

NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

# Full Scope

ISSUE 2 | 2024



**Shaping vision,  
building a legacy**

**Dr. Doug Penisten**

# From the President

## Greetings NSUOCO alumni and friends,

It's an exciting time for Northeastern State University and the Oklahoma College of Optometry.

A long-awaited vision is taking shape in concrete and steel as progress continues on the new home for NSUOCO. It's been inspiring to see all the years of hard work and planning that began in 2016 to come to life a bit more each day.

The NSUOCO facility represents a significant leap forward in serving both students and patients alike. With its expansive 78,000-square-foot layout, the facility offers ample space for cutting-edge educational resources and state-of-the-art clinical facilities.

Even more exciting than the physical building is what the new facility will do for our people. Students will benefit from enhanced learning environments, including modern classrooms equipped with the latest technology and dedicated study areas tailored to their needs. Moreover, the increased space allows for the expansion of clinical services, enabling more comprehensive and accessible eye care for patients within the community. With a focus on fostering hands-on learning experiences and providing top-tier patient care, the new facility embodies the commitment of the optometry college to excellence in education and service provision.

It is also the most expensive endeavor in NSU history with an expected cost of \$39.3 million. With support from the Oklahoma Legislature, Cherokee Nation, Masonic Charity Foundation of Oklahoma, Cherokee County Commissioners and private donations from faculty, staff, alumni, it is poised to be a more than worthy investment.

I can't wait to celebrate alongside you in 2025 when we get to cut the ribbon on this state-of-the-art facility and officially welcome the next era of vision care and teaching in Oklahoma and beyond. For additional project updates, see pg 5.

Speaking of next era aspirations, this past year NSU launched a new strategic plan reaffirming our commitment to our people, our place and our purpose. For over one hundred years, Northeastern State University has been a staple within the communities it serves. Building upon our Cherokee heritage, NSU is committed to student success and a sustainable future for our diverse communities.

The work being done at NSUOCO and by its alumni—in the field, in the classroom and across the world is the purest example of our mission in action. Together, we remain steadfast in our commitment to positively influence the lives of our students, patients, and the communities we serve. For a comprehensive overview of our strategic plan, please visit [nsuok.edu/strategicplan](https://nsuok.edu/strategicplan).

I look forward to meeting you soon,



Dr. Rodney Hanley  
NSU President



# Full Scope

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF  
NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY  
OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

ISSUE 2 | 2024

Produced by the Northeastern State University  
Office of Communications & Marketing

## DIRECTOR

Jennifer Zehnder

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Rachel Mamone

## MANAGING EDITOR

Cassandra Robledo

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Abigail Kelley  
Mallory Semrow '21

## LAYOUT & DESIGN

Jeff Snodgrass '99



**NORTHEASTERN**  
STATE UNIVERSITY  
OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

For more than 40 years the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry has provided a nationally recognized optometry education to its students and comprehensive vision services to communities in northeastern Oklahoma. Here, dedicated and caring faculty have been educating the next generation of world-class optometrists for an evolving scope of practice using the highest technology available. The college also offers post-graduate clinical residency certification and is a leader in continuing optometric education.

.....  
This publication was printed by Western Printing and issued by Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry as authorized by House Bill 1714. 1,500 copies were printed; the total cost was \$4,175. This institution, in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to, admissions, employment, financial aid and educational services.

# From the Dean



Welcome to the second annual issue of Full Scope. In the past year much has occurred at Northeastern State University and the Oklahoma College of Optometry. After years of planning and fundraising, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Oklahoma College of Optometry building took place on the morning of Thursday, June 29. The turnout was huge and included the NSU community, Tahlequah City officials and citizens, Oklahoma State senators and representatives, representatives of the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians and representatives from the Cherokee Nation including Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. and Deputy Principal Chief Bryan Warner.

It was a very uplifting ceremony with tributes and short speeches dedicated to the significance of what this new building will bring, and importantly, the phenomenal positive impact optometric physicians provide for the health and welfare of the citizens of Oklahoma. It was a very moving and joyous event. Every optometric physician in Oklahoma would have beamed with pride hearing the many excellent words of acknowledgement and thanks for the optometric profession.

