



PROJECT FUTURE

Shaping Our Osteopathic Physician Identity and Impact of Tomorrow

Insights and Recommendations from the AOF Project Future Forum

Why We Came Together

The American Osteopathic Foundation convened the Project Future Forum to discuss our osteopathic practitioner *identity*—specifically, the opportunities and challenges to consider in shaping our professional identity of the future. Identity formation is [critical across medical fields](#), has been a [longstanding issue](#) in osteopathic medicine (OM), and represents a critical discussion to have today.

Indeed, we believe that understanding, developing, and communicating our identity within and outside OM is the most important issue we face as a collective, encompassing our education, practice, livelihood, and impact. We are [not the only medical field](#) to face identity-related challenges; but it's especially important for us given the [potential biases](#) related to OM among practitioners, patients, and other stakeholders.

Thus, we came together with the explicit goal to establish an insight-driven vision with actionable ideas for how to move towards engaging our futures. We urgently need to understand how best to present our identity and all that supports it to the field and broader public, to promote clarity, trust, and inspiration across the full range of OM stakeholders.

In this effort we believe it's important to take a “high-ground” approach: one that's future-oriented and forward-looking. It's not about “What should we have done differently” but “What can we do to create and capture opportunity going forward,” taking into account multiple generations the field represents, along with current challenges, as guided by our enduring core philosophy of human-centered healthcare.

Ultimately, we believe this is the most important work we can do as a field, and our hope is that this Project Future report has the potential to provide renewed excitement, collaboration and bonding among and within Osteopathic institutions and organizations in support of the ideas, insights and recommendations presented.

Guided by this framing, our rich discussion drove the ideas, insights, and recommendations presented in the next section.

Shaping Our Professional Identity: Insights and Recommendations

The forum yielded key insights and related recommendations including the mutually reinforcing ones below.

Improve our branding—proactively

In thinking about and articulating our identity, we need to develop clear value propositions to promote excitement and trust among different “customer groups”: patients, payors, undergraduates, other practitioners, ourselves. This reality aligns our identity-development effort closely with the need to brand OM and its practitioners in a compelling way. A strong brand communicates our identity, and [promotes trust](#) within and outside the field.

Effective branding, for example, will highlight our foundational strengths, including that we are the only medical professionals trained explicitly to *seek out health* by developing a full, ongoing partnership with our patients. We should also emphasize the broad, large impact we can have in the future, given that we have [grown steadily](#) as a percentage of all physicians (and in our residency-matching rate), and currently [span all branches of medicine](#) and can take more active ownership of these.

In developing our identity and brand, it’s critical to tell our story *proactively and with conviction*, rather than defensively or from a position that places us on our heels. For example, a key message that supports our identity is that allopathic and osteopathic medicine are already aligned on [accreditation](#), and allopathic medicine is steadily moving more toward OM, not vice versa, as allopathic physicians and the [broader public](#), globally, increasingly appreciate the value of a whole-person, population-focused healthcare approach.

As a starting point for brand development, we can ask ourselves, “Why does OM still exist?” That will illuminate what the osteopathic physician is built for and what problems we solve best. Answers will revolve around the idea that we work hard to define health and help support it, creating a deep sense of trust with patients as we improve population health and shape the future of healthcare one patient at a time.

Create a big tent: think beyond primary care and OMT

As we form our collective professional identity, we need to think broadly. For example, while our longstanding strength has been primary care, we can effectively apply our way of thinking and clinical approach to any medical specialty.

Moreover, it’s important to recognize the diversity of mindsets of those entering and already within our field. For example, while some students are deeply inspired by the core OM tenets and practices, others are less so. While some osteopathic physicians routinely draw on OM principles, others may [downplay](#) these in certain contexts. So it’s never about a one-size-fits-all approach but creating a large “tent” to house a variety of interests, preferences, and perspectives.

That OMT is the *only* OM-specific training many rising practitioners will receive underscores the need to define our OM approach broadly, across specialties. It's about how we work to promote health comprehensively, no matter our training or specialty.

