



CAOS • ACÉO

Canadian Association of Optometry Students

Association canadienne des étudiants en optométrie

2016 CAOS SURVEY REPORT

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Abstract:

The Canadian Association of Optometry Students (CAOS) conducted a survey that was sent out to all Canadian OD students from University of Waterloo, University of Montreal, and US optometry schools to better understand student perspectives about the state of the optometric profession. The survey asked participants to rank seven different challenges Canadian optometry is currently facing, from most important to least important, and provide open-ended feedback about these issues. The results showed that students believe low public awareness and online eye services were the top two of highest importance affecting the profession, whereas lack of residency opportunities was ranked least important. The open-ended responses from students showed some disconnection in awareness about the issues affecting our profession, and the actions currently being taken by the optometry associations to resolve the issues. Overall, communication between the optometry associations and students could be improved, and students would like to see more public campaigns to promote awareness for the profession.

Introduction:

The Canadian Association of Optometry Students/Association Canadienne des Étudiants en Optométrie (CAOS-ACEO) is a North American wide organization that represents Canadian optometry students studying in Canada and USA. Our mission is to enhance the professional and clinical development of the next generation of ODs, and create awareness of challenges affecting the optometric profession. Also, we want to increase the public's awareness of optometrist's role as the primary vision care provider. By unifying optometry students together, we can collaborate and deal with current and futures challenges affecting the profession.

You can learn more about CAOS by visiting <http://caostudents.ca>

Purpose of the survey:

It is evident that there are many challenges affecting the Canadian optometric profession. The CAOS executive committee decided to conduct this survey to learn more about the student perspective on current challenges facing the profession, and to voice their concerns anonymously to the professional associations and colleges. Also, the survey was used as a means to educate the students on some of the current challenges affecting the profession. Lastly, we used this survey to determine the amount of student interest in attending CAO Congress 2017.



Methods:

The 2016 CAOS Student Survey was conducted using the SurveyMonkey platform. The survey consisted of 9 questions, which were used to collect data on: demographics of Canadian optometry students from the Canadian and US schools, a ranking of different issues of the optometric profession based on the respondent’s perspective, open-ended questions for the respondents to provide any additional concerns or suggestions regarding the profession, and their interest in attending CAO Congress 2017.

The survey was sent out to all University of Waterloo optometry students through email, in class announcements by CAOS executive members, Facebook announcements, and word of mouth. Students were encouraged to complete the survey as it was an opportunity for them to voice their opinions. The survey was distributed to the University of Montreal Optometry students by their CAOS chapter. In order to eliminate any errors in interpreting the survey, they were provided a document containing a French translation of the survey questions. In addition, the survey was distributed to all US CAOS chapter presidents to notify Canadian students to take the survey.

We made the survey available to the students throughout the month of December 2016 (4 weeks). The results were then analyzed by the UW CAOS executive team and compiled into this report. The survey received a total of 180 responses from the aforementioned Canadian optometry students.

Survey Results & Analysis:

Question 1: Are you male or female?

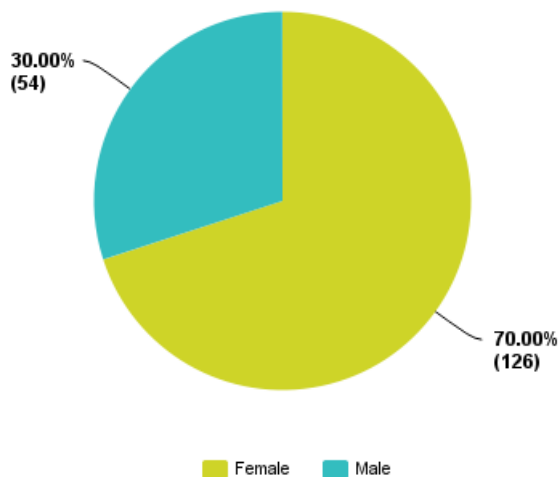


Figure 1: Represents the demographics of the responses by gender.

Question 2: Which optometry school are you currently attending?

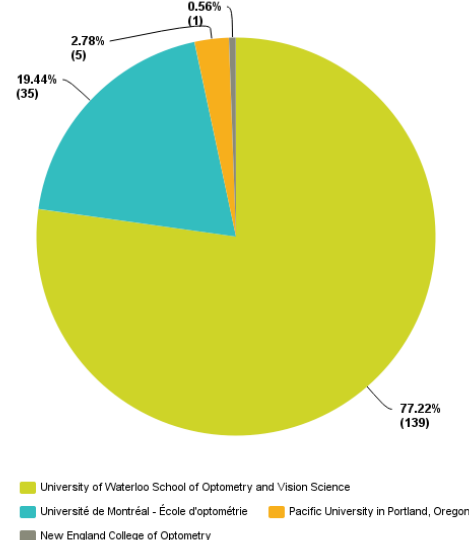


Figure 2: Represents the demographics of the responses by optometry school attended.



