

NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

Full Scope

ISSUE 3 | 2025



**Derek Bryant's focus
on student advocacy**

From the President

Greetings NSUOCO alumni and friends,

Just down the road from my office, the nearly \$40 million state-of-the-art Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry complex is nearing completion, ushering in a new era of innovation, education and service. This transformative milestone is a testament to the vision and dedication of our university, and we are thrilled to see it become a reality.

This world-class facility will offer unparalleled opportunities for students and faculty while expanding vital vision care services for the communities we serve. We look forward to celebrating this achievement with a ribbon-cutting ceremony this summer and welcoming faculty, staff and students to their new home this fall.

None of this would be possible without the generosity of our valued partners, including the Oklahoma Legislature, the Cherokee Nation, Masonic Charity Foundation of Oklahoma, Cherokee County Commissioners and NSU community members. Our university and NSUOCO share a long-standing and deeply valued partnership with the Cherokee Nation. As the eye care provider for the Cherokee Nation since NSUOCO's founding in 1979, the college is able to provide state-of-the-art care to a diverse and often underserved population as well as provide their students and residents with nearly 60,000 immersive learning encounters each year. This new facility will not only expand these services and educational opportunities but stand as a brick-and-mortar symbol of our shared commitment to advancing healthcare access, education and innovation.

NSUOCO's impact extends far beyond this new facility. In this issue, readers will learn about our expanding residency program in Canada, strengthening our influence in optometric education. We also celebrate the remarkable career of an NSU alumna and former faculty member who has dedicated decades to teaching and serving fellow tribal members across the state. Additionally, we introduce a student leader serving as president of the American Optometric Student Association, showcase innovative student research, and highlight NSUOCO's role as a leader in continuing education opportunities nationwide and beyond.

We hope you will join us later this summer to see NSUOCO's new complex, where students will receive cutting-edge training to lead in the field of optometry. At the same time, this facility will expand vision care access for underserved populations, reinforcing our mission to serve and uplift our region.

As we approach the completion of this significant project, we extend our deepest gratitude to all who have contributed. Your support fuels our progress, and we look forward to welcoming you to this remarkable new facility soon.

Sincerely,



Rodney Hanley, Ph.D.
NSU President



Full Scope

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF
NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY
OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

ISSUE 3 | 2025

**Produced by the Northeastern State University
Office of Communications & Marketing**

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**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.

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From the Dean

Welcome to another issue of Full Scope. It has been a year of excitement, change and preparedness for the move into the new home of Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry.

The topic on everyone's mind of course is the construction of the new NSUOCO facility. As I write this, carpet and flooring are being installed, and we remain on schedule to take full occupancy of the building on Aug. 1, just in time for the fall semester. Boasting 26 exam rooms with new exam lane equipment, a host of new diagnostic and therapeutic equipment, and state-of-the-art technology in classrooms, lab spaces and the new 286 seat auditorium, the new facility will enhance the world-class reputation and services that the NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry has to offer.

Special emphasis will be placed on the first refractive surgery clinic at NSUOCO and in Tahlequah, as well as a private clinic to better serve the Tahlequah community and NSU employees. A special shout-out and thank you goes to Harold McMillen and Zach Henley at NSU, the GH2 Architects team, Flintco Construction and their dedicated crew who are on the worksite each day, NSUOCO faculty and staff and NSU administration for their tireless work on this highly anticipated project.

Our faculty continues to excel in all areas of classroom and clinical teaching, as well as patient care. In 2025, with the Cherokee Nation acquiring the Claremore Indian Hospital, we will add our ninth Rural Eye Program (REP) location. Along with the clinics at Cherokee Nation Outpatient Health Center, NSUOCO and the NSU-Broken Arrow location, we'll have 12 total locations, providing patient care across Northeastern Oklahoma. In 2024, we exceeded 50,000 patient encounters across all of our optometry clinics, a testament to the world-class clinical education experience we offer.

Please help me in welcoming our new administrative team including Dr. Earlena McKee as Associate Dean, Dr. Ryan Fenska as the Assistant Dean of Clinical Care and Dr. Joseph Shetler as Assistant Dean of Alumni Relations and Development. They, along with our Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, Dr. Jeff Miller, provide strong leadership for our amazing faculty and students.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize Dr. Doug Penisten, a pillar of the community who retired in July 2024, after 36 years of service at NSUOCO and 15 years serving as Dean of the College of Optometry. Dr. Penisten was instrumental in making this building dream a reality and we are incredibly grateful for his leadership and years of service. We wish him well in his retirement.

