

EVOLUTION OF OPTOMETRIC PRATICE EXPECTATIONS: A SURVEY OF
PRACTITIONERS

by

Brian Wade
Shawn Miller

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PRACTITIONERS

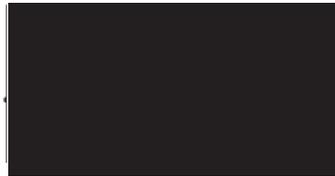
by

Brian Wade
Shawn Miller

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EVOLUTION OF OPTOMETRIC PRACTICE EXPECTATIONS:
THE RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS

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ABSTRACT

Background: This research seeks to assess the relationship between optometric career expectations and current career state in regards to mode of practice, income, location, and other specific optometric practice characteristics. It aims to look specifically at how the current career of optometrists compares to what they expected and desired when selecting optometry as their profession.

Methods: The research for this study was conducted via an online survey questionnaire consisting of twenty-one free-response questions about optometrists' expectations and current level of satisfaction in regards to characteristics such as income, mode of practice, geographic location in which they practice, practice ownership (if applicable), daily work schedule, and flexibility to practice as they would like. The survey was distributed to current members of the Michigan Optometric Association via email and 111 responses were collected. Data was compiled and analysis looked for general trends in responses.

Results: A considerable majority, 83% and 84% of optometrists, respectively, report they are satisfied with their current mode of practice and geographic location. Overall, 72% of optometrists report their income has either met or exceeded their expectations. Of optometrists that have at least partial ownership of a practice, the largest percentage, 38%, obtained ownership of a practice within 1-3 years after graduation. The majority of working optometrists received full time work (greater than 30 hours per week) straight out of school at a single practice location.

Conclusions: Overall, a considerable majority of optometrists are pleased with their current mode of optometric practice, with the largest percentage practicing in the private practice setting. Optometrists as a whole are also satisfied with their income and geographic location. It is perhaps more difficult than one would think to obtain full-time employment at one practice after graduating from optometry school but full time employment appears to be quite possible for those willing to practice at multiple locations. Business concepts, insurance billing and coding, and aspects of purchasing an optometric practice are consistently cited as elements of optometric education which could be improved.

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Introduction

Optometry is highly regarded as being a rewarding and respected career. As such, the optometry profession continues to grow and expand. There is continual research and analysis examining many aspects of optometry for the benefit of current optometrists as well as those thinking about the profession as a future career. Much research has been dedicated to assessing optometrists' satisfaction with income, lifestyle, mode of practice, and time spent working and is often used in reference guides for career descriptions and career outlooks. However, there has been very little investigation into how optometrists' current career meets the expectations he or she had when deciding to pursue a career in optometry. This research seeks to assess the relationship between optometric career expectations and current career state in regards to mode of practice, income, location, and other specific optometric practice characteristics. It aims to look more specifically at how the current career of optometrists compares to what they expected and desired when selecting optometry as their profession.

Methods

The research for this study was conducted via an online survey questionnaire. The survey consisted of twenty one free-response questions about optometrists' expectations and current level of satisfaction in regards to characteristics such as income, mode of practice, geographic location in which they practice, practice ownership (if applicable), daily work schedule, and flexibility to practice as they would like (Appendix A). The survey was distributed to current members of the Michigan Optometric Association via email and

111 responses were collected. Data was compiled and analysis looked for general trends in responses.

Results

The survey data indicates the overall expectation of graduating optometrists is to practice in the private practice setting, with 73% stating they planned on practicing within this mode of practice after graduation. Interestingly, approximately 80% of optometrists report practicing in the mode of practice they expected to while in optometry school. An overwhelming majority of optometrists, 83%, report they are satisfied with their current mode of practice, whatever mode that may be. Of the approximately 17% not satisfied, only 9% are currently seeking a different mode of practice. Approximately 50% of the surveyed optometrists ended up in their preferred mode of practice within 6 months of graduation.