A total of 180 responses were received. The data showed that 70% of the population was female, which coincides with the current optometry student population across North America (Figure 1). The data revealed 139 students (77%) came from University of Waterloo, 35 students (19.44%) came from University of Montreal, 5 students (3%) from Pacific College of Optometry, and 1 student (0.56%) from New England College of Optometry (Figure 2). Low representation from the US schools suggests that communication between CAOS and the US chapters could be improved.

Question 3: What year of optometry are you currently enrolled in?

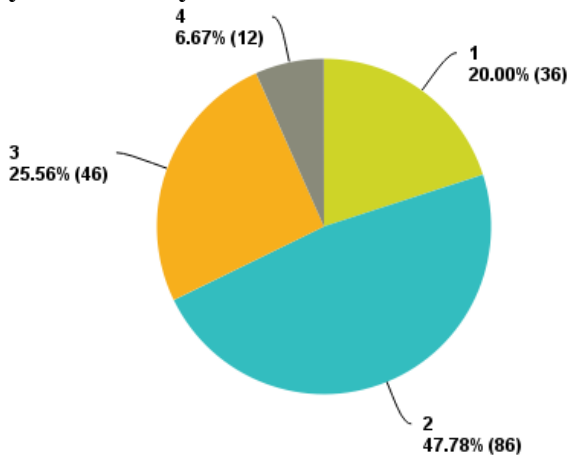


Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by year of Optometry.

Question 4: What province or territory are you from?

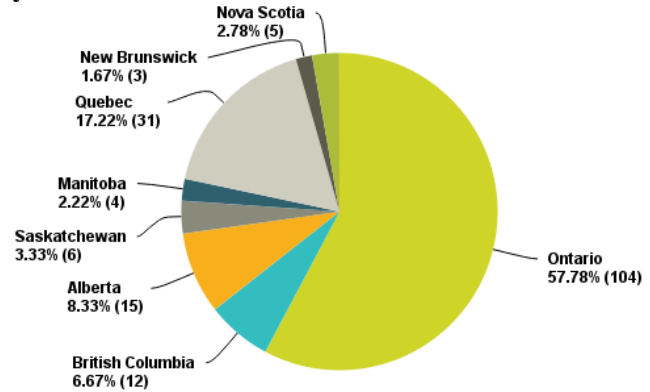


Figure 4: Distribution of respondents by province of origin.

Almost half of the responses (47%) came from second year students. Responses from first and third year students were similar, making up 20% and 26% of the responses respectively (Figure 3). The smallest number of responses were received from 4th year students. This could be due to the 4th years being on their externship rotations, which would make communication with the school or CAOS more difficult. In addition, more than half of the respondents (58%) were from Ontario. Also, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia were well represented making up 17%, 8% and 7% of the responses respectively (Figure 4).



In **Question 5**, students were provided with a list of 7 challenges currently affecting the profession, summarized in Table 1. This list was compiled by the CAOS executive team to comprehensively encompass the various issues. Each student was then asked to rate the 7 challenges in order of most important (rank 1) to least important (rank 7).

Table 1: List of 7 current issues affecting Canadian optometry that the students were asked to rate in order of importance.

Optometrist employment saturation in Canada
Online eye exams, contact lens, and glasses dispensing
Lack of Canadian residency opportunities
Low public and health care practitioner awareness of what optometrists do
Differences in scope of practice between Canadian provinces and USA
Low government and private insurance remunerations
Lack of interprofessional collaboration among health care providers

Question 5: Rank the following from most important (Rank 1) to least important (Rank 7) on what issue you think is the most challenging issue currently facing optometry.