Over the past eight months, construction has proceeded at an astounding pace. As I write, work on the steel superstructure clearly shows the building magnificently rising three stories high. Please visit [optometry.nsuok.edu](http://optometry.nsuok.edu) to view time-lapse videos of the construction.

This new facility, the first ever NSU construction dedicated to house the NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry, will provide state-of-the-art facilities for didactic teaching, clinical teaching and all of the many services the college provides.

For decades, optometric physicians in Oklahoma have been providing patients with the broadest scope of optometric care in the nation. Students and residents trained at the NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry experience their clinical training with faculty that both teach and provide patients with the broadest scope of optometric care with the newest technology. The new optometry building will have five rooms solely dedicated for laser and surgical procedures along with the education of students and residents in these areas.

The Oklahoma College of Optometry opening is planned for the summer of 2025. It's going to be a busy upcoming year and one in which we are very excited to share with you!

Douglas K. Penisten O.D., Ph.D.  
Dean

## CONTENTS

- 2 | From the President
- 3 | Dean's Letter
- 4 | NSU welcomes Dr. Rodney Hanley
- 6 | Interprofessional training transforms lives of students, patients
- 8 | Dr. Nate Lighthizer contributes to ophthalmic and laser surgery handbooks
- 10 | Alumni Spotlight: Oklahoma State representative Dr. Carl Newton
- 12 | Shaping vision, building a legacy: Dr. Doug Penisten's journey
- 14 | Indian Health Services & NSUOCO provides opportunities and services

### ON THE COVER

Behind the scenes with Dr. Doug Penisten, Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry Dean, as he reflects upon his career, future of NSUOCO.

Page 12



## UNIVERSITY UPDATE

# A new chapter for NSU, a new chapter for NSUOCO

Just as a new chapter has unfolded for NSUOCO with the construction of a new facility, a new chapter has unfolded for all of Northeastern State University with the arrival of the institution's 20th president, Dr. Rodney Hanley.

Hanley was most recently President of Lake Superior State University, a rural public university in Michigan, and brings over 35 years of leadership experience in higher education with him to his role at NSU. His diverse career, spanning roles such as instructor, dean, provost and university president, has equipped him with a comprehensive understanding of college administration.

Passionate about expanding access to higher education, Hanley has dedicated his career to serving underserved student populations. His previous roles at institutions like the University of North Dakota, Lakehead University and the University of Winnipeg involved close collaboration with tribal and First Nations communities. Additionally, he served as provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at Fisk University, a historically Black college.

As NSU president, Hanley will help to lead NSUOCO in its mission to educate and equip future generations of optometrists.

"It's an honor to be joining the university at such a pivotal time for the Oklahoma College of Optometry at NSU," Hanley said. "With this new facility, NSUOCO will expand its leadership role in optometric education and further advance its mission to provide high-quality vision care to patients here in Green Country and beyond."


In many ways, NSUOCO's position aligns with Hanley's commitment to working with underserved populations.

It is the only optometry college in the state of Oklahoma and one of 24 in the nation and provides much-needed services and care to rural and tribal populations. A longtime partner with the Cherokee Nation, NSUOCO has served as the eye care provider for the Cherokee Nation since the college's founding in 1979.

As NSUOCO enters this next chapter with a new facility on the horizon, the hope amongst leadership is to expand learning opportunities for students while also increasing opportunities for patients to receive vision care.

"We look forward to offering even more immersive learning opportunities upon the opening of the new facility," Hanley



said. "In the meantime, we will continue to support the great work being done every day by NSUOCO students and faculty. Their commitment to research and education, as well as volunteerism and service to provide exceptional vision care to those who might otherwise go without, is certainly changing lives." 

*With this new facility, NSUOCO will expand its leadership role in optometric education and further advance its mission to provide high-quality vision care to patients here in Green Country and beyond.*

→ DR. RODNEY HANLEY

## FACILITY UPDATE

---

# On the horizon: a new home for the Oklahoma College of Optometry

June 29, 2023, marked a significant milestone for Northeastern State University as ground broke on the new Oklahoma College of Optometry facility.

The eagerly anticipated event signified the college's commitment to enhancing services for both students and patients in the years ahead.

Distinguished as the sole optometry college in the state and one of just 24 in the nation, NSUOCO's project outlines include the development of an expansive 78,000-square-foot complex nearly tripling the usable space when compared to the current facility.