Lastly, the new NSUOCO facility will not only be home to our students, residents, faculty and staff, but also to our alumni and friends of the program. We hope to see each of you on the NSU campus, visiting our new state-of-the-art facility following its opening. Whether it's attending continuing education events in the auditorium, taking on some students in a game of pickleball on our pickleball court, or coming to visit former professors, we hope to see you in Tahlequah soon!



Nathan Lighthizer, O.D., F.A.A.O., F.A.A.O.M.S.
NSUOCO Dean



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ON THE COVER

Read our Student
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his advocacy for
NSUOCO students
through leadership
and focus.

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Completion of the new home for NSUOCO in sight

2025 will be a momentous year for Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry as the new state of the art facility draws closer to its summer completion date.

After years of planning, the completion of the building will highlight the collaboration of support and planning provided by the state and local community. The final project is estimated to cost approximately \$39.3 million.

Ground for the eagerly anticipated 78,000-square-foot facility was broken June of 2023, signifying the college's continued efforts to enhance experiences for students and patients. The new complex will nearly triple the usable space provided by the current facility.

Students are expected to begin utilizing the building for the fall 2025 semester.

The first floor of the building will house new clinical equipment with exam lanes for students to perform exams along with conference rooms, laser procedure rooms, surgical procedure rooms and more.


The second floor will be comprised of classrooms, offices, laboratory spaces and conference rooms, and an auditorium to serve as a lecture hall.

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

As the facility construction completion draws near, students, faculty, staff, state government officials and faculty from other colleges have received a first-hand look at the building with tours provided by administrators and construction teams.

"This building as a whole allows us to match the reputation of NSUOCO," Dr. Nate Lighthizer, NSUOCO Dean, said. "It gives us a facility where we can offer more services for our patients and enhanced clinical and didactic education for our students and residents."

According to Lighthizer, the hope is for the facility to also be a space for optometrists from around the country to visit and participate in continuing education courses provided by the college.

"I want to thank NSU's Zach Henley and Harold McMillen along with Flintco and GH2 Architects who have done a tremendous job working to keep us on schedule," Lighthizer said. 



EXPANDING HORIZONS:

NSUOCO empowers optometrists to expand their optometric education

For more than 30 years, the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry has been a leader in optometric continuing education, offering advanced training that extends beyond the traditional four-year curriculum. Through its nationally and internationally recognized courses, NSUOCO equips optometrists with the latest clinical skills, ensuring they remain at the forefront of patient care.

Optometry professionals from across North America—and even as far as London—have sought out NSUOCO's surgical procedure courses to enhance their expertise. These hands-on programs provide critical experience in advanced techniques, allowing practitioners to expand their scope of practice and meet the evolving needs of their patients.

"The courses consist of 32 total hours, with 16 hours dedicated to laser procedures and 16 hours focused on surgical techniques," said Dr. Nate Lighthizer, NSUOCO Dean. "We provide both lectures and hands-on labs covering procedures such as YAG laser capsulotomy, selective laser trabeculoplasty, and laser peripheral iridotomy."

The immersive hands-on format of these courses is essential to developing confidence and competence in new procedures.

"Ultimately, if I'm performing a procedure, I want to have the experience of doing it first in a lab setting, on model eyes, gaining the hands-on repetition needed to master it," Lighthizer said.

NSUOCO's continuing education offerings have grown significantly in response to increasing demand. Initially, the college hosted only two to three courses per year. By 2025, that number has expanded to between seven and 10 annual courses, each designed to help optometrists expand their clinical capabilities and advocate for broader scope-of-practice laws in their home states.