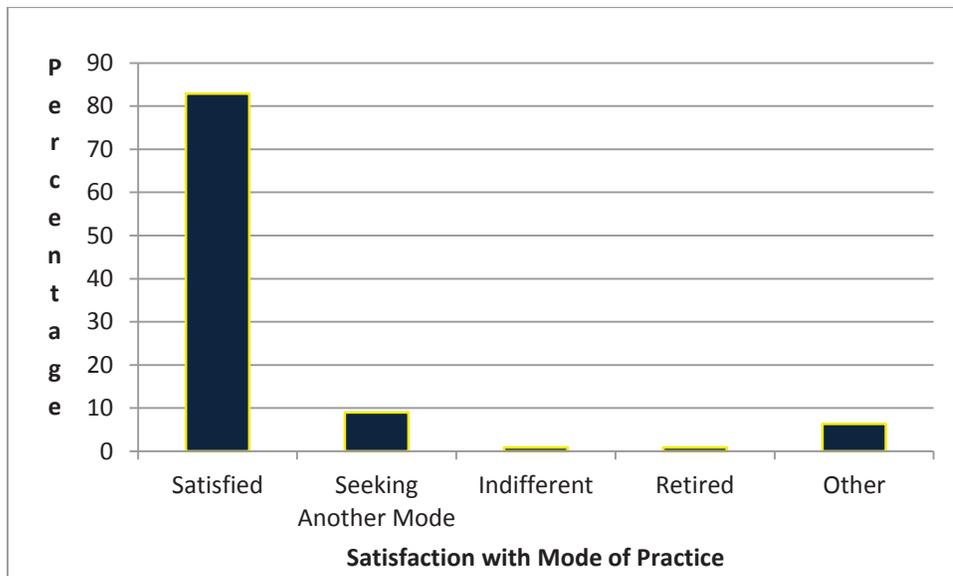


Figure 1. Satisfaction with Mode of Practice by Percentage

The largest percentage of optometrists, 55%, expected to earn an income in the range of \$75,000-\$100,000.

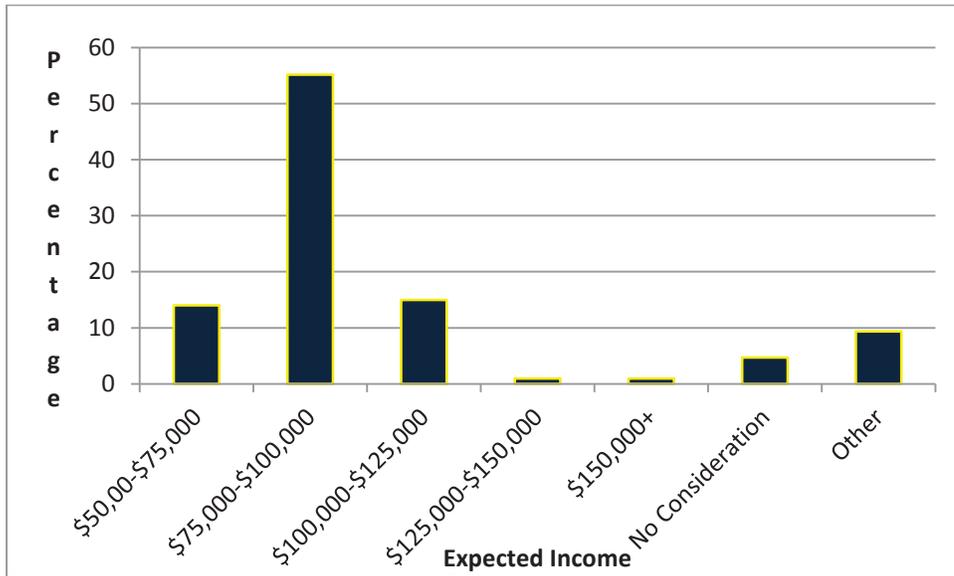


Figure 2. Expected Income by Percent

Overall, 72% of optometrists report their income has either met or exceeded their expectations. The highest percentage of optometrists, 34%, report it took 1-5 years to earn their expected salary. However, over 25% report it took six months or less to earn their expected salary.