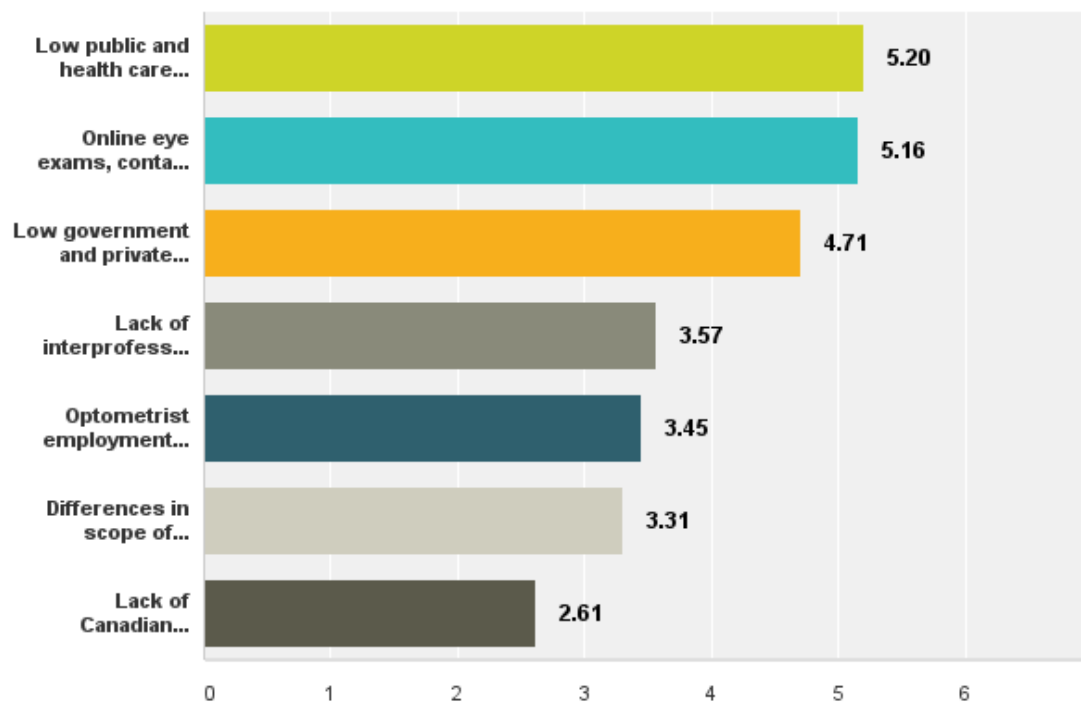


Figure 5: Rating of the challenges currently affecting Canadian optometry. Higher scores on the figure represent higher ranked issues (closer to rank 1) whereas lower scores represent lower ranked issues (closer to rank 7).

SurveyMonkey compiled all the responses and gave each category a mean score. Higher scores represent higher average ranking (closer to rank 1), whereas lower scores represent lower average ranking (closer to rank 7). The highest rated issue collected from the survey was “low public and health care practitioner awareness of what optometrists do” with a mean score of 5.20, followed closely by “online eye exams, contact lens, and glasses dispensing” with a mean



score of 5.16 (Figure 5). The lowest scored issue was “lack of Canadian residency opportunities” with a mean score of 2.61. Students thought this had the smallest effect on our profession, although it is still a pertinent issue.

Question 6: Are there any challenges listed from Question 5 that you were uninformed of, and want to learn more about?

Table 2: Challenges from Question 5 that students were uninformed of and want to learn more about.

Issues Uninformed of by Respondents	Frequency
Low government and private insurance remunerations	16
Differences in scope of practice between Canadian provinces and USA	15
Optometrist employment saturation in Canada	12
Lack of Canadian residency opportunities	8
Online eye exams, contact lens, and glasses dispensing	6
Lack of interprofessional collaboration among health care providers	1
Low public and health care practitioner awareness of what optometrists do	0

Low insurance remunerations were identified as the most uninformed issue by the respondents. This was followed by differences in scope of practice, optometrist employment saturation, lack of Canadian residency opportunities, online eye services, and lack of interprofessional collaboration respectively (Table 2). Low public awareness of optometry was an issue not mentioned by students for being uninformed.

Question 7: Do you have any additional concerns that were not addressed in Question 5? Please let us know below.

There were 44 students that responded to this question. The following is a brief summary of the concerns the students had that were not suggested in Question 5:

Respondents are concerned about the limited scope of practice, for instance the inability to prescribe certain medications, and order lab tests in Ontario.

Students mentioned that there is a lack of support for Canadian optometry students studying in the USA, and there are a limited number of optometry schools in Canada.

The recent advances in technology such as online eye exams, and the negative impact of large chain franchises on private practice optometry is a pertinent issue.



The high financial cost of writing Canadian licensing exams, and the ability of optometrists to practice in BC without writing Canadian licensing exams was brought up as well.

Increased interprofessional collaboration within the eye care field was also indicated.