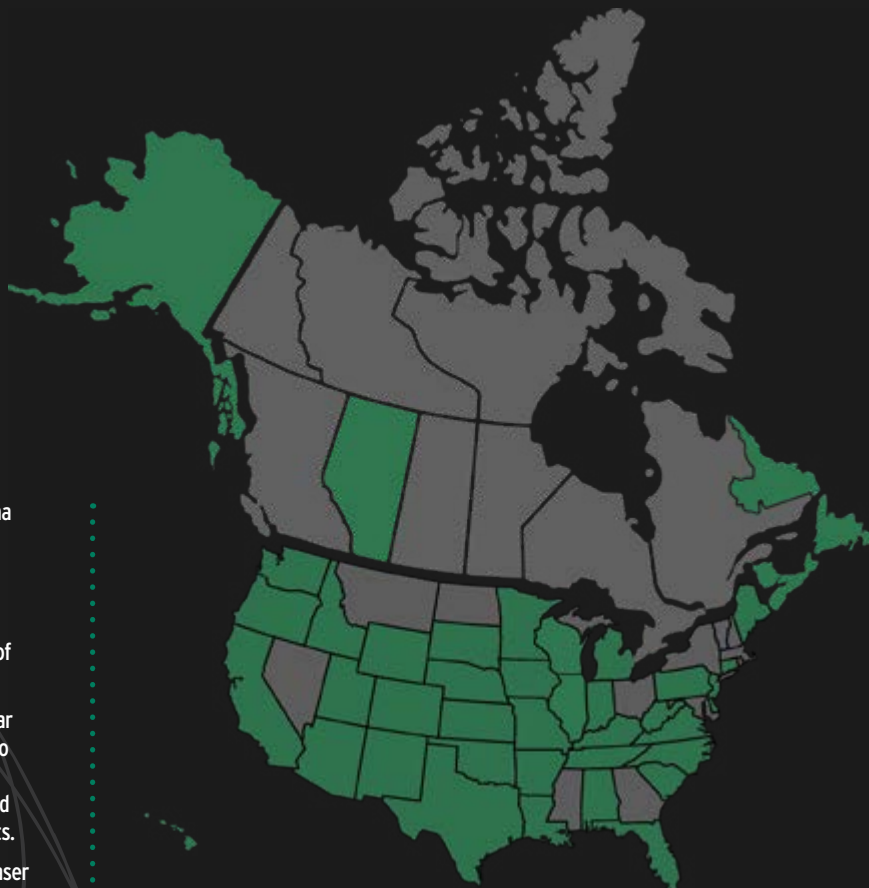
"We're a legislated profession," Lighthizer explained. "The laws governing optometry are determined by each state legislature. Our goal is to advance the profession by expanding the scope of practice nationwide. That's why we always say, 'We educate before we legislate.'"

Beyond enhancing individual skill sets, NSUOCO's continuing education programs play a vital role in shaping the future of optometry. By equipping professionals with advanced training, these courses empower optometrists to advocate for expanded clinical privileges, ensuring the profession continues to evolve to meet patient needs.

"Our hope at NSUOCO is to be a part of the process that helps states expand optometric practice rights, both nationally and internationally," Lighthizer said. "And to do that, optometrists need access to top-tier training and education."

With its world-class faculty, state-of-the-art facilities, and a commitment to advancing optometric education, NSUOCO continues to lead the way in professional development for optometrists everywhere.

For more information on NSUOCO's continuing education programs, visit optometry.nsuok.edu. 



States where NSUOCO Advanced/Ophthalmic Procedures Course held:

Alabama	Kansas	Pennsylvania
Alaska	Kentucky	South Carolina
Arkansas	Louisiana	South Dakota
Arizona	Maine	Tennessee
California	Michigan	Texas
Colorado	Minnesota	Utah
Connecticut	Missouri	Virginia
Florida	North Carolina	Washington
Hawaii	Nebraska	Wisconsin
Idaho	New Jersey	West Virginia
Iowa	New Mexico	Wyoming
Illinois	Oklahoma	
Indiana	Oregon	



Canadian Provinces where NSUOCO Advanced/Ophthalmic Procedures Course held:

Alberta
Newfoundland
Nova Scotia
Prince Edward Island
New Brunswick

Other locations:



London, England
United Kingdom



NSUOCO adds Canada to residency program lineup

Optometric education in North America faces significant gaps, particularly in Canada. With a population exceeding 40 million, the country has only two accredited Doctor of Optometry programs and three optometry residency programs in Montreal, Québec; Waterloo, Ontario; and the Mission Eye Care Residency in Cornea and Contact Lens in Calgary, Alberta. The vast distances between these institutions further limit opportunities for advanced training.

Dr. Andrea Lasby, a Calgary native, partner at Mission Eye Care, and a graduate of the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry residency program, is working to address this issue. As a residency coordinator and supervisor, she is dedicated to making hands-on optometric education more accessible to Canadian students and strengthening post-graduate training options.

"In Canada, there are no cornea and contact lens residency positions outside of the Université de Montréal and University of Waterloo," Lasby said. "For a population of over 40 million people, we have only two residency locations, with nothing in Western Canada."