The new complex will be made up of three floors to best serve NSUOCO. The first floor will be a dedicated clinical floor with 26 exam lanes, four conference rooms, three laser procedure rooms, two surgical procedure rooms and numerous pre-testing and special testing rooms. It will also house an optical dispensary, clinical waiting room and front desk area.


The second floor will be comprised of two classrooms, an auditorium that will also serve as a lecture hall, many support offices, laboratory spaces and conference rooms. It will also be home to a spectacle fabrication lab and a receiving and loading dock for eyecare equipment.

The third floor will contain faculty offices, administrative offices, student practice exam lanes, student study spaces and the student lounge.

This ambitious construction project, projected to cost \$39.3 million, stands as the most expensive in NSU's history. Its realization is a testament to years of meticulous planning and widespread support from the state and local community, alumni and donors.

Month after month, campus and community members have been able to watch as progress is made on the building in real-time.

The project currently remains on schedule with NSUOCO expected to take occupancy of the new building in the summer of 2025.

Those interested in supporting the NSUOCO facility can visit [nsugiving.com/OCOVision](https://nsugiving.com/OCOVision). 



## STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

# Interprofessional training transforms the lives of students, patients

The Oklahoma College of Optometry at Northeastern State University has provided optometric care and education in northeast Oklahoma for decades. It's a rich tradition that has brought students from all over the world together on their journey to becoming optometrists.

Similarly, the Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine also has a long history of medical training and care to the region.

NSUOCO and OSUCOM have many of the same goals of preparing the next generation of healthcare providers as well as providing care to underserved populations in their respective fields.

It only makes sense that the two schools would come together for training that benefits their students and future patients.

For several years NSUOCO has joined forces with OSUCOM to provide an introduction to optometry skills and testing to medical students. This interprofessional training takes place each fall at both OSUCOM's Tulsa and Cherokee Nation campuses where NSUOCO residents and fourth-year students have played a pivotal role in enriching the optometric education of their peers.

"Interprofessional training between the optometric and medical fields is so important because we're all on the same team," Kylie Endres, NSUOCO fourth-year student, said. "The eyes can tell us so much about the body as a whole, and it's important that we all work together to provide the best care for our patients that we can."

At the training this past fall NSUOCO students demonstrated techniques for taking visual acuities and understanding pupil reactions with educational tools including a slit lamp and direct ophthalmoscope.

NSUOCO residents and students showcased their expertise by teaching, answering questions and providing a working understanding of the vital connection between ocular health and systemic well-being.

While NSUOCO students were administering this particular training, they were also learning throughout the experience.


"I enjoyed learning about a day in the life of medical students and realizing that our experiences in school are not that different from each other," Endres said. "We may be focusing on different information, but our education and overall goals overlap in so many ways."

Beyond the skills that are shared through interprofessional training, the practical implications of this collaboration are profound. Vision health is intrinsically connected to the overall physical health of patients. By working together before they

graduate and practicing in their fields, NSUOCO and OSUCOM will have a deeper understanding of patient's health as a whole.

Dr. Janet Naguib is an NSUOCO faculty member who helped to facilitate the training last fall. She explained the need for optometrists, doctors and other healthcare providers to work together to ensure the best possible care for patients.

"Doctors and nurse practitioners will refer patients for eye exams, especially those that have associated ocular problems that need to be monitored," Naguib said. "Optometrists will refer patients for medical health checkups, especially those with ocular manifestations of an undiagnosed medical condition affecting their ocular health and putting their overall health at risk."

This collaboration is not only strengthening the educational foundation of medical students, but also fostering a symbiotic relationship between different healthcare disciplines. As NSUOCO and OSUCOM continue to evolve and refine their collaborative efforts, the future holds the promise of a healthcare landscape where professionals from various fields seamlessly work together for the benefit of patient care and overall well-being. 





## FACULTY HIGHLIGHTS

# The Ophthalmic Laser and Surgery Handbooks: Illuminating excellence for Doctors of Optometry across the world

In the ever-evolving field of optometry, pushing the boundaries of knowledge and innovation is no easy feat. In October 2021, the boundaries of knowledge were pushed during the release of a clinical textbook, titled “The Ophthalmic Laser Handbook,” created through a collaborative effort of dozens of the leading optometrists and ophthalmologists from across the country. In February 2024, the companion textbook, titled “The Ophthalmic Office Procedures Handbook” was released.

