



Marie Lulette Fermil is a second-year student at University of Missouri-St. Louis in the Army Reserves.

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balance is more emphasized than it was in the past, and that goes for men, too," Hamm says.

"With so many different avenues in optometry, you can choose to lead whatever kind of life you want. If you want a family, you can have one. If you don't, you don't. If you want to have 70 dogs and run a farm, you can do that, too. You can practice anywhere at any time."

### Diverse perspectives

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However, one of those paths isn't for the faint-hearted. And as Marie Lulette Fermil can attest, it wasn't a straight path. Fermil immigrated to the U.S. in 2006 from Quezon City in the Philippines. In 2009, she enlisted in the U.S. Army as a medic, and it wasn't long before Fermil was looking for a specialty.

"I didn't realize how frightening being a medic is, but I was doing well," she says. That's when an opportunity for an ophthalmic technician class opened, and she volunteered.

Fast-forward through six years of clinic rotations and undergraduate night classes, and Fermil is currently working through her second year at UMSL in the Army Reserves, owing three years of active duty post-graduation. She plans to make the Army, and optometry, a career.

It was while stationed at Madigan Army Medical Center outside Tacoma, Washington, however, that Fermil noticed another trend in optometry. By her estimate, 9 out of every 10 optometry student interns were not only women, but also Asian.

"At first I thought, 'Oh my gosh, Asian women must really be dominating this profession,'" Fermil says. Although not quite "dominating," Asian students represent one of the fastest-growing demographics in optometry school.

According to ASCO data, the minority groups with the largest increases in enrollment between 2006 and 2016 include Asian (48 percent) and Hispanic (41 percent) students. Likewise, the minority groups with the largest gains in dental school enrollment also were Asian (32 percent) and Hispanic (63 percent) students.

However, Asian students still only represent about a third of optometry school enrollment; Hispanic, black and multiracial students even less. That represents a challenge for optometry schools, says Quy Nguyen, O.D., State University of New York College of Optometry director of career development and minority enrichment.

"Optometry tends to attract more Asian and Caucasian students, but it's not entirely reflective of the American population," Dr. Nguyen says. "There are a lot of barriers to higher education. When it comes to attracting historically underrepresented groups, certainly the cost is an issue, but we know that our focus on academic excellence and standardized test scores are other factors. When students attend our programs, we have workshops and speakers designed to motivate and provide tools to help them succeed."

Dr. Nguyen oversees an effort to remove those barriers, called the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP). The initiative strives to increase the number of historically underrepresented groups in the profession by inviting prospective, qualifying students for an internship of the optometry program.

In 2015, CSTEP's winter internship offered 15 slots and received 39 applications; in 2016, that increased to 72 applications. Most importantly, many of those candidates have turned into optometry school enrollees.

"The program's been going really well, and I'm excited about what's going to happen and come out of these shifts in demographics," Dr. Nguyen says.

Jacqueline Davis, O.D., professor of clinical optometry at The Ohio State University and AOA's 2016 Optometric Educator of the Year, also leads an effort to enroll ethnically underrepresented minority students (read more on page 20). It wasn't all that long ago that Dr. Davis remembers her own first day of optometry school, counting the number of black students who would join her.

"I kept looking and looking, and no one else came in," she says. "I thought to myself, 'Alright, you're doing this on your own.'"

But that kind of thinking is precisely what Dr. Davis' Improving Diversity in Optometric Careers (I-DOC) program hopes to change. I-DOC provides qualifying students with a hands-on look at optometry school and discusses the importance of diversity in health care.

Often optometry isn't the first profession for minority students looking at health careers, Dr. Davis says; however, the I-DOC program provides a "lightbulb moment."

"When students start to look at the lifestyles and what that means for their livelihood and family, optometry is a great option to consider," Dr. Davis says. Programs, such as I-DOC and CSTEP, are helping move the needle, but the numbers of minority students entering the profession are still low," she says.

She adds, "We're absolutely not where we should be in having the profession reflect the American

## EXAMINING THE GENDER

# PAY

# GAP

Optometry isn't unique to the increasing numbers of women entering the profession. It also is not unique to the pay gap between men and women.

Published in March 2016 by online jobs marketplace Glassdoor, "Demystifying the Gender Pay Gap: Evidence from Glassdoor Salary Data" found female U.S. workers earned about 94.6 cents per dollar to their male counterparts. But health care represents the largest gender pay gap at 7.2 percent, or about 93 cents per dollar.

For UMSL student Kate Hamm, the gender pay gap is a frequent topic of conversation, especially after a salary negotiator spoke to her and classmates. Hamm summed up the discussion in one word: "Disconcerting."

"I just didn't think that was a thing anymore," Hamm says. "I've heard about it in other professions, but I thought optometry was fairly women-heavy and it wouldn't be the case."

Here are Glassdoor's top five highest "adjusted" gender pay gaps in health care for 2016:

1

### Dentist

**Adjusted gender pay gap:** 28.1 percent  
**Average salary:** \$132,125

2

### Psychologist

**Adjusted gender pay gap:** 27.2 percent  
**Average salary:** \$76,061

3

### Pharmacist

**Adjusted gender pay gap:** 21.8 percent  
**Average salary:** \$120,000

4

### Physician

**Adjusted gender pay gap:** 18.2 percent  
**Average salary:** \$175,929

5

### Optician

**Adjusted gender pay gap:** 17.3 percent  
**Average salary:** \$24,290

### What about optometry, specifically?

The latest (2015) AOA Survey of Optometric Practice found female practice owners earned about \$41,000 less than their male counterparts in 2014, or about 33 percent less.