Limited residency opportunities and the potential for stricter border policies make it even more challenging for Canadian optometrists to receive the education they need.

"I feel so privileged that I completed my residency in Oklahoma," Lasby said. "I see it as my duty to help expand the expertise of Canadian optometrists and ensure that knowledge benefits the Canadian population."

Lasby completed NSUOCO's Cornea & Contact Lens residency in 2014, gaining invaluable clinical experience through advanced case studies and procedures. This training reinforced her mission to bring that expertise back to Calgary and enhance optometric education in Canada.

"The reason I partnered with NSU for residency training is because I know the program's quality and want to support it," Lasby said. "More importantly, I want our doctors to specialize in advanced scope techniques and see well-trained optometrists spread across Canada."

Like Oklahoma, Alberta has vast rural areas where access to quality eye care is essential. Training well-prepared optometrists to serve these underserved communities is central to Lasby's mission.

Her positive experience at NSUOCO, particularly its partnerships with Cherokee Nation clinics, motivated her to advocate for

collaboration between Mission Eye Care and the university. NSUOCO's successful relationship with a tribal nation provided a model for how similar partnerships with Canada's First Nations could benefit Indigenous patients.

"They [NSU] do such a great job partnering with the Cherokee Nation," Lasby said. "I hope other universities follow suit. In Canada, we have large First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations, and it's crucial to ensure they have equitable access to healthcare."

Although residency training is not required to practice optometry, it is becoming increasingly valued as optometrists push for an expanded scope of practice across North America.

"Unfortunately, in Canada, most optometrists don't complete residencies, but that's beginning to change as more people recognize their importance," Lasby said. "One of the reasons I pursued residency training was that nowhere in Canada offers the advanced scope training I received."

Lasby has spent the last decade sharing her expertise with Canadian optometrists through speaking engagements and training programs.


The Mission Eye Care Residency recently celebrated its first graduate in June 2024 and is currently interviewing for its third resident. That same month, the program achieved accreditation from the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education, a milestone Lasby credits to NSUOCO's Director of Residencies and professor, Dr. Carolyn Majcher, for guiding them through the accreditation process.

The residency provides new optometry graduates exposure to complex cases and advanced clinical training that would


otherwise take years to acquire. Lasby describes the program as demanding but rewarding, requiring residents to pursue advanced scope training, conduct research, present lectures and submit a publishable case report under the guidance of their residency supervisors. Residents also participate in weekly virtual meetings with their Oklahoma-based counterparts, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

Reflecting on her time at NSUOCO, Lasby recalls the supportive faculty, welcoming atmosphere and unparalleled expertise offered by the college.

"It is such a nation-leading program for clinical optometrists," Lasby said. "I'm honored to be part of it and to continue building on its legacy."

For more information about Mission Eye Care, visit www.missioneyecare.ca. 



A portrait of Dr. Andrea Lasby, a woman with long dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a maroon blazer over a white top and a gold necklace. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

The reason I partnered with NSU for residency training is because I know the program's quality and want to support it.

→ DR. ANDREA LASBY



A faithful crowd of optometrists, paraoptometrics, scholars and other interested parties have convened in various cities for The Heart of America Eye Care Congress, an annual multi-date conference first held in Kansas City, Missouri, on May 13, 1962. The Heart of America Eye Care Congress returned to Kansas City for the 64th conference on Feb. 7-9, 2025.

The Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry has participated in the conference for several years, presenting research on a range of vision-related topics, such as Standardized Color Vision Testing in a Screening Tool for Children and CATS vs iCare Tonometry on Varying Corneal Thickness, Visual Comfort With And Without Prism In Spectacles.

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gives students time to learn about various topics in optometry before choosing a direction for their project, while giving them time to complete it prior to graduation.”

While students conduct most of the research faculty members provide critical guidance, including topic selection, troubleshooting, proofreading and professional mentorship. These collaborative relationships play a key role in students’ academic and professional development, often leading to strong letters of recommendation and valuable networking opportunities.

At NSUOCO, research is embedded within the Doctor of Optometry curriculum. Research projects allow students to enhance their clinical and critical thinking skills, fostering innovation that extends beyond Oklahoma and contributes to advancements in healthcare.

For this reason, courses like Research Methodology, taught by Janzen, expose students to established research while equipping them with the skills to design and execute their own studies.


“Students become an expert in the particular area they study,” Janzen said. “Learning to think critically and problem solving are hard to teach, but it is something students gain experience in as they evaluate other research, creatively set up their own projects, troubleshoot anything that isn’t working as expected, and evaluate their data to determine what it all means.”