The handbooks are based on training courses offered at Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry for optometrists from across the world and serve as a guideline for innovative practices and surgeries utilized by optometrists and ophthalmologists alike.

“The NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry is considered the training institution for doctors of optometry from across the world as they advance their scope of practice,” Dr. Nate Lighthizer, associate dean and professor of the college of optometry and co-ideator of the books, said. “We do a lot of continuing education and training courses for optometrists from Oklahoma to Maine to Alaska and everywhere in between. We have been fortunate to do the course in 35 states over the past 20+ years, and have had doctors from all across the world take the Advanced Procedures Course.”

Lighthizer said there are two parts to the courses offered through NSUOCO, the first being surgical procedures and injections, the second half includes laser procedures. Each book touches on their respective approaches.

“The laser book covers refractive surgery like LASIK done by our ophthalmology colleagues, to the most commonly done laser procedures performed by optometrists which is a YAG laser capsulotomy,” Lighthizer said. “The surgery book covers many in-office procedures performed by optometrists and ophthalmologists from punctal plugs and corneal foreign body removal, to blepharoplasties (eyelid lifts) and injections into the eye.”

The books have unique features to help guide professionals quickly and easily. Each chapter is broken down into different sections within each chapter for different categories of the eye.

Lighthizer said there are indications for when professionals should or should not do a procedure due to contraindications. There are also bullet points within each chapter subsection that help guide when professionals want quick reference points for easy access when in clinic.

Lighthizer said each book has a scratch off code on the inside cover that professionals can scan to view the electronic version of the book as well as the dozens of videos included in the e-book.


“There are video libraries included in each book so eyecare providers can have a step-by-step visual process on how to perform the procedures,” Lighthizer said. “The video libraries are good for doctors as they start implementing new procedures in their practice. They are good ways for doctors to see it done and how to perform the procedures step by step.”

The books are for those currently going through schooling and training to become optometrists and ophthalmologists, to those who have completed their training and are seasoned eyecare professionals that want to add a new skill set to their battery.

“These books are important because we continually learn as doctors and we are not stuck in what we learned at school and in our formal training, we have to continually learn and these books help doctors learn even after

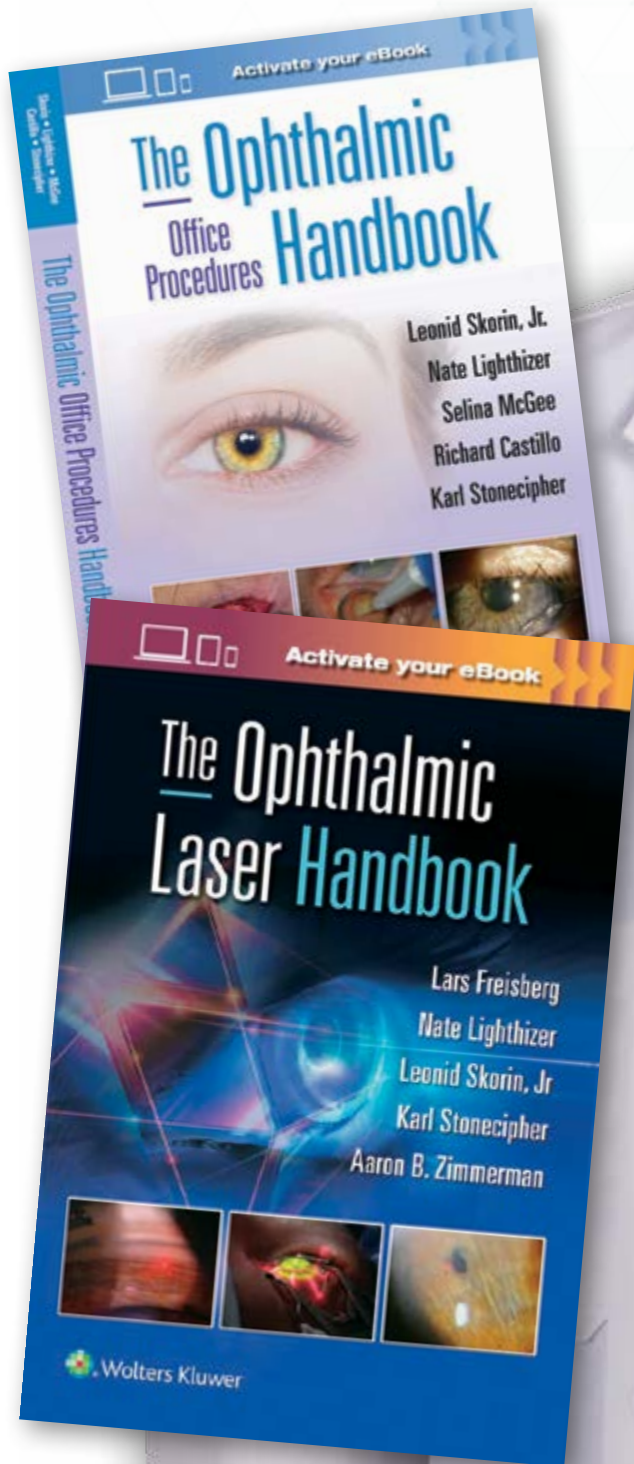
their formal training has finished,” Lighthizer said. “I think they’re an important piece of learning procedures that we do in the office even after we finished our formal education.”

