

# EDITORIAL

## ABOUT A MERGER

**B**ob Williams, Executive Director of the Optometric Extension Program Foundation (OEP), on October 28, 2002, placed an e-mail message on VTOD-L@LISTSERVE.INDIANA.EDU. This web-site serves as a communication vehicle for those with special interest and expertise in vision therapy (VT). Mr. Williams announced that on January 1, 2003 the Baltimore Academy for Behavioral Optometry (BABO) and OEP plan to merge into a single organization. He further outlined some of the educational benefits that are expected to result.

The communication received a good deal of attention. In the next several weeks a number of messages were posted as a result of the original. However, almost none of them spoke directly to the merger per se. Rather, the announcement immediately sparked discussion, first about the desirability of combining the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD) with OEP. Somewhat later others raised the idea of a super organization that would include these two entities along with the College of Syntonic Optometry and the Neuro-Optometric Rehabilitation Association (NORA).

Interest in the super organization soon dwindled and the next phase again settled on the concept of a merger between COVD and OEP. The proponents stressed the benefits from the financial

aspect. A number stated that there would be an economy of scale on two levels. First, there would be less of a financial dues burden for those who are members of both organizations; second, that the merged entity would operate more effectively and efficiently than the combined efforts of its predecessors. Other respondents pointed out that the two organizations have different purposes and missions; that OEP is devoted to post-graduate education, and COVD with credentialing. Dr. Lynn Hellerstein, who is an officer of COVD, added a very important contribution to the discussion. She stated that there has been a recent history of increasing positive interactions between OEP and COVD, and she encouraged the two boards to issue a joint statement describing the current and ongoing cooperation between them. Dr. Hellerstein listed a number of cooperative endeavors that I feel are impressive.

I find it surprising that there was an absence of discussion about the OEP-BABO merger. This was accomplished only after several years of interactions and planning between the two Boards and required both significant human and fiscal resources. These entities were able to reconcile differences in organizational culture, values and sensitivities in the interest of enhancing their common mission of education. This was no mean

task and both organizations should be recognized and congratulated.

I also find it surprising that the sole reason made by the proponents of an OEP-COVD merger was financial. As stated above, they assumed that a union would result in decreased dues for those who belong to both organizations and some type of overall infra-structural savings. Essentially they assumed that all the activities of both organizations would be carried out with fewer human and fiscal resources. While fiscal responsibility are very important for individuals and organizations in today's world, these assumptions would first and foremost have to be validated if a merger were to proceed.

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*Irwin B. Suchoff, O.D., D.O.S.*

Some respondents who advised caution intimated that a merger would lessen the organizational visibility and influence of those who seriously practice VT; that there is strength in organizational numbers. Over the recent past OEP and COVD have acted in unison at a number of meetings that are important to the profession and the areas of practice the entities represent. This can be crucial for the maintenance and growth of behavioral optometry, particularly in view of the profession's continued

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can Optometric Association (AOA) and the American Academy of Optometry (AAO), and the total dues are greater than the total for COVD and OEP. Further, the AOA has a standing committee and the AOA a section that are devoted to VT. Yet, it is common knowledge and general acceptance that each of these entities provide services that the other doesn't. To my knowledge, there has not been any movement toward a merger. Perhaps the AOA and AAO have defined their unique identities more effectively than have OEP and COVD.

The fact that Mr. Williams' announcement was the catalyst for individuals to express an interest in a merger between OEP and COVD should not be ignored. The concept is not new to the two governance bodies. As Dr. Hellerstein expressed, at present there is an era of good feeling between OEP and COVD. Each has begun to provide the other with things it does best and a symbiotic relationship is developing. Whether this eventually will result in a union remains to be seen. But I believe that a move in this direction without thoroughly determining and weighing the potential benefits and losses is a dangerous road to travel.