

NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

# Full Scope

ISSUE 4 | 2026

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WORLD-CLASS  
VISION



A new era  
of excellence  
and care begins

## From the President



### Greetings NSUOCO alumni and friends,

Progress at Northeastern State University is often measured in the opportunities we create for our students and the impact we have on the communities we serve. Nowhere is that more evident than at the NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry.

Over the past year, NSUOCO has entered an exciting new phase with the opening of its state-of-the-art facility. This investment represents a shared commitment to providing world-class education, expanding access to care and preparing the next generation of optometrists to meet the needs of a growing region. With this expansion, the college has increased its entering class size from 28 to 32 students, further strengthening its ability to address the rising demand for optometric care across Oklahoma and beyond.

This progress has been made possible through strong and enduring partnerships, including the Cherokee Nation, the State of Oklahoma and the continued support of our alumni and friends. Together, these partnerships ensure that NSUOCO remains a leader in clinical training and a vital resource for communities across northeastern Oklahoma and beyond.

Within the college, that commitment is reflected daily in the work of our faculty and students. Through hands-on clinical experiences, advanced technology and a focus on patient-centered care, students are gaining the knowledge and confidence needed to succeed in an evolving healthcare landscape.

Equally important is the role of our alumni and supporters. Through initiatives like the Focus Foundation, you are helping sustain a model of education and care that is both innovative and accessible. Your investment supports today's students while strengthening the future of optometry in Oklahoma.

This issue of Full Scope highlights the people and partnerships that make this progress possible. It is a reflection of a college that continues to build on its strengths while embracing new opportunities for growth and service.

Thank you for your continued support of Northeastern State University and the Oklahoma College of Optometry. Together, we are advancing a proud tradition while shaping a future defined by access, innovation and world-class care.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rodney S. Hanley".

Rodney S. Hanley, Ph.D.  
NSU President

# Full Scope

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF  
NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY  
OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

ISSUE 4 | 2026

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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 the fourth issue of Full Scope, the annual magazine of the NSU Oklahoma College of Optometry. It has been a busy year! At the forefront of everyone's mind over the past year has been the new building and our successful move into our new facility. July 29, 2025 was truly a special day! The Grand Opening Ceremony of the new NSUOCO facility where we were joined by legislators, NSU administration, our Cherokee Nation partners and friends, former deans of NSUOCO, current and former faculty, students, alumni, friends and supporters of NSU and NSUOCO, among many others to celebrate that monumental day. It was a wonderful start to this new chapter at NSUOCO!

Knock on wood, it has been a smooth transition and start in our new home. We had a "welcome to your new home" ceremony on day one of classes in the fall where students got to play fun games and explore their new home. Minus a few A/V hiccups and a couple of leaky pipes here and there, most everything has gone as planned in both the classroom spaces as well as the clinical spaces. We keep working hard to turn our new house into our home. A special thank you to Dr. Earlena McKee and our entire faculty for their tremendous work in the new facility.

A new and bigger space comes along with an exciting new and bigger class size. The entering class of 2026 (graduating class of 2030) will be the first to have 32 students in a class, up four students from the 28 students per class that NSUOCO has had over the past 15 years or so.

We continue to have a nearly full faculty, and they have been busy! From leadership conferences across the country to our world-class continuing education department, NSUOCO's presence has been felt both nationally and internationally. The NSUOCO laser course, surgery course and aesthetics course will all be featured at the American Academy of Optometry meeting in Anaheim in early October 2026. Seven different NSUOCO faculty, along with NSUOCO alumna Dr. Selina McGee, will lead and highlight these courses at this internationally renowned meeting. It truly is a feather in the cap of NSUOCO!

Our faculty have supported our students by being involved with pickleball tournaments, ping pong tournaments, student quiz bowls, and of course, their expert classroom teaching and clinical care. In the past year, we will be north of 51,000 patient encounters across our 12 clinical locations in northeast Oklahoma.

We want to thank all alumni and friends who have become members of Focus Foundation. What is Focus Foundation? It is the avenue to giving back to NSUOCO and our students through donations and giving that go directly to NSUOCO. Monies go towards students, scholarships, travel and equipment that keep NSUOCO at the top of optometry schools across the country. Currently we have 52 Focus Foundation members and 63 NFfocus members which is the student chapter of Focus Foundation. Please consider joining Focus Foundation at \$500 per year (\$41 per month) to support and help grow NSUOCO! Our goal is to have 100 members by the end of this calendar year!