With NSUOCO being a hub for continuing education for optometrists, it is important to release cutting-edge resources such as these handbooks and in-person training.

“The College of Optometry here at NSU is a world leader in eye care,” Lighthizer said. “I’ve been on calls with doctors from Australia, Canada and London going over topics mentioned in these books. This book is just another showcase of why NSU and the College of Optometry in Tahlequah, Oklahoma are known worldwide. So, I think it’s a feather in the cap for NSU.” 







## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

# FROM VISION CARE TO VISIONARY LAWMAKING:

*How Dr. Carl Newton went from fellow optometrist to Oklahoma State representative*



Northwestern Oklahoma serves as a hub for farmers and ranchers instilled with values and strength as sturdy as the land itself. For Oklahoma State Representative Carl Newton, growing up on his father's cattle and farming operation in Waynoka, Oklahoma, instilled him with the values that would define his character.

"I got involved in one athletic sport because otherwise I had to be home working, so I chose football," Newton said. "I was involved in the Future Farmers of America and received the State Farmer degree. We lived a good wholesome lifestyle and I'm proud of my heritage."

Having always enjoyed helping others, Newton felt a pull toward a career where he could make a tangible difference in people's lives. He became interested in Optometry when his mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor and began having vision problems.

"I've always cared about people and I think going into the medical field when you care about people is one of the best things you can do," Newton said.

Newton attended college at Oklahoma Baptist University for two years after high school and completed his bachelor's degree at Oklahoma State University.

He was accepted into the inaugural class of the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry in 1979. Upon its inception, NSUOCO programming was only approved for one year. The program's uncertainty added an additional complexity for its first class of students.

"Optometry is a four-year doctorate degree so it was interesting walking in and not knowing what the next year would look like," Newton said. "In the middle of our first year, they approved the second year. It wasn't until the end of our second year that they approved our third and fourth years."

Despite the uncertainties, the inaugural class had 21 students with 17 of those students graduating at the end of the four years. Students were seeing patients in the heart of Cherokee County by the end of their first year.

"My first patient was a 92-year-old Cherokee woman that didn't speak English," Newton said. "Her appointment was almost three hours long because of the language barrier but she was so patient with me."

With hard work and ethics engrained in him from a young age, Newton never shied away from pushing for change. He served as president of the NSUOCO Student Government Association during his junior and senior year, ensuring he was a voice for his peers.



Newton is proud to be a part of NSUOCO’s humble beginnings and is excited for the new state-of-the-art facility the college will soon call home.

“We started out in Haskell Hall, transferred over to Wiley Hall and now they’ve moved into the old hospital,” Newton said. “The new building will be great for the College of Optometry as it will be the first facility especially designed for educating Optometry students.”

While at NSUOCO, Newton received an offer that would pay for his last two years of college if he returned to northwestern Oklahoma to practice for charity. He accepted the four-year offer and moved to Cherokee, Oklahoma, just 40 miles from his hometown. Newton has since spent the last 40 years there as a practicing optometrist.

