

BILL ANALYSIS

C.S.H.B. 1427
By: Alonzo
Higher Education
Committee Report (Substituted)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Research data and other statistical information reveals that there are numerous barriers to recruiting and retaining economically and/or academically disadvantaged and minority students to many fields of medicine, including the profession of optometry. There are many communities that traditionally have a shortage of health care providers, including optometrists. With few role models, individuals contemplating a career in the health professions may not even be aware of the profession of optometry. To meet the health care needs of the future, optometry needs to reach out to underserved communities for students who, upon completing their professional training, are likely to return to their home community to provide vital health care for their neighbors and citizens of a region that they may be familiar with.

The University of Houston College of Optometry(UHCO), which is the only professional school of optometry in the state of Texas, implemented a Health Career Opportunities Program (HCOP) in the fall of 1987 - called the Texas Optometry Career Opportunities Program (TEXOCOP) - that has become a model for other institutions. A major objective of TEXOCOP is to add diversity to the profession of optometry and UHCO remains committed to this goal. One way to accomplish this mission is to offer a program that aids in the recruitment and retention of economically and/or academically disadvantaged students. Often these recruits are first generation college students in their families, and through the TEXOCOP program, educators are able to provide the tools necessary for them to be successful by creating an academically challenging and stimulating environment where their skills and talents are nurtured and developed into future optometrists.

Since the initial implementation of the TEXOCOP program, UHCO boasts considerable success in graduating economically disadvantaged minority students. In past years, the TEXOCOP program has been funded by a number of agencies and organizations, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions, UH Central Campus, and UHCO. In recent years, however, the national grants have continued to diminish and the program has faced significant cuts. Currently, the Foundation for Education for Research and Vision (FERV) and UHCO are providing funding for TEXOCOP, but because of recent state budget cuts, the program is running at considerably less capacity than when it was first implemented. If private donors are not identified and state cuts continue to diminish even more, unfortunately this outstanding program may have to run every other summer rather than annually. CSHB 1427 provides a mechanism for recruiting and graduating economically disadvantaged minority students.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

SECTION 1: Subchapter C, Chapter 111 of the Education Code is amended by adding Section 111.43 relating to an optometry career program at the University of Houston. The college of optometry may operate a summer program that prepares highly qualified, economically and academically disadvantaged junior-level, senior-level and postbaccalaureate students from any public or private institution of higher education for advanced studies and a career in the field of optometry.

The program may include courses in improvement of study skills and Optometry Admission Test preparation courses; a review of selected undergraduate academic courses that are prerequisites for admission to advanced degree programs in optometry; academic courses that are designed to familiarize students with the course work in advanced degree programs in optometry; clinical work; and extracurricular activities, including observing professionals in the field of optometry.

As practicable, the college of optometry shall operate the program in a manner that may assist students to obtain course credit for the program from their respective institutions of higher education. The college of optometry shall recruit eligible undergraduate or postbaccalaureate students for admission to the program, establish an application process for admitting eligible undergraduate or postbaccalaureate students to the program, develop reasonable requirements for admission to the program, monitor the implementation of the program and assist in developing services, including career counseling, to support and encourage the pursuit of advanced studies and careers in the field of optometry.

The college of optometry may solicit and accept gifts and grants from any public or private source for the purposes of this section.

SECTION 2: Effective date.

EFFECTIVE DATE

Upon passage, or, if the Act does not receive the necessary vote, the Act takes effect September 1, 2007.

COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL TO SUBSTITUTE

The Committee Substitute adds clarifying language. The substitute changes the word "university" to "college of optometry" in 3 areas of the substitute including page 1 - line 2, page 1 - lines 7-8; page 2 - line 6; and page 2 - line 18. The substitute also adds the phrase "and academically" to page 1-line 9 of the bill. Changes language from "may" to "designed to" in line 2 of page 2.