Residency trained optometrists not recognized as “specialists” in Canada was stated as a problem by one of the respondents.

Please refer to **Appendix I** to access all of the responses to Question 7.

Question 8: Do you have any suggestions for the provincial and national optometry associations (OAO, CAO, etc.) on how to overcome the challenges listed from Question 5? Please let us know below.

There were 41 students that responded to this question. The following is a brief summary of the suggestions offered to the national and provincial associations by the students/respondents:

Increase public awareness of what optometrists do, and the benefits of having regular eye exams by an optometrist. A few ideas that the students suggested for enhancing public outreach were: collaborating with an eye care industry partner to run a nationwide public outreach campaign on the importance of having regular eye exams by an optometrist (similar to how the Canadian Dental Association partnered with Colgate-Palmolive to implement a nationwide public education campaign about dental care). Television commercials, YouTube videos, and billboard advertisements about the importance of visiting an optometrist were suggested by some respondents.

It would be greatly beneficial to have another optometry school, particularly in Western Canada so that students have more opportunities to stay within Canada to study and practice optometry. Also, advocate to increase Canadian residency opportunities, and increase legislation regarding online eye exams and dispensing.

Engage and inform students on projects the associations are currently working on or plan on pursuing in the future. Effective communication with students via newsletters, emails, and presentations to keep students informed on issues affecting Canadian optometry.

Enhance interprofessional relationship between MDs, OMDs and ODs by inviting them over to optometry conferences. Educate them on the role and importance of optometrists in the Canadian healthcare system.

Please refer to **Appendix II** to access all of the responses for Question 8.

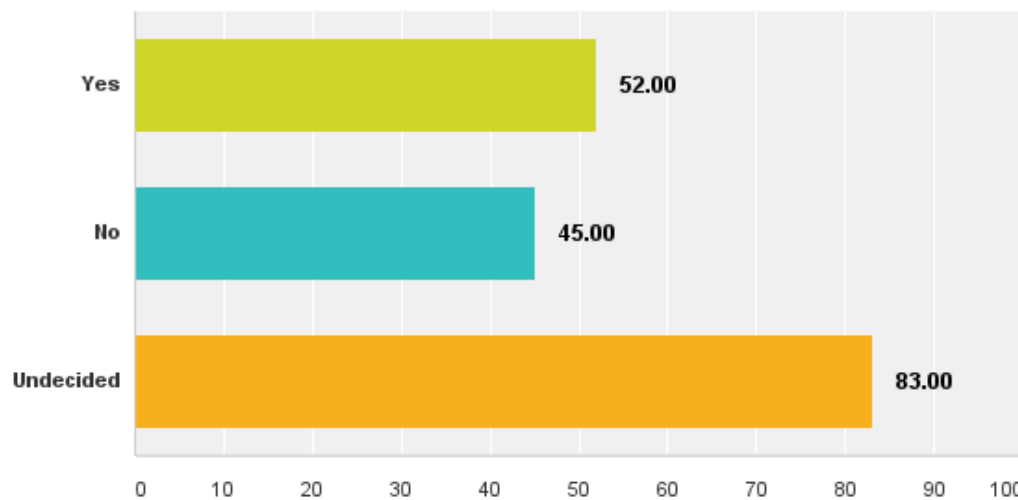
Question 9: Do you plan on attending CAO Congress 2017 from June 28-30th in Ottawa?

Figure 7: Respondents were asked if they had any interest in attending CAO Congress 2017. This was done to estimate the expected student attendance for the CAO.

This data was collected to gauge students' interests in attending CAO Congress. The results of this question were shared with the CAO to determine the student registration fee for Congress 2017.

Reflection:

One limitation to our study is that we had difficulties promoting our survey to the US CAOS chapters. We lacked direct access to advertising to these students, and as a result had a low response rate from them. To improve this, we must have better communication between CAOS, the US chapters, and its members.

One point we would like to highlight is that although the "lack of residencies for Canadian students" received the lowest ranking, its importance should not be undermined. The results show some bias because not all students are interested in completing a residency upon graduation. Perhaps one area to focus on is increasing education and interest among the students to take part in residencies.

A very common issue brought up by the students was the lack of public awareness on what optometrists do, and the importance of an eye exam. We feel that a greater emphasis should be placed by the associations on increasing public awareness. During the annual OAO town hall meeting at University of Waterloo, students were shown a short marketing video called, "Sleepless, are screens keeping you awake?" on digital eye strain. Many of the students found this video to be very effective and would like to see an increase in similar initiatives by all associations. We believe that these videos should be broadcasted to a greater number of media



channels, and shared on social media. These videos are not only entertaining, but also rich in educational content which would be effective in raising public awareness for services an optometrist can provide.