A special shout out and thank you to Dr. Dawn Holsted who has donated an excimer laser to NSUOCO! We now have a permanent laser in our facility to expand our refractive surgery offerings to our patients and education to our students!

Our new home is not only our home, but yours as well. Please stop by anytime for a tour led by Dr. Whittle, a cup of coffee with Dr. Shetler, shoot the breeze with one of the McKees or Kreins, and of course I will always have the pickleball paddles ready to go! Thank you so much for your support of NSUOCO and Oklahoma Optometry!

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

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### ON THE COVER

On July 29, 2025  
Northeastern  
State University  
Oklahoma College  
of Optometry cut  
the ribbon on its  
nearly \$40 million  
facility beginning  
the next chapter of  
its world-class story.



# Advancing Oklahoma's premier optometry program

For many years, the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO) has been known for its tradition of clinical excellence. In September 2025, that reputation evolved into a dedicated mission with the establishment of the Focus Foundation.

Conceived alongside the opening of the college's new optometry facility, the foundation serves as a link between the professional success of NSU alumni and the future of current students. As the state's only optometry program, uniquely situated within a tribal jurisdiction, NSUOCO is more than a school; it is a regional resource for advanced eye care.

"This is a philanthropic bridge," Dr. Joseph Shetler, NSUOCO assistant dean and clinic chief, said. "It's an invitation for our friends and alumni to remain connected to the heartbeat of NSUOCO."

### THREE PILLARS OF PURPOSE

The foundation's roadmap is built on three pillars designed to keep northeastern Oklahoma at the forefront of optometric education and care:

**Recruitment:** Competitive scholarships help attract top students, regardless of their home state.

**Technology:** Direct funding supports advanced laser suites and diagnostic equipment for students and faculty.

**Innovation:** An Innovation and Growth Fund allows leadership to respond to evolving needs across the college.

"Providing scholarship funding helps us remain competitive and attract high-quality optometric candidates," Shetler said.

### MILESTONE WITH MOMENTUM

The early success of the Focus Foundation reflects strong collaboration between the College of Optometry and the broader university. Shetler credits Peggy Glenn and Danny Johnson of the NSU Foundation and Alumni Association as key partners in advancing that work.

The foundation's impact was on display in March 2026 at the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians Spring Conference in Oklahoma City, where three \$2,000 scholarships were awarded to NSUOCO students. The milestone

demonstrates how alumni support is already making a difference in student success.

### NFOCUS: BUILDING A CULTURE OF GIVING

A key component of the foundation's strategy is the NFocus program, designed specifically for current students. For a \$25 per semester contribution, students can begin engaging in philanthropy while still in the classroom.

The program is intended to instill a culture of giving early in students' careers.

"Our goal is that they will have a strong and positive experience as an NFocus member and continue that involvement after graduation," Shetler said.

By building this pipeline, the college encourages students to recognize the importance of supporting the profession and investing in its future.

### VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The goal of the Focus Foundation is not only to sustain progress, but to advance it. By strengthening connections between alumni and students, NSUOCO is fostering a cycle of support that benefits both the college and the communities it serves.

"We aren't just building a fund; we are building a community of practitioners who care about the future of their profession," Shetler said.

As the new facility enters its first full year of operation and the first scholarships reach students, the message is clear: NSUOCO alumni play a vital role in shaping the future of optometry in Oklahoma.

### GET INVOLVED

Alumni and friends can support the mission in several ways:

► **Join the Focus Foundation:** Contribute to Recruitment, Technology and Innovation initiatives.



► **Mentor NFocus students:** Connect with current students and support their development in advocacy and philanthropy. 👁️

# Inaugural NFocus Scholarship recipients awarded

The inaugural NFocus Scholarships were awarded at the OAOP Vision Summit this spring. Recipients were recognized for their commitment to service, leadership and engagement.

Thanks to the support of the Focus Foundation, NSUOCO continues to invest in the next generation of optometrists and expand access to care across Oklahoma.