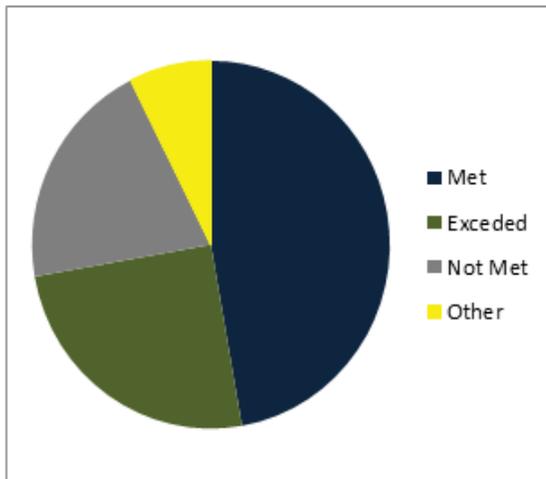


Figure 3. Earnings Expectations

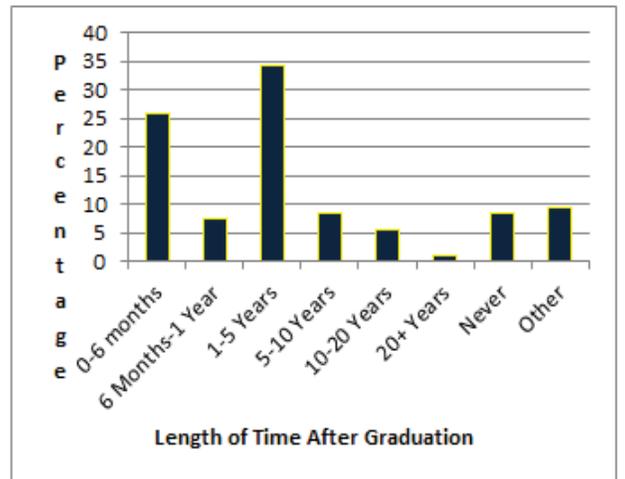


Figure 4. Time to Earn Expected Salary

Approximately 64% of optometrists are currently practicing in the geographic area in which they expected to practice. Additionally, 84% of participating optometrists are pleased with the current geographic area in which they practice.

