

January 19, 2021

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond  
Biden-Harris Transition Team Lead  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Dr. Darling-Hammond:

On behalf of the American Optometric Association (AOA) and the American Optometric Student Association (AOSA), we thank you for your commitment to all students. As you address the impact of the public health emergency and economic crisis on the education system, we respectfully urge you to support optometry graduate students and the future patients and communities they will serve.

The AOA represents more than 44,000 doctors of optometry (O.D.), optometric professionals, and optometry students. Doctors of optometry serve as frontline primary care doctors with respect to eye and vision care and optometry practices nationwide are delivering essential care to patients during the public health emergency. However, without addressing the continued financial and workforce concerns of student borrowers, many student doctors of optometry may not be able to play a future frontline role in caring for the needs of neighbors and helping communities recover. In 2018, 81 percent of U.S. optometry graduates accumulated debt with a mean debt of \$178,922. The student loan burden continues to increase, and in this uncertain economic environment, the debt-to-income ratio is growing higher.

During this time of crisis, it has been made especially clear that a strong and well-trained health care workforce is critical for our country's success. We appreciate that the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act suspended payments and interest on federally held student loans and that the U.S. Department of Education recently extended the federal student loan administrative forbearance period, the pause in interest accrual, and the suspension of collections activity through January 31, 2021; however, we urge President-elect Biden and the Administration to provide further relief for student loan borrowers.

We respectfully ask that the Administration further extend the timeline on suspension of loan payments, as well as consider additional student debt relief and loan forgiveness measures. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted optometry students by resulting in the recent postponement of certain boards examinations which can delay entry into their roles as providers. Student loan relief is critical for optometry graduate students who are disproportionately bearing the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic through a disrupted education, uncertain job market, and delays in their ability to practice.

We look forward to working with you to support optometry graduate students and the future health care workforce. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Sally Guthrie, AOA Associate Director of Congressional Relations, at [SGuthrie@aoa.org](mailto:SGuthrie@aoa.org).

Sincerely,



William T. Reynolds, O.D.  
President, American Optometric Association  
(AOA)



Alexander Bennett  
President, American Optometric Student  
Association (AOSA)