“There wasn’t an optometrist here at the time so I established a practice once the opportunity was offered to me,” Newton said. “Being in a rural setting, you are people’s primary care eye doctor, I do more medical challenges than most of those practicing in metropolitan areas.”

Although optometry can be a challenging profession, especially in the midst of a rural population, Newton began looking for an additional challenge to add to his arsenal.

“I wanted a new challenge and thought I could help provide assistance to northwest Oklahoma so I ran for State Representative of District 58 where I’ve been for the last eight years now,” Newton said.

He accepted the opportunity to help people and create change. He currently represents five counties.

“This affords me the opportunity that I can reach out and help with issues people are having and hopefully make a difference – that’s the fun part,” Newton said.

Newton is running for Pro Term in the November 2024 elections where he aims to use his experience to further help the House of Representatives in their efforts to better the State of Oklahoma. With this latest venture, Newton has had to step back from his practice.

“I like the fact that I’ve been able to step back from full time practice while taking on the challenge as State Representative,” Newton said. “I practice one day a week now. I still can’t believe that after 40 years, I have a few people who still want to see me.”

Despite his busy schedule, Newton enjoys spending time with his wife Jackie, his three kids, Rachael, Timothy and Stacey and his six grandchildren. 🌀

# SHAPING VISION, BUILDING A LEGACY

DR. DOUG PENISTEN



Dr. Doug Penisten grew up in southern Indiana in a town called Columbus. As a child, his hobbies and interests were wide and varied. Astronomy, radio and its history, paleontology and fossils and stamp collecting were just some of the things that sparked his curiosity. Both stamp collecting and shortwave radio mirrored Penisten's fascination with the world and learning more about far-flung places.

"I call it the romance of distance," Penisten said about his fascination with places other than the town where he grew up.

Little did Penisten know that his life and career would take him to some of those distant places that had captured his attention as a young man.

He attended Indiana University where he explored various majors and potential career paths before deciding to study optometry.

"I was actually in the midst of doing my bachelor's degree and I had a friend who was interested in going into optometry and I started thinking about it," Penisten said. "I'd had an optometrist my whole life and I thought, wait a minute. That's a very phenomenal field because it mixes knowledge that you have to have of optics, it mixes health sciences and medical science. In other words, it combines all the physiology and medical. I investigated it and the next thing I knew I was in optometry school."

While studying at the Indiana University School of Optometry, Penisten gained many friends and mentors who had great confidence in him not only as a future optometrist but as a future educator as well.

Penisten graduated from optometry school in 1979 and that spring he also began his PhD in physiological optics and visual sciences.

Around this time, he was approached by the dean of the college of optometry and one of his mentors, instructor and former dean Henry Hofstetter, in the hope he would step in to teach a course with the optometry school the upcoming fall.

It put Penisten in a unique position, teaching students who were at the same point of their studies as he was just the year before. However, once he started teaching, he never looked back.

On the encouragement and recommendation of Hofstetter, Penisten took a hiatus from his Ph.D. program to work in



South Africa where he served as a senior lecturer in the Department of Optometry at the University of the North. He played an instrumental role in the success of the optometry program there on his way to becoming a worldwide leader in optometric education.

“I got to travel all over Africa working in optometry and organizations and through the World Council of Optometry,” Penisten said. “International optometry was a huge part of my world besides my regular job and getting a degree and everything so it’s been a good one.”

While he was changing the lives of many in South Africa, his life was also changed when he met his future wife Alphie, which Penisten notes as being the best thing to happen in his life.

Upon returning to the United States, Penisten completed his PhD research and dissertation before accepting a job at the Oklahoma College of Optometry at Northeastern State University in 1988.

Over the years he taught courses such as introduction to optometry, clinical methods and binocular and refractive anomalies to students at Oklahoma’s only optometry school.

When asked if he thought about becoming an educator himself while in optometry school, Penisten said not at first.

“It [an interest in educating] grew near the end of optometry school,” Penisten said. “When I realized I just love to understand something and then try to convey it to others who are trying to learn it. And I’ve always told folks when I’m lecturing: Yes, I’ve got the PowerPoint. You’ve got all the notes, but I’m going to explain it like I understand it because I figure if I can explain it to myself, maybe I can explain it to other people.”