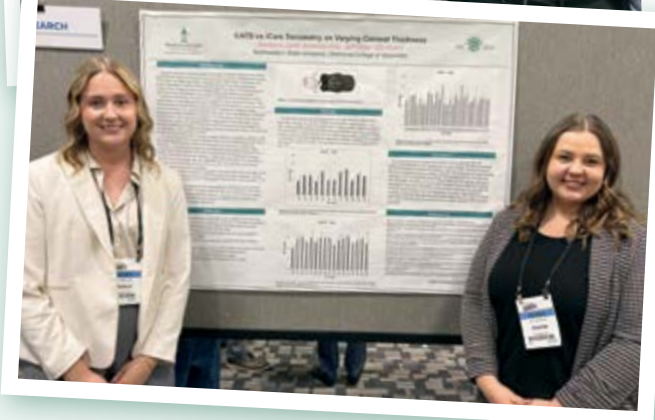
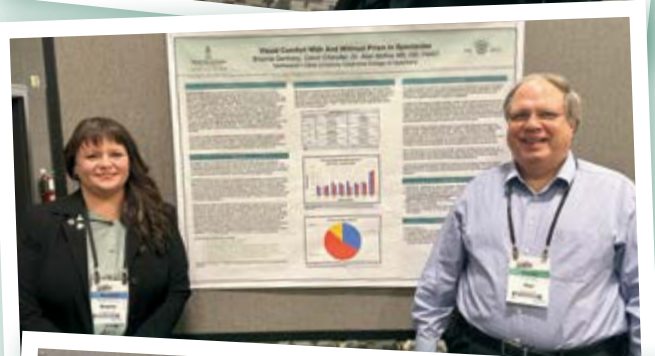
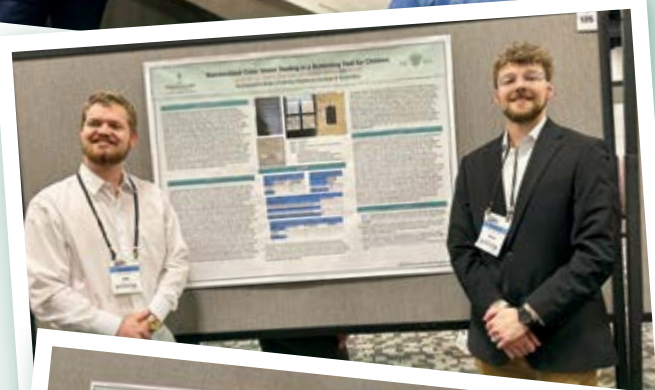
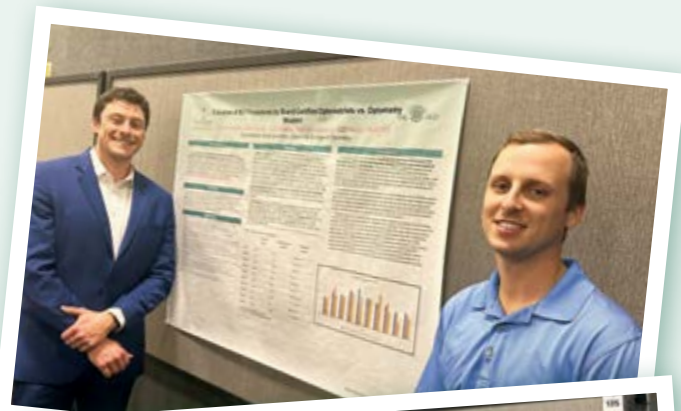
Janzen, a regular attendee of the conference, believes national conferences like the Heart of America Eye Care Congress help boost students’ confidence when they are able to present a finished project to others—an experience that enhances résumés and professional credibility. He added that these opportunities further strengthen NSUOCO’s reputation, potentially influencing students to consider it as their institution of choice.

“While we don’t recruit exclusively from NSU, a large number of subjects for research projects do come from within NSU,” Janzen said. “This means that people within the Northeastern community can potentially benefit from this.”

Much like NSUOCO’s impact on optometric education in North America, students who present their research are beginning to see a measurable impact on the industry.

“One example pertains to the use of lasers in optometry,” Janzen said. “There has been some pushback with scope expansion and an article [Nd:YAG Laser Capsulotomy: Efficacy and Outcomes Performed by Optometrists] published by some of our faculty and students showed the efficacy of optometrists performing these procedures. Data like this helps as across the U.S. more states allow an expansion of optometric scope.”