Based on the open-ended responses in the survey, we got the sense that students thought the optometry associations were not doing enough to resolve the issues proposed by CAOS. However, we at CAOS do acknowledge that the associations are taking action against these problems. We believe there is a disconnection between students' expectations and the work that is being done by the association. We propose that CAOS can try to improve communication by being informed about the progress made by the associations, and relaying it to the students. It would be appreciated if the associations could give a monthly summary or announcements about current updates which we could pass on to the students. This would not only encourage student participation and awareness, but also increase their appreciation for the efforts by their provincial associations. We hope this will lead to greater support for the associations by our students and future ODs upon graduation.



Appendix I: Responses from Question 7

Table 3: Open-ended responses to additional concerns students had about the optometry profession. Responses have been modified for grammar. Repeated or inappropriate responses were omitted.

“Our lack of updating our drug list with newer medications, particularly in Ontario.”
“The lack of support (and almost interest) for Canadian optometry students in the USA. Also that Canada only offer two programs (mainly just Waterloo for all others outside Quebec). This means that Canada loses a lot of students to the USA which also means that Canada loses potentially many valuable future docs that may stay in the US (for monetary reasons, scope differences).”
“Optometrists being unable to order lab work.”
“There is no Optometry school in western Canada.”
“new technology that can take over for refraction eye exams and how it is encroaching the profession”
“How the bridging program is only 3 months while other programs require at least 1 year.”
“I think there is a huge problem with in the profession. Practicing optometrists are charging different amounts for their services, and that makes sense to an extent. I feel that there should be a minimum amount Optometrists should be charging for their services. Especially with inflation going up how are we keeping our incomes at standard. Providing great care is important but to provide care we must also benefit. OHIP compensation also has not changed in a very long time.”
“Large chain franchises taking over, leaving a smaller market for private practices.”
“More focus on education of business aspect of optometry.
“Board certification and the high cost of Canadian boards, especially for students already completing NBEO”
“There is also the concern of having good quality trained staff if you decide to have a practice with a dispensary. It is very important to have interprofessional collaboration with health care providers, but the opticians - optometrist ophthalmologist relations must be strong as well.”
“Residencies not being recognized as "specialists" in Canada (vs the US) Scope of practice between opticians, optometrists, and ophthalmologists. This has an effect on "Saturation in Canada" as well”
“Another concern is how to protect private practice optometry from competitive forces such as corporate optometry, side-by-sides etc. Another concern I have is that optometrists are not paying into their provincial colleges (ex. OAO), which may be contributing to lower funds available to overcome some of the challenges listed above.”
“Optometrist practicing in BC without writing Canadian boards”



Appendix II: Responses from Question 8

Table 4: Open-ended responses for suggestions to the optometry associations. Responses have been modified for grammar. Repeated or inappropriate responses were omitted

<p>“Public awareness is key”</p>
<p>“We definitely need more public outreach so that people are more aware of the services we provide. People still think that all OD's do is prescribe glasses. We do so much more. I think one way to overcome this is to do more outreach in public schools, especially for younger grades. We should try to implement mandatory eye exams for kindergarten students (free of charge to the parents of course). Also, maybe more humanitarian services not just overseas but to local impoverished neighborhoods (this will not only serve our fellow Canadian public, but also give us some publicity on what ODs do).”</p>
<p>“We should advertise what an optometrist does more often! Seeing an optometrist should become just as commonly known as seeing a dentist.”</p>
<p>“Having a big national campaign in the same light as Colgate did for dentistry in the 1970-80's? I think that there isn't enough of a TV or radio or billboard presence like Dentistry offers. Our profession seems to have too much of a laid back approach compared to dentistry (personal opinion).”</p>
<p>“Public awareness of the importance of optometry.”</p>
<p>“For low public and health care practitioner awareness of what optometrist do, do publicity (publicité)”</p>
<p>“I believe that if the population is more aware of what optometrists do, they won't have their eye exams done online. If the health care providers as well were better informed of our profession, interprofessional collaboration would be easier.”</p>
<p>“It would be greatly beneficial to have another Optometry school, particularly in western Canada so that students have more opportunity to stay within Canada to learn and practice Optometry.”</p>
<p>“Advertise the optometrists' practice to make people aware of what they can do. For example, make publicity advertisements on TV.”</p>
<p>“Commercials to educate the public about the low quality of online eye exams and dispensing.”</p>
<p>“In terms of educating the public on what optometrists do, optometrists should give explanations of why they're performing certain tests to patients. In my previous experience as a patient before optometry school I found that many optometrists wouldn't say much other than inform me where to look in the room or to ask me when lines split into two or which lens made the letters clearer. If optometrists explained the purpose of each test (and what they're looking for) then the public may slowly become more informed.”</p>
<p>“Fight for legislation more that will increase our scope.”</p>
<p>“Provide more awareness to the public community of what optometrists do and the benefit of eye exams.”</p>