*"Receiving this scholarship is such an honor. As a first-year optometry student and alumni of NSU, I am so grateful to the university and NSUOCO for their investments in their students. The financial aspects of my academic journey are always daunting, but scholarships like this will assist me in becoming an effective optometrist."*

*Kinley Wilson, first-year student*



*"Receiving the NFocus scholarship means so much to me because it represents a shared commitment to service, leadership and the future of optometry. Throughout my time at NSUOCO, I have been inspired by the passion that leaders in our profession have for investing in the next generation. To be recognized by the Focus Foundation is both an honor and a reminder that I am part of something much larger than myself."*

*Emma Brockman, second-year student*



*"Receiving this scholarship is yet another way this school has put its faith in me to be an excellent student, clinician and advocate for the college. I am humbled, but also am reminded of the charge that was given to me the day I walked on campus to start school, which is to practice the art and science of optometry faithfully and conscientiously and to the fullest scope of my competence."*

*Justin Dang, second-year student*



# Dr. George Foster

(1943-2025)

Dr. George Foster's life and career were defined by a simple but profound belief, "Next to life itself, God's most precious gift is vision." Through decades of service, leadership and advocacy, he ensured that gift was protected and expanded for countless patients, students and communities.

A 1965 graduate of Northeastern State University and a proud citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Foster returned to Tahlequah in 1997 intending to serve just six months as interim dean of the Oklahoma College of Optometry. Instead, his leadership spanned more than a decade, shaping the college into a nationally recognized leader in optometric education and clinical training.

During his tenure, Foster elevated the college's academic rigor, expanded recruitment nationwide and strengthened its clinical impact, guiding a program where students now participate in more than 50,000 patient encounters each year. He was instrumental in building a lasting partnership with the Cherokee Nation, significantly increasing access to eye care in rural and underserved communities across northeastern Oklahoma.

Beyond campus, Foster was a transformative advocate for the profession. His work with state leaders helped position Oklahoma at the forefront of optometric scope of practice, including landmark advancements that allowed optometrists to perform laser procedures, an achievement that reshaped patient care and influenced policy nationwide.

Known affectionately as "Cuz" to colleagues and friends, Foster led with warmth, humor and an unwavering belief in people. He fostered a culture of purpose and pride at NSU, reminding each new class of students of their responsibility to carry forward the legacy of those who came before them.

His connection to NSU remained strong long after his time as dean. As an inaugural NSU Centurion, he was recognized among the university's most dedicated supporters and leaders. In a fitting full-circle moment, Foster also contributed to the future of optometric education through a personal gift supporting laser surgical training labs in the college's new facility, ensuring students would continue to learn at the leading edge of the profession he helped shape.

Foster passed away on Aug. 22, 2025, on his 61st wedding anniversary with his beloved wife, Rita. Together, they built a life centered on faith, family and service. He is remembered as a devoted husband, father, grandfather and mentor whose influence will be felt for generations.

At Northeastern State University and the Oklahoma College of Optometry, his legacy lives on—in every student trained, every patient served and every step forward in the profession he loved. 🕊️





## WORLD-CLASS EDUCATION

# EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION, SERVICE IN PRACTICE

Students filled the auditorium inside Northeastern State University's Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO) as a photorefractive keratectomy (PRK) surgery took place just down the hall. On large screens in front of them, the procedure was broadcast live from the surgical microscope, allowing students to observe every step in real time.

The moment marked the first PRK surgery performed in the new NSUOCO facility—and the first in Tahlequah—demonstrating how the college blends advanced technology with hands-on education.

"In the auditorium, our technology allows people to see exactly what the surgeon sees under the microscope," Dr. Joseph Shetler, NSUOCO assistant dean and clinic chief, said. "Almost anything that's being done with the patient's consent can be broadcast as an educational tool."

Education and patient care remain central to NSUOCO's mission. Students are not only trained to master clinical skills but also to serve patients, communities and the optometric profession.

The college's new facility expands those opportunities with modern classrooms, examination rooms, laboratories, conference rooms and eyewear facilities. These spaces give students access to modern technology while providing direct clinical experience.



This past fall, NSUOCO hosted the Primary Care Update, a continuing education conference that welcomed nearly 300 optometric residents, doctors and alumni from across the region to explore the new state-of-the-art facilities.