Janzen noted that while research projects can seem overwhelming at first, NSUOCO faculty work to make the process more manageable by breaking it down into steps. He believes students take pride in their research accomplishments and emerge as stronger optometrists because of the experience. 



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

DR. MICHELLE WELCH:

A legacy of care and education in optometry



Steve Croft Photography

Dr. Michelle Welch's warmth and approachability make it easy to see why her patients feel at ease under her care. A proud Cherokee and Oklahoma native, Welch's deep roots at Northeastern State University and her passion for healthcare have shaped her career in optometry.

"Well, both of my parents went to NSU, my sister, my niece and my brother-in-law, so we are a family of NSU graduates," Welch said. "We're very proud to be alumni of NSU, and of course I am very proud to be an alumna of the College of Optometry."

Though many in her family were educators, Welch initially pursued a different path, briefly exploring aerospace engineering before finding her calling in optometry. Despite an early reluctance to teach, she discovered a talent for helping others learn, first as a student tutor and later as an educator and mentor at NSUOCO.

"I always enjoyed that part of it as well as helping young people because you figure if you teach an optometrist how to do a good job, then they go and take care of their patients, then you had a hand in that as well," Welch said. "Although, I left the teaching part, at this point I like to teach my patients. I'm still educating them on their disease and about how to improve their visual health."

After earning her degree in 1995, Welch joined NSUOCO's Rural Eye Program, working in Cherokee Nation healthcare clinics. In 2000, she became a clinical director and faculty member, eventually serving as associate dean before transitioning to the Choctaw Nation clinic in Idabel, Oklahoma.

Her identity as a tribal member and experience in tribal healthcare have profoundly influenced her approach to patient care.

"I played a significant role in taking care of patients in the College of Optometry in tribal clinics through the Cherokee Nation," Welch said. "So, I became familiar with the tribal healthcare system. I came down here [to Idabel] when one of my former students, Dr. Josh Golden, actually recruited me."

Golden saw Welch's skills firsthand and recommended her for a position that would allow her to continue providing patient care, performing laser procedures, and using Botox for medical treatments. She values the opportunity to serve within the tribal healthcare system, where she feels a strong connection with her patients.

"Even though I'm Cherokee down here in Choctaw Nation, my clinical experience along with having that tribal affiliation makes it easier to relate to my patients and for them to relate to me," Welch said. "They understand that, yes, I'm a tribal citizen just like them, so I feel like that helps me give back to the people that I serve."

Welch's dedication to optometry and education has not gone unnoticed. In June 2021, she received the Distinguished Service Award from the American Optometric Association, an honor made possible through a nomination by the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians, where she previously served as president.

"I just love taking care of people," Welch said. "I enjoy helping my patients see better, improve their ability to perform daily activities and being able to do what they need to do to take care of themselves."

Welch prioritizes clear communication, ensuring her patients feel informed and empowered in managing their eye health. Having experienced patient loss, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, she understands the weight of her role.

"That's the hard part, you know, losing the patient," Welch said. "When COVID-19 hit, we'd come back after the weekend and hear about two or three more of our elderly patients that had passed away. You get to know them and [you get to know] their family, so that's the most challenging, taking care of someone, and then they pass away."

For Welch, being an NSUOCO alumna means more than just earning a

degree—it's about being part of a lifelong professional family. The program's intimate class size, rigorous training and strong relationship with the Cherokee Nation make her proud of its legacy and excited for its future.

"I can't even explain how proud I am of the faculty, staff and administration at the College of Optometry for making this vision a reality," Welch said. "Future students are going to benefit from the new building as well as optometrists in the state of Oklahoma because of the continuing education that will be offered there."

Outside of her work, Welch enjoys life in the mountains with her husband and their seven dogs, often spending her free time reading murder mystery novels. 🐾

I just love taking care of people. I enjoy helping my patients see better, improve their ability to perform daily activities and being able to do what they need to do to take care of themselves.

→ DR. MICHELLE WELCH

DIFFERENT PATHS, SHARED PURPOSE

How Dr. Komal Patel and Dr. Aubry Tackett found their way to NSUOCO

No two paths are the same, yet they can lead to the same destination. For Dr. Komal Patel and Dr. Aubry Tackett, their journeys to Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry were uniquely different.

Growing up in Toronto, Canada, Patel experienced the fast-paced nature of a large city.