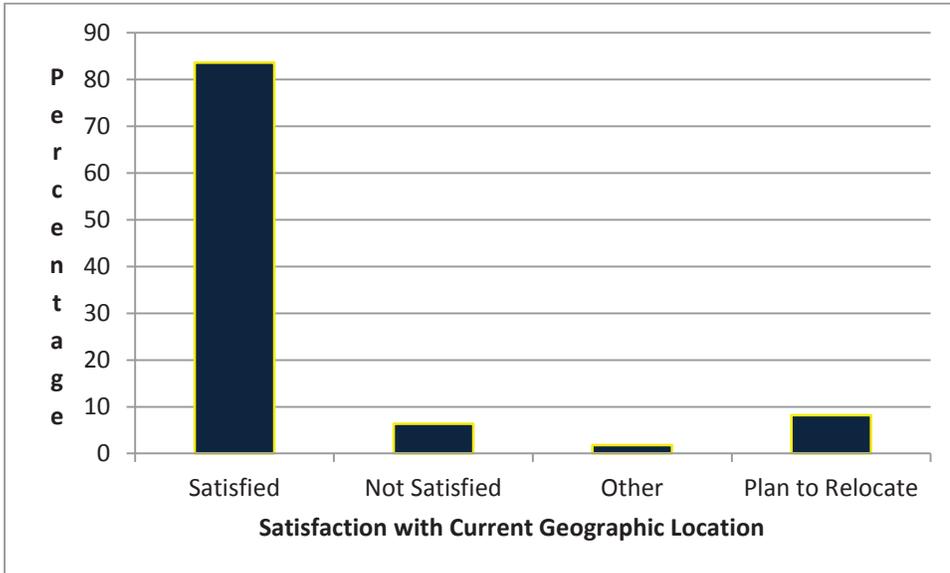


Figure 5. Satisfaction with Current Geographic Location by Percentage

Approximately 68% of respondents report being a practice owner. Of optometrists that have at least partial ownership of a practice, the largest percentage, nearly 35%, obtained ownership of a practice within 1-3 years after graduation. Business knowledge, 44%, was cited as the most common aspect of practice ownership optometrists wish they were more educated on at the time of graduation. Issues such as practice ownership being more difficult and time consuming than expected, managing employees, and insurance billing and coding were also consistent difficulties associated with optometric practice ownership.

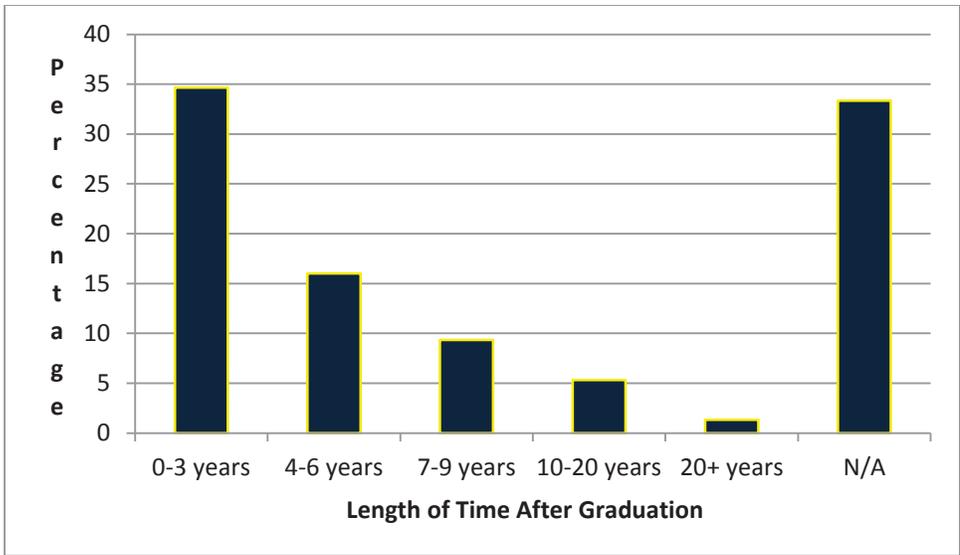


Figure 6. Length of Time to Obtain Practice Ownership

The majority of working optometrists received full time work (greater than 30 hours per week) straight out of school at a single practice location with 55% receiving full time work at a single location and 45% having to seek employment at 2+ locations. Of optometrists not achieving single location full time employment out of school, 24% achieved single location within the first 12 months, 12% in the second year, 27% in 2 to 5 years, and 10% taking longer than 5 years and 27% that still work 2 or more locations.

