

BILL ANALYSIS

H.B. 451
By: Alonzo
Higher Education
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

According to interested parties, research data and other statistical information reveal numerous barriers to recruiting and retaining economically or academically disadvantaged minority students to many fields of medicine, including optometry, despite there being many communities that traditionally have a shortage of health care providers. The parties suggest that, in order to meet the health care needs of the future, particularly with regard to optometry, underserved communities must be cultivated for students who, on completing professional training, are more likely to return to their home communities to provide vital health care for their neighbors.

The parties identify a program that attempts to do that at the University of Houston College of Optometry—a program that, since its initial implementation, has boasted considerable success in graduating economically and academically disadvantaged minority students. The parties report that, in past years, the program has been funded by a number of agencies and organizations but that more recently national grants have diminished and the program has faced significant budget cuts. These cuts have left the program running at considerably less capacity than when it was first implemented. The parties raise concerns that the program may have to run every other summer rather than annually if private donors are not identified and state cuts persist. The parties emphasize that this would limit the number of participants the program can serve and directly impact the overarching goal of adding diversity to a profession that is already underrepresented in terms of minority and educationally disadvantaged students. H.B. 451 seeks to address these concerns.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

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

H.B. 451 amends the Education Code to authorize the University of Houston to operate a summer program that prepares highly qualified, economically 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 bill authorizes the program to 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 optometry programs, academic courses designed to familiarize students with the course work in advanced degree optometry programs, clinical work, and extracurricular activities. The bill requires the university, to the extent practicable and consistent

with the program's purposes, to operate the program in a manner that assists students in obtaining course credit for the program from their respective institutions of higher education.

H.B. 451 requires the university to recruit eligible undergraduate or postbaccalaureate students for admission to the program, establish an application process for admitting eligible students, develop reasonable program admission requirements, monitor the program's implementation, and assist in developing services to support and encourage the pursuit of advanced studies and careers in optometry. The bill authorizes the university to solicit and accept gifts and grants from any public or private source to fund the program and authorizes the legislature to appropriate money for the purposes of the bill.

EFFECTIVE DATE

On passage, or, if the bill does not receive the necessary vote, September 1, 2015.