“I am aware that we get paid very little for most OHIP services. If the amount we are paid can't be brought to a reasonable level possibly we can have a system like BC. From what I understand they receive an amount from the province and then are able to bill the patient the remaining portion of their fee for the eye exam or service. Most patients then submit this to their private insurance and get reimbursed. With the growing number of seniors in the population, getting approx. \$42 for a seniors' eye exam from OHIP when we should be getting over \$110 isn't feasible.”

“More info in the form of column articles that are distributed by email would be helpful to inform students of the issues facing optometrists.”

“More awareness ads, commercials, brochures, etc on what optometrists can provide their patients.”

“Support from the government on importance of eye care (through patient education, better compensation to reflect services provided by optometrists) and to consider optometrist as primary care practitioner. Compensation for optometrist is not proportional to education, skills and knowledge we have. Insurance companies need to place higher value on eye coverage. Dentist coverage is thousands of dollars per year and is in nearly every insurer's plan; however, several insurance companies do not include eye coverage (for example, even the University of Waterloo staff don't have eye coverage from the insurer!) in their plans, hence patients have no incentive to see the optometrist unless something severe happens. Online sales/prescriptions will wipe out the services of optometry. Most people care about getting the best deal, and are willing to take the risk to pay 1/5 cost of glasses/eye exams (including myself). How will the government step in to regulate this? Especially if there are optometrists who sign off on the final prescription of these online sales? Why is it acceptable to purchase glasses/contacts online but ordering pharmaceutical drugs is not acceptable? Government needs to step in and enforce some sort of regulations.”

“Political advocacy. Maybe this is a lack of my exposure but I rarely see Optometry in the front lines, speaking to politicians or media. No one seems to be truly fighting for what our profession can do. Waterloo brings in politicians all around the country to visit their school of engineering why aren't we inviting people with large reaches to see what we do. Furthermore, the OAO at least needs to understand there is power in numbers. At this point everyone in the profession knows that optometry isn't growing as it should. The OAO should target this realization and ask their doctors to promote the profession. Even patient education can get you far.”

“Continue to make Youtube videos and have students share them. They are great visuals that are easy for the general public to understand and for the government to see the importance of our profession. It is great to hold conferences, but we must become activists towards these challenges to solve them. Word of mouth and visuals such as online websites, ads, and videos are great tools for this.”

“I think a series of videos about what optometrists do should be made and shared across social media. It would be awesome if the government could fund the project, but I know that the public health budget is already stretched.”

“Engage students early regarding issues they'd be currently working on and outline what is being done and if students can get involved.”

“To listen to the needs of its constituents, regardless of how bitter and controversial the requirements may. It is their duty to address these issues, the bare minimum internally if not to the government.”



“Get government to clean up legislation surrounding eye health and 3rd parties. I know that takes time so in the meantime try to have public education in the risks and benefit of online eye exams, etc.”

“Continue to lobby government about ODs as primary ECPs. Continue wide-spread public promotion about ODs as first choice for anything eye related.”

“Incorporate case-based thinking earlier in curriculum, more team-based learning to aid in self-assessment.”

“De-list optometry from OHIP coverage, or offer balanced billing.”

“Try to increase Canadian residency opportunities and increase legislation regarding online eye exams and dispensing.”

“Enforce laws on online exams and dispensing.”

“I believe there should be better and more effective advocacy measures to overcome the problem with low government remunerations for professional fees. I am aware that there are already active measures but more frequent lobbying efforts can be made or possibly get students involved as this affects not only current but also future OD's.”

“Be united. Listen to their constituents.”

“Lobbying.”

“To establish or enhance the relationship between MDs, OMDs and ODs perhaps by inviting them over to CAO congress and having ODs attend theirs and establish a relationship and connect with their national and/or provincial associations, so the scope and capabilities of ODs are much more known and appreciated in the healthcare system.”