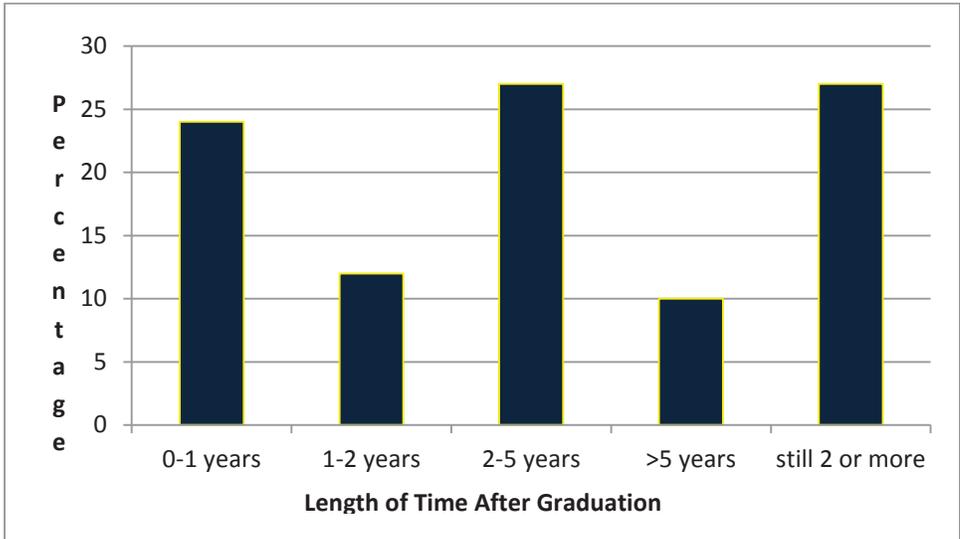


Figure 7. Length of Time to Achieve Full Time Employment at One Location

When asked if optometry school provided adequate information regarding potential optometric modes of practice upon graduation, 63% of respondents said yes while 37% said no. They also felt that in hindsight many wished they had done residencies, thought of long term potential vs. quick money now when picking their mode of practice, paid off student debt as quickly as possible, or be more willing to accept a job out of school knowing that they likely will continue to search for a dream job.

Approximately 13% of respondents started searching for potential jobs before optometry school, 40% between year 1-3 of school, 42% in 4th year, and 6% after graduation.

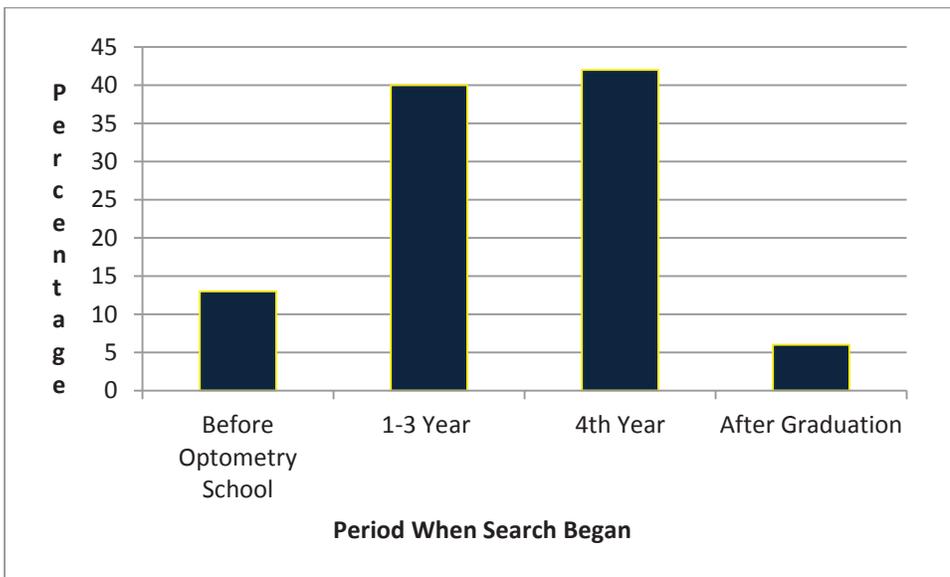


Figure 8. Time Period Optometric Job Search Began

When choosing mode of practice for these jobs, 23% of respondents used location, 15% based on potential income, 3% based on family considerations, 32% for reasons of independence, 6% based on the best patient care possible, 6% took whatever job opportunity arose, and 12% based on the type of care and services they would be providing for their patients. When choosing the location of where their job would be

located 55% chose based on proximity to family, 13% based on available jobs, 7% based on rural vs. city settings, 6% on the need of the surrounding area for an optometrist, 10% on the lifestyle the area would provide, and 9% chose to be located in or near their hometown.