One of the things Penisten notes as setting NSUOCO apart from other optometry schools is the expanded scope of practice for optometrists in Oklahoma. For decades, the state was alone in procedures that could be performed by optometrists and in turn, NSUOCO was a leader in training and educating on these practices. To this day NSUOCO remains the leader in the field, providing a scope optometric care and training not available anywhere else in the nation.

Penisten credits the faculty as the other defining factor in making NSUOCO a standout choice for aspiring optometrists and optometric educators.

“It wouldn’t be what it is, without the dedication and the phenomenal talents of our faculty,” Penisten said.

Penisten was named dean of NSUOCO in 2009 and before that, he served as associate dean of the college, as well as interim dean for the Gregg Wadley College of Science & Health Professions.

Throughout his career, he has held numerous leadership positions in the field of optometry and optometric education. He is a former chair of the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education, has served as a member of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry Basic Science Council and served as the Vice Chair of the Education Committee of the World Council of Optometry.

While he has spent much of his life educating others, Penisten enjoys constantly learning himself.

“I just can’t stop learning. I just love to read. I read all the time. I like learning new things,” he said.

His trailblazing work has impacted the lives of countless students, peers and patients all over the world and NSUOCO has thrived under his leadership.

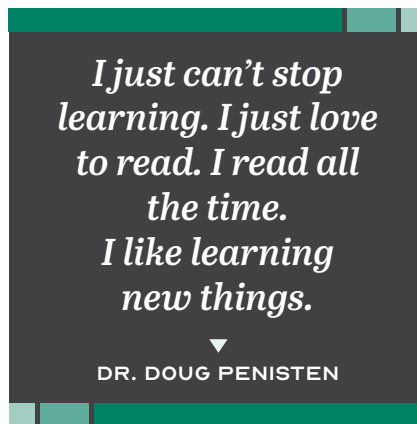
In the summer of 2023, the college broke ground on a state-of-the-art facility that will increase learning and patient care opportunities. It’s a dream realized thanks to years of hard work by many, including Penisten, who will retire from his position as dean of NSUOCO on June 30, 2024.

“It’s been an extraordinary journey,” Penisten said. “When I’ve been on the faculty for 36 years, that’s when you know, you did something right.”

While they have no definitive plans for their retirement, Penisten and his wife look forward to having some more time to relax and travel.

As for the future of NSUOCO, Penisten is confident that the path he and many others have helped lay will guide the college into its next era of success.

“They will determine their future. They have a clear pathway now with a new building to do what they want and what they feel they need to do,” Penisten said. “Whatever the future holds, they will be able to have the facilities to be able to do that and that’s extremely rewarding.” 🧐





## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

# INDIAN HEALTH SERVICES & NSUOCO: Providing opportunities and service

The journey toward a career in the medical field often begins with pivotal moments in one's life.

Some shy away at the thought of narrowing down a specific career path within the medical field, others steer clear at the thought of the additional years it takes to achieve this goal and for others, the daunting thoughts of how to pay for professional school quickly takes them down a different direction.

Agencies like the Indian Health Service provide resources and scholarships for Native students entering these fields. For Blayne Haggard and Dalton Cunningham, fourth-year optometry students at Northeastern State University College of Optometry, the option to accept a scholarship from IHS, assisting their way through Optometry school and in return giving back to the communities that shaped them, was too good of an offer to not accept.

Cunningham, an Oklahoma State University molecular biology alumnus, grew up in Tahlequah, Oklahoma while Haggard, an NSU cellular and molecular biology alumnus, is from Sallisaw, Oklahoma. Although they grew up just 30 miles apart, they initially crossed paths during their first weeks as optometry students.

“The first time we met was during a group meeting between our class a few days before school started our first year,” Cunningham said. “When there’s only 28 of you, and sports gets mentioned, it’s an immediate draw.”

The two formed a bond initially based on sports, but the real longevity of their friendship was based on their shared time at NSUOCO.

“Everything Blayke and I have been through together, the collective triumphs and the not-so-good test days, has created an everlasting bond,” Cunningham said. “This bond will extend into professional collaborations and lifelong friendships. I can say that about most of our classmates too. We truly did have a close class that I will deeply miss once we graduate.”