Recognize identity begins early and must be perpetuated intentionally

Identity begins largely [in medical school](#) for all physicians. So we must strive to begin shaping our identity there, and even before, with prospective OM physicians. That means we need to understand the value proposition we can offer students and communicate this clearly and broadly.

Further, it's about anchoring OM skills in our sense of identity, as reinforced through medical education and, ideally, training. Developing the [AOA credential](#) is a good step toward this goal, but we need to think even bigger, along the lines of "We own critical knowledge to share with the world for better health outcomes."

Still, the reality on the ground is that most OM students drop into a "black hole" after their first two years of training, with a general lack of osteopathic faculty/preceptors across facilities and specialties, part of a [general decline](#) of such mentors across medicine. That leads naturally to identity challenges we need to address thoughtfully; for example, even many OM students struggle to define OM correctly. Developing a strong sense of identity from the start will help.

The bottom line: we should aim to admit people passionate about our profession into our schools; work to shape and communicate a meaningful, inspiring identity; and create a more active, dynamic OM community including diverse mentors across medical fields.

Promote cohesiveness and equity

Articulating our identity well isn't enough. We need to craft an OM-wide organizational structure that brings everyone together, in line with the "big tent" idea above.

Here, we have an inherent advantage over allopathic medicine because we have a "head on the monster" versus their "every specialty for themselves" mentality. We can use that to promote a greater sense of cohesiveness and trust within our community and with broader society, including those we treat.

OM, too, is tied intimately to the concept of health equity, including through providing [resources](#) to address social determinants of health. Our whole-patient approach encompasses mental, physical, and spiritual health, and places the individual patient as part of a broader community and population with individual and collective health impacts. So let's use our unique position in medicine to lead the way in defining and promoting health equity.

Understand and harness technology as part of our identity

Technology plays an increasing role in every healthcare field, including OM, with [hundreds of billions](#) invested in medical technologies over the past decade. In this context, we should understand that

the [rise of telemedicine](#) and other digital medical technologies will influence our traditionally hands-on clinical work.

That said, we can and should promote the idea of being “digitally hands-on,” with our core focus on promotion of health and systemic effects, as we work with and assess patients more comprehensively than any other practitioners. In that regard, technology is just another tool to deliver what’s best for our patients, such as using AI-based approaches to understanding risk factors or aid in patient communications.

Rather than fearing technology or its impacts, then, the goal is to incorporate the most valuable innovations into our work, with the aim to lead the way as implementation stewards and position ourselves as the *emerging physicians of the future*.

Don’t forget the money part

We must keep in mind that economics will always play a role in industry and identity—including our own. In the US, healthcare economics are particularly inefficient: we [spend more on healthcare without achieving better outcomes](#), and have seemingly out-of-control spending ([\\$4.3 trillion in 2021](#)), with the government footing [over a third](#) of all medical costs.

Here, too, is opportunity to leverage our core principles and practices by communicating that OM, with its focus on disease prevention and wellbeing, can lower total healthcare costs on everything from [neonatal care](#) to [migraine treatment](#), while still delivering positive outcomes at scale. We need to be mindful and intentional about communicating this truth, with supporting research and data.

The Path Forward

This document represents an important beginning to shaping and communicating our professional identity—but it’s still just the start. “Vision without execution is hallucination,” as the saying goes.

With that in mind, let’s distill our passion into specific action items and put our heads together about how best to execute on these. As suggested by the earlier content, key priorities in this regard include:

- Determining how to most effectively promote our brand and identity widely
- Understanding how best to inspire prospective student to go into OM, given our value proposition
- Creating a supportive, active OM community across academic institutions, healthcare facilities, payors, and others
- Recruiting and supporting strong OM mentors for every career stage
- Finding research and data to back up key parts of our platform

We are excited to share these ideas, insights, and recommendations with you, and inspired to chart the OM course for the future, built upon a shared identity we can all rally around to maximize our impact for every stakeholder group.



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Project Future Professional Identity Forum was held on April 13, 2023 via Zoom

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