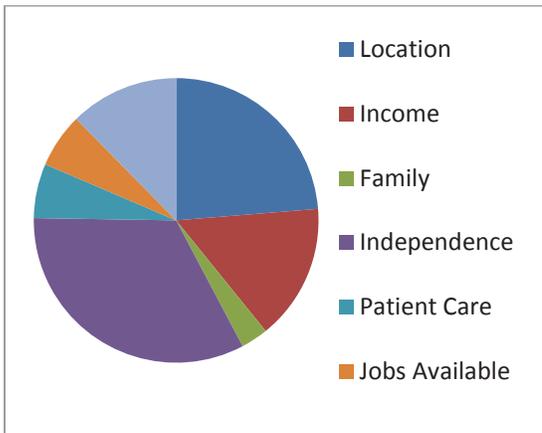


Figure 9. Choosing Practice Mode

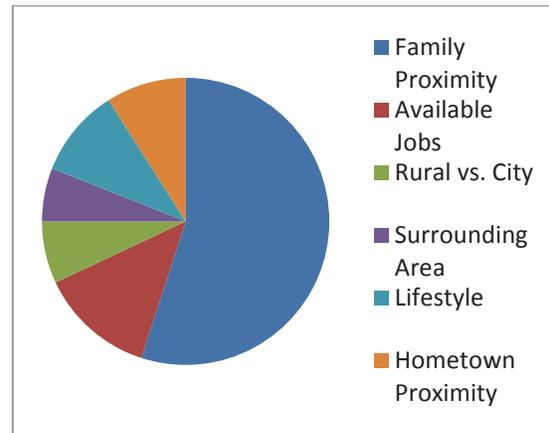


Figure 10. Choosing Practice Location

Discussion

While the authors of this research project attempted to design a study which would obtain a wide range of relevant data, it became evident upon data analysis that a multiple choice survey format would have been more suitable than the selected free-response format. It is true that the free-response format allowed for a variety of responses and very thoughtful input, but it made data grouping difficult. Another limitation of this survey that became evident upon data analysis is the potential for varying responses based on the optometrist's age, experience, and changes in the overall economy and work force that may span many years. For example, an optometrist who graduated optometry school in the 1980's likely will have a different response for questions regarding expected income at the time of graduation, current income, and satisfaction with various elements of their career compared to a 2013 graduate who has had considerably less time to establish his or

her career. It would have been beneficial to know the age of the optometrist and how long they have been practicing. Additionally, it is important to remember the polled optometrists are members of the Michigan Optometric Association and the data found in this research may not be completely representative of optometrists in other areas of the United States where economic factors, legislature, and population characteristics may impact factors such as income, scope of practice, and geographic location. However, despite the survey limitations, there were several noteworthy trends in the data.

The survey data indicates a large majority of graduating optometrists had plans to practice in the private practice setting. While other optometric modalities are represented, an overwhelming percentage of optometrists planned on entering the world of private practice. These findings are similar to a 2012 VSP survey of third year optometry students that found that 72% would ideally like to begin their optometric career as the owner of a private practice.¹ As another of the limitations of the free-response format, private practice was forced to include solo, family, and group optometric practices. It would have been valuable to have data about how many optometrists wanted to go into different sub-entities of private practice. The data also indicates that an overwhelming majority of optometrists are currently practicing in the mode of practice they desire, with only a small percentage looking to change their mode of practice. In comparison, a 2007 survey conducted as a doctoral research project by senior students at the Michigan College of Optometry found that 32-53% of recent graduates (graduating classes of 2003-2006) were satisfied with their current mode of practice².

Interestingly, approximately 50% of the optometrists who are currently practicing in their preferred mode of practice were able to do so within six months of graduation from optometry school. Overall, optometrists have a high level of satisfaction with their ability to practice within their desired mode of practice.