“Our facility allowed us to host nearly two and a half times more in-person participants,” Shetler said. “New digital technologies elevated the educational experience, especially for retinal case presentations where clarity and color detail were visible. We had our alumni as conference speakers and hosted tours and a reception. Those elements created not only our largest conference to date, but one that sets a new standard for the future.”

Inside the facility, several new learning environments help students strengthen their clinical skills before entering full-time patient care. Among them are the new Clinical Education Lab (CEL) and National Board of Examiners of Optometry (NBEO) Prep Rooms—spaces where students refine their proficiency using equipment similar to what they will encounter in professional practice.

All NSUOCO students have around-the-clock access to the CEL lab, which is designed with individual exam lanes for practicing with eye-testing equipment. Students can bring volunteers to practice procedural skills, and the lab is also used for structured instruction.

“They are required to do so many practice procedures prior to being allowed into the clinic to see patients,” Shetler said. “The lab is set up in a way that is private but still has all the equipment in each lane.”


Fourth-year students often take advantage of the NBEO Prep Rooms when preparing for their national exams, which is only administered in North Carolina.

“We’re conscientious about mimicking the actual equipment that they will see when they go to national boards,” Shetler said. “We believe these rooms will help our students take away some of the nervousness and help them perform at their best.”

Service remains a defining part of the NSUOCO experience. Students volunteer at events including Special Olympics in Stillwater, Giving Sight Day in Tahlequah, Tahlequah Cares and the University of Oklahoma’s Bedlam Clinic, providing eye care to impoverished communities.

Students also participate in international outreach through the Student Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (SVOSH), a student-led nonprofit organization that provides vision care to underserved populations. Each year, NSUOCO students, faculty, sponsors and alumni travel to Honduras to provide free services to hundreds of patients.

“Students spend weeks preparing for SVOSH,” Shetler said. “They collect donated glasses, determine prescriptions and label them before traveling to Honduras, where teams can see 300 to 400 patients a day.”

Through modern facilities, hands-on training and service opportunities, NSUOCO is preparing students to become skilled clinicians and compassionate providers of care. 

## EXPANDING THE OPTOMETRIST’S SKILL SET

As one of the only colleges in the nation offering a course in Ocular Aesthetics for the Optometric Physician, NSUOCO is making a significant impact among Doctors of Optometry (O.D.s).

As interest in facial neurotoxins, what we know as Botox, continues to grow, Dr. Aubry Tackett, NSUOCO assistant professor, explains that optometrists are uniquely qualified to understand the intricate anatomy of the face, including nerves, musculature and skin.

Launching the ocular aesthetics certificate as part of the college’s Continuing Education program expands professional opportunities while strengthening the confidence optometrists have in their skills and the trust they build with patients.

The course provides the educational and technical training necessary to perform ocular aesthetic procedures in clinical settings. With small class sizes, O.D.s receive individualized instruction while learning about the equipment, techniques and injections used in a variety of treatments.

Under direct supervision, and with patient consent, participating doctors practice their skills on live participants before integrating the procedures into their own practices, ensuring they are prepared to safely incorporate aesthetic services into patient care.





## WORLD-CLASS CLINICAL CARE

# Expanding regional care with state-of-the-art equipment

The Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO) facility stands as a beacon of “World-Class Clinical Care” in Tahlequah, blending advanced surgical technology with a patient-centered experience. Boasting an optical showroom with over 550 frames and 200 variations, NSUOCO prides itself on providing essential access and care for northeastern Oklahoma and beyond. This new, nearly \$40 million investment represents a commitment to optometric education

and patient service, ensuring that patients in northeastern Oklahoma and beyond receive care that surpasses what is available in major metropolitan areas.

### THE EXAM LANE: A HIGH-DEFINITION CLASSROOM

At the core of the facility’s operations are 26 identical, state-of-the-art exam lanes. These rooms are designed to be more than just clinical spaces; they are advanced learning opportunities for

medical education. Every lane features brand-new, high-end slit lamps—microscopes used to examine the internal and external structures of the eye.

To bridge the gap between student learning and expert diagnosis, each lane is equipped with advanced video systems. This technology allows faculty members to view live examinations in real-time.

“When a student is looking at the eyeball, the attending doctor, our faculty, can see what the student is seeing,” Dr. Nathan Lighthizer, Dean at NSUOCO, said.