Both had significant experiences with their own vision that impacted why they wanted to become an optometrist in the first place.

“I knew I wanted to be an optometrist since I was a freshman in high school,” Haggard said. “I never had glasses before and one day we were driving down the road and I noticed I couldn’t read the Taco Bell sign. I never really put any thought into it until I went and got my eyes checked. I had a pretty high prescription and got glasses two weeks later. It completely changed my entire world.”

For Cunningham, the changes to his vision were more sudden.

“I had a subdural hematoma, a brain bleed, when I was in the seventh grade,” Cunningham said. “I started to have vision problems after that and began frequently seeing an optometrist. He fixed me up and I began seeing the importance of the profession. It didn’t hurt growing up having such a prestigious school in my backyard either.”

Both grew up hearing about NSUOCO and their respective reasons for pushing through four grueling years of undergrad then onto optometry school was also due to the work-life balance opportunities they saw this career path could give them.

“I think Blayke would agree that the conversations we get to have with our patients are a little more extended than any other profession,” Cunningham said. “The ability to build a relationship with our patients is what really drew me in.”

Upon graduation, both will be going their separate ways, taking advantage of the multiple career paths the optometry field offers. Cunningham will be attending a year of residency in order to specialize in ocular disease, taking a gap year between his IHS repayment, while Haggard will begin practicing for his three years of IHS repayment.

The IHS scholarships are based on a repayment plan that includes service in underserved Native areas where recipients agree to fulfill a service commitment in full-time clinical practice for each year they receive the scholarship upon completion of their academic or post-graduate clinical training. The scholarships provide financial aid to American Indian and Alaskan Native undergraduate and graduate-level students who are obtaining degrees in eligible health professions.



**Dalton Cunningham**



**Blayke Haggard**

“We both received the scholarship for three years,” Haggard said. “So, we will repay back three years to IHS after we graduate. The cool thing is it’s not specific to one tribe. We are both Cherokee, but I could choose to go to Alaska and work for the Alaskan Natives if I wanted to.”

The pair both agreed they would like to begin their professions in northeast Oklahoma. Haggard said he would enjoy beginning his repayment plan through the Cherokee Nation as an appreciation for what the tribe has done in his life.


“I’m lucky enough to represent the Cherokee Nation,” Haggard said. “They’ve given me plenty throughout my life, so I would personally love to repay my scholarship to them.”

Haggard said IHS did not just cover their tuition. In addition to tuition, the program aided with fees, books, food, travel and also included a monthly stipend for miscellaneous things. He said these opportunities are normally based on underserved locations but that recipients are still offered a competitive salary during the repayment process.

As their years at NSUOCO conclude, the future is bright for both Haggard and Cunningham as they fulfill the next step on their individual journeys.

“We would just like to extend our gratitude to IHS, the Cherokee Nation and NSUOCO for believing in us and providing us the opportunity to chase this career path,” Cunningham said. “And thank you to the sensational class of 2024 for the camaraderie during this rollercoaster the past four years.”

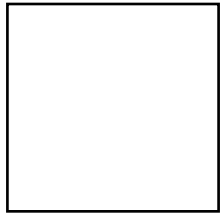
IHS is an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services and is responsible for providing federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives. These services grew out of the special government to government relationship between the federal government and Indian tribes.

For more information on IHS and the services they provide, visit [www.ihs.gov](http://www.ihs.gov). 



**NORTHEASTERN**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

1001 N Grand Avenue  
Tahlequah, OK 74464



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

# Continuing Education @NSUOCO

In-person, Virtual Live or Online

*Meets state licensing requirements for the  
Council on Optometric Practitioner Education*

**CME Online\***

Oklahoma Judicious Prescribing NSUOCO Online CME Program  
\*Anytime

**Ocular Disease Update+ | June 1-3**  
+In-Person & Online

**Ophthalmic Procedures | July 11-14**

**Primary Care Update | Sept. 7-8**

**Converge 2024 | Nov. 14-16**



**NORTHEASTERN**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

[optometry.nsuok.edu/continuingeducation](https://optometry.nsuok.edu/continuingeducation)

