



**ALLOWING NORTH CAROLINA STUDENTS  
AFFORDABLE – EQUITABLE OPTOMETRIC EDUCATION**

**Presented by Representatives of the North Carolina State Optometric Society  
To the LRC Study Commission on Health Care Provider Practice Sustainability  
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- Optometrists in North Carolina are an important component of the larger healthcare system providing primary health care to our population.
- Medicare and Medicaid consider practitioners in the profession of optometry the same as they do other health care providers; such as medical doctors, osteopathic physicians and dentists, with regard to reimbursements and other issues related to health care provision.
- Since Optometrists are on the frontlines of eye and vision care for the vast majority of those needing professional eye care in our state, it is very important that the demand and need for optometric services be met.
- There is no optometry school located in our state, hence North Carolina students must be trained in and recruited from Colleges of Optometry located in other states, particularly schools in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Texas and Alabama, where contract spots were previously allotted for North Carolina students.
- For 31 years, North Carolina offered a grant program to offset the out-of-state tuition at those schools, thus making the cost of optometric education for North Carolina residents essentially equivalent to in-state tuition.
- Most of the North Carolina residents who attended optometry school under this arrangement returned to North Carolina, and optometrists in our state are among the most equitably distributed, serving both urban and rural, of any of the health care professions.
- Nationally the ratio of optometrists-to-population is 1 per 7,000; the ratio in North Carolina is well below that at 1 to 10,000 and has declined 5% in the last 5 years. Like many professions, North Carolina has a large percentage of baby boomers who will not be practicing in 10-12 years and nearly 40% of North Carolina optometrists fall into that category.
- Statistics from both the Southern College of Optometry (TN) and Pennsylvania College of Optometry (PA) demonstrate the decline in North Carolina students enrolled in their programs since the elimination of the grant program.
- Optometry should be part of the solution when discussing the future health care needs of the citizens of North Carolina. The modest cost of reinstatement of the tuition offset grant program for optometric education should be considered as part of an overall approach to health workforce policy in our state.

**Respectfully submitted by: Steven H. Eyler, OD and Hal C. Herring, Jr., OD**

**Resources for data presented: American Optometric Association, Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry, Association of Regulatory Boards of Optometry, Pennsylvania College of Optometry, Southern College of Optometry, North Carolina State Board of Examiners in Optometry, UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research.**

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