high-quality, patient-centered medicine to all patients. Program enrollment and sustained engagement of MOM volunteerism are imperative to the goal of increasing diversity to reduce health inequity, thereby better serving all patients.