As mentioned previously, questions regarding income are complicated in this research due to varying degrees of experience as well as economic inflation. However, with efforts to account for these, the data showed a general expectation of earnings between \$75,000-\$100,000. Nearly 50% of the surveyed optometrists feel their earnings meet their expectations while over 25% of the optometrists report their earnings have exceeded their expectations. Similarly, a 2009 survey of optometrists by *Review of Optometry* indicated that 57% of surveyed optometrists were “satisfied” (51%) or “more than satisfied” (6%) with their income, indicating a majority of optometrists are pleased with their earnings³.

It is important to mention that nearly 70% of optometrists reached their expected income within 5 years of graduation, with 25% reaching it within six months of graduation. Optometrists as a whole appear to be pleased with their earnings and earnings expectations appear to be met within a rather quick time-frame. It is important to note however, these findings do not take into account the age or experience level of the optometrist and the fact that some of the participating optometrists answering that they have not met their earnings expectations may have only been practicing for a year or two. Additional complicating factors not taken into account include increases in optometrists participating in residencies (which tend to pay considerably lower than many other

optometric positions) and the role increased student loans of recent years may play on income expectations.

The data also indicates optometrists are quite satisfied with their ability to practice in their desired geographic location. Only 16% of optometrists report they do not practice in the geographic location in which they would like. There are confounding factors to these findings as well. Young optometrists may not yet have had a chance to find a career opportunity in their desired geographic location. An optometrist who is currently a resident may not be currently practicing in their desired location because they chose a particular residency program based on factors other than location. Additionally, optometrists who reported they do not practice in their desired location may not be doing so for any number of reasons which may be completely unrelated to his or her optometry career opportunities.

Approximately 68% of optometrists surveyed report being an owner of an optometric practice. This is considerably higher than a 2012 survey done by the American Optometric Association in which 49% of respondents reported being owners of a practice⁴. In addition, with regards to the present study, there was some ambiguity as to whether or not certain practice situations, such as independent contractors, qualified as practice owners. Since the wording of the survey question left it up to the responder to determine if they were a practice owner, it is unclear how many independent contractors responded as a practice owner. Of the optometric practice owners, the largest percentage of owners obtained ownership between 1-3 years of graduation. This however does not take into account factors such as student loans or practice start-up costs and loan availability which may vary greatly between generations of optometrists.

One important aspect of this research was to investigate how optometrists' current career has met their expectations in terms of characteristics such as mode of practice, income, and geographic location. Approximately 80% of optometrists report practicing in the mode of practice they expected or desired during optometry school, indicating a career in optometry provides solid opportunities to allow optometrists to practice in the mode of practice they desire. In terms of income, nearly 75% of optometrists report their income has either met or exceeded their expectations. Income, therefore, appears to be at least satisfactory for a majority of optometrists. A career in optometry also appears to allow for geographic flexibility since approximately 64% of optometrists are currently practicing in the geographic area in which they expected to practice.

One interesting topic that is very important to any student in any profession is the potential for jobs upon graduation, what kind of employment is available, how soon they should start searching for jobs, and what commonly is considered in the job selection process. Most commonly people would like to graduate and have a single steady job where they make good money and have a full work week.

In the case of optometrists, the availability of a full time job versus working multiple jobs to have a 30 hour work or more is almost split in half with 55% of respondents achieving full time employment at a single location straight out of school. This shows a couple of things. Unfortunately, it is basically the flip of a coin as to whether a new optometrist will have to go to multiple locations in order to have full time employment. On the positive side it means that it is very plausible for an optometrist looking for variety, multiple modes of practice, and to be able to provide a range of

services to patients to be able to succeed. It also shows that there are jobs available for optometrists.