"Toronto is very populated," Patel said. "I was used to growing up in the city and seeing all the skyscrapers with people everywhere. It's definitely more fast-paced than it is here. Tahlequah has that small-town feel that you don't necessarily get in Toronto."

Having known about a career in healthcare, Patel's direction became clear after an eye exam at Western University in Ontario revealed she was nearsighted in one eye.

"From that day I started wearing one contact lens to correct my myopia, and it was at that moment when I decided that optometry is what I wanted to do," Patel said.

She attended the University of Waterloo, Canada's only English-speaking optometry school, and graduated amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

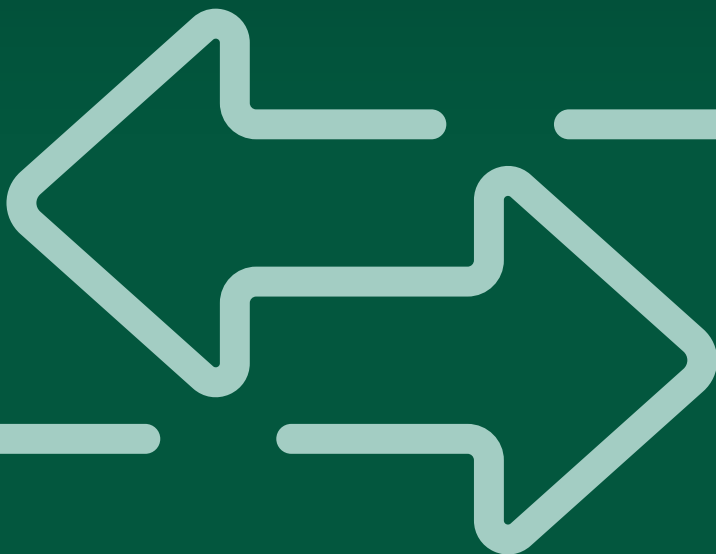
"I went into private practice during the pandemic which was a very different way of practicing as you can imagine, and it was there that I had an epiphany," Patel said. "I just didn't feel challenged in my primary care practice and knew there was more I wanted to be doing in my career... that's when I started looking into residency programs."



Patel



Tackett



Determined to specialize in ocular disease, Patel pursued a disease-focused residency at NSUOCO, where she found her passion for advanced procedures.

"Residency was one of the most rewarding years of my career," Patel said. "I chose to specialize in ocular disease, but I also fell in love with advanced procedures."

After completing her residency, Patel transitioned into her current role as an assistant professor, practicing medical optometry to its fullest scope.

Tackett, from Yukon, Oklahoma, spent her childhood playing piano, leading worship, and riding horses, which shaped her strong work ethic and sense of community. Initially drawn to veterinary medicine, her career trajectory shifted after a heartbreaking experience with her childhood horse. Yet a childhood accident spurred an aversion to needles and blood.

"In my head, I thought that I wouldn't have to deal with needles, blood or surgery," Tackett said. "And, then I get to optometry school and surgery ends up being one of my favorite things... It's funny how I've been able to turn it around."

Choosing to stay close to home, Tackett completed her undergraduate degree at NSU and met her husband, Austin, during her studies. During this time, she immersed herself in the optometry community, volunteering with Opening Eyes, a Special Olympics event that provides eye care to participants.

"I knew I wanted to be a part of a community that cared about each other," Tackett said. "It was really neat to see the connections they have with each other, the athletes and their families."

When choosing her residency path, Tackett opted for academia, believing it would allow her to eventually teach. "I enjoyed that aspect of my residency because I was able to get feedback about my communication and teaching style," she said.

A fourth-generation educator, Tackett now serves as an assistant professor at NSUOCO, following in the footsteps of her great-grandmother, grandfather and mother.

Teaching wasn't initially part of either doctor's plan, but both found immense fulfillment in guiding students through optometric care. Today, as young professionals and educators, Patel and Tackett are inspiring the next generation of NSUOCO students. Despite their differing journeys, their shared purpose is clear: shaping the future of optometry, one student at a time.

"There can be a lot of benefit in stepping outside of your comfort zone and moving to a new place, city or country that you would never know about if you didn't take that leap of faith," Patel said. "Take a chance, if an opportunity presents itself, it may be one of the best decisions you'll ever make in your career." 🧐





STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

DEREK BRYANT

From small-town roots to national advocacy

For many high school students, the question, “What are you going to college for?” can feel daunting—especially when growing up in a rural town. Fortunately for Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry student Derek Bryant, his high school offered a program that allowed him to explore his passion for the medical field.