While searching for a job can never start too soon most students started searching for employment during school with an almost equal 40% starting their search in the first three years and 42% not starting until the last year. The largest considerations taken into account when deciding the mode of practice to start in and the location of this practice were independence and family proximity, respectively.

We often look back and wish we had done things differently. The majority of optometrists felt as though they were adequately prepared when looking into potential practice opportunities. However, once working, they felt as though they were not very prepared for the non-patient care aspects of optometry such as running the business and insurance billing and coding. This all was “on the job” learning. They also had wished that they had changed some of their decision making in regards to what they did after school. Respondents, once getting out and practicing, felt unprepared and had wished that they had done a residency to further their optometric knowledge. In regards to where they worked they also wished they had made these decisions with long-term potential in mind, that they had put more money towards paying off student debt, and had been more willing to get a job straight out of school knowing that they would keep searching for their “dream” job.

While straight out of school full time employment at a single location may not be available, it can be achieved with time. Some stayed in a multiple location situation on purpose due to the positives listed. The 2011 Gallup Pole states that, “87.5% of workers

were satisfied with their job.” Optometry compares very closely to this with 83% of optometrists being satisfied with their job⁵.

Conclusion

Overall, a considerable majority of optometrists are pleased with the current mode of optometric practice, with the largest percentage practicing in the private practice setting. Optometrists as a whole are also satisfied with their income and geographic location. It is perhaps more difficult than one would think to obtain full-time employment at one practice after graduating from optometry school but full time employment appears to be quite possible for those willing to practice at multiple locations. Business concepts, insurance billing and coding, and aspects of purchasing an optometric practice are consistently cited as elements of optometric education which could be improved. Although there are several limitations to the data obtained in this research, this study serves as a foundation from which future similar research can be built upon. The aspect of how optometrists’ career has met expectations remains largely uninvestigated and can most certainly be successfully further researched.

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APPENDIX A
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

EVOLUTION OF OPTOMETRIC PRACTICE EXPECTATIONS: A SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS

1. During optometry school what mode of practice did you plan on practicing in?
2. Pertaining to Question 1, did you end up in this mode of practice? If so, how long after graduation did you start working in this mode?
3. Do you feel fulfilled with the mode of practice you are currently in or do you intend on seeking employment in another mode of practice?
4. What range of salary did you expect to make in the world of optometry after graduation?
5. Pertaining to Question 4, were these expectations met, not met, or exceeded in regards to annual salary?
6. How long after graduation did it take you to make the salary that you were expecting or desired?
7. Are you currently practicing in the geographical area that you were expecting to practice in while you were in school?
8. Are you currently happy with the geographical area that you are practicing or do you wish to practice in a different geographical area?
9. The following 3 questions pertain to ownership of an optometric practice. Please answer if you are a practice owner or co-owner. How long did it take you to achieve (co) ownership of a practice?
10. What do you wish you would have known about practice ownership before you began?

11. What recommendations/advice would you offer to optometrists initiating the process of practice ownership?
12. Upon graduation, did you receive full-time work seeing patients at a single optometric place of employment or did you have to work at more than one optometric place of employment to achieve a full week of work (30+ hours each week)?
13. Pertaining to Question 12, if you had to work in more than one location, how long did it take you to achieve a full time work load at a single optometric practice?
14. Do you feel optometry school sufficiently educated you about modes of practice/practice options available to you?
15. What do wish you would have learned/been aware of as a newly graduated optometrist beginning your career?
16. What advice do you have for new graduates beginning their career?
17. How early in your optometry school career did you begin making plans for your career after optometry school?
18. What were your primary considerations when choosing a mode of practice?
19. What were your primary considerations when choosing a geographic location to practice in?
20. How much freedom/flexibility do you feel a career in optometry allows you practice the way you would like (i.e., limited to certain modes/location due to limits in employment opportunities, etc)?
21. Overall, are you pleased with the current modality in which you practice? If not, why not? (ie., Income? Limitations on scope of practice?)