Growing up in Winfield, Kansas, Bryant had a natural interest in math and science, but his early ambitions leaned toward politics.

“At first, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer and go into politics,” Bryant said. “I really enjoyed the service aspect of it, but I’ve always liked science and math, so then I thought maybe I wanted to go into neurology or neurosurgery.”

Through his high school’s Health Careers Program, Bryant

had the opportunity to explore different healthcare fields by rotating through specialties at local hospitals. He interned with an audiologist, observed surgeries, and even spent time at a funeral home. However, it was optometry that ultimately captured his interest.

“I got to intern with two different optometrists and my experience at Winfield Family Optometry even turned into a paid job,” Bryant said. “I was drawn to optometry because of the work-life balance and it also ties in a little bit of neurology and politics.”

Bryant pursued his undergraduate degree at Oklahoma City University, where he met his wife, Hannah, and graduated a year early. By then, he had firmly set his sights on optometry as the perfect blend of his interests.

When it came time to choose an optometry school, Bryant looked for institutions close to home. NSUOCO stood out, particularly for its emphasis on laser and surgical training.

“During my interview, my main question was about how they teach lasers and surgery,” Bryant said. “It just felt like they invested in that, and that was enough for me.”

Although he described himself as a quiet high school student, Bryant was frequently sought out for leadership roles.

“In high school, I was heavily involved in student council, so I’ve always had leadership positions,” he said. “When I started optometry school, I thought, ‘Maybe I’ll just focus on school.’”

That plan quickly changed. Bryant became his class president and joined NSUOCO’s executive council. His professors encouraged him to apply for the American Optometric Student Association trustee position, leading to his current role as national president of the association.

“I’ve had the chance to travel, meet students from different optometry schools, and advocate for student issues,” Bryant said. “I can’t go anywhere now without someone in optometry recognizing me but it’s been incredibly rewarding. I’ve met senators from Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas and I even testified before the Kansas State Senate to support scope modernization.”

Over the past four years, Bryant has actively championed not only his fellow students but also the broader optometry profession. As he prepares for the next chapter of his career, he remains committed to advancing the field in his home state.

“Oklahoma has been great and I’m so grateful for my education here,” Bryant said. “But if I don’t go back to Kansas, who will advocate for optometrists there? I feel called to be part of that movement and help expand the profession.”

Balancing the demands of optometry school and his leadership roles has been challenging, but Bryant credits his opportunities to the connections he’s made at NSUOCO.

“Through my network, my name got passed around, and someone looking for a doctor to become a partner reached out to me,” Bryant said. “That’s how I landed my post-graduation position. It reinforced the importance of getting involved and why students should return to their home states to advocate for our profession.”

Bryant encourages future and current optometry students to take an active role in the profession.

In spring 2025, he will graduate and return to Kansas with his wife and their pets. He will begin his career at Walters Optometry in McPherson, Kansas, while continuing to advocate for optometry in his home state. 🧐





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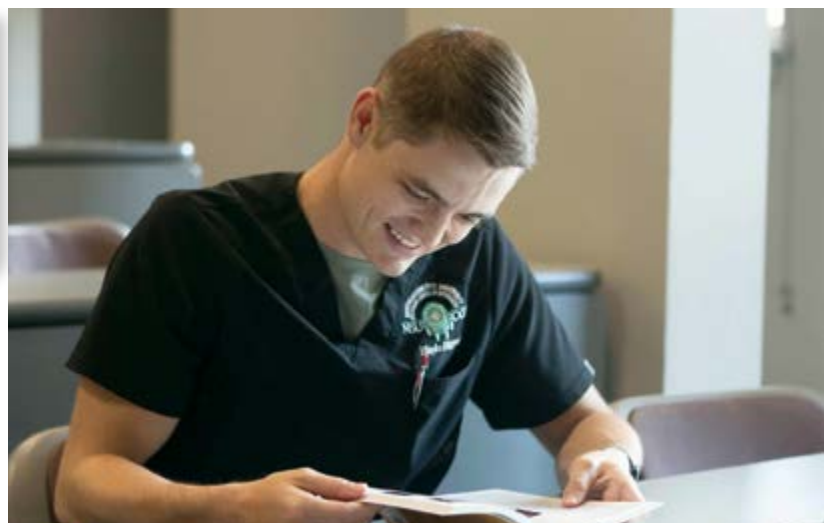
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