“We can visualize what the doctor or the student is seeing. That’s huge, to have brand-new equipment in each exam lane.” This “see what I see” philosophy ensures that the more than 50,000 annual patient encounters are handled with unparalleled accuracy while providing students with immediate expert guidance.

### ADVANCING REGIONAL ACCESS

For decades, patients in Northeastern Oklahoma were forced to travel to distant places or big cities for advanced refractive procedures. Today, the gap has been closed. The new NSUOCO facility features a dedicated surgical area equipped with advanced surgical microscopes and lasers designed for specialized eye procedures.

These tools allow the college to perform surgeries like PRK (Photorefractive Keratectomy) and LASIK, which reshape the cornea to reduce a patient’s dependence on glasses. “Currently, we are rolling on and rolling off an Excimer laser about every quarter to be able to do PRK and or LASIK on patients,” Lighthizer said. “Having the option to have refractive surgery here in Tahlequah certainly is beneficial for our patients.” By bringing this level of advancement to the local community, NSUOCO has established itself as a regional leader, providing life-changing care right in the heart of northeastern Oklahoma.

### PRECISION IN PRACTICE

The technical heart of the facility is the Spectacle Fabrication Laboratory. This lab is where the science of a medical prescription meets the physical craft of eyewear. Here, students gain important hands-on experience by operating the specialized machinery essential to cutting the prescription lenses.

The process is intensive and students gain hands-on experience by operating machines that cut lenses to the exact shape and size of the specific frame. The fabrication process ensures that every pair of glasses meets the exact requirements for each patient’s needs. This lab is a powerhouse for the region, supporting a network of nine external clinics to ensure that patients across the entire northeastern Oklahoma footprint receive precision-engineered corrective lenses.

Dr. Alan McKee, director of optical services, emphasizes that the expansion of lens fabrication production was always part of the long-term vision. “Expanding the fabrication lab to include machines that produce the very lenses we prescribe has been in the original design of this facility from the start,” McKee noted. “It was simply a matter of getting our footing in the new building. By meeting the needs of the area and the growing demand from the clinics we serve, we are directly benefiting optometric access throughout northeastern Oklahoma and beyond.”

Downstairs from the fabrication lab is the optical showroom, a state-of-the-art eyewear gallery that serves as the public face

of the facility. Designed to feel like a high-end boutique, the dispensary features over 550 frames with over 200 variations to choose from. This space is a unique intersection of retail and medicine; it is where clinical prescriptions are translated into a finished product. Students assist patients in selecting frames that not only fit their style but are also technically compatible with their specific medical needs, ensuring that “world-class care” extends to the patient’s daily life.

### THE CALLIE JORDAN LEGACY

Expanding access to world-class care requires capable doctors, but the path to optometry is often paved with significant equipment costs. Students must purchase many handheld tools that they will use throughout their graduate and post-education careers.

To expand education access to optometry students, the Communities Foundation of Oklahoma (CFO) and the Nix Foundation established an endowment scholarship in memory of Callie Jordan, a beloved patient with low vision. This fund assists second-year optometry students by offsetting the cost of their clinical equipment.

### A VISION OF THE FUTURE

Supported by the Cherokee Nation, the State of Oklahoma and a loyal network of alumni, the new NSUOCO facility is a self-sustaining environment for success and innovation. By integrating surgical suites, 26 high-tech exam lanes and a high-volume fabrication lab, the college ensures that students are trained in the optometry industry of tomorrow.



# NSUOCO faculty shaping the future of optometry



Dr. Latricia Pack



Dr. Dawn Holsted



Dr. Dalton Cunningham

Faculty mentorship at Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO) spans multiple levels of experience, but the goal remains consistent: preparing students for successful careers. From seasoned professors to alumni partners and new clinical instructors, faculty help shape the next generation of optometrists.

Among them are Dr. Latricia Pack, senior faculty member in contact lens education; Dr. Dawn Holsted, an NSUOCO alumna and clinical partner; and Dr. Dalton Cunningham, a recently appointed Rural Eye Program (REP) clinical faculty member working with the Cherokee Nation.

## CONTACT LENS LEADERSHIP

For nearly three decades, Pack has taught contact lens courses and supervised students at NSUOCO. A career in education, however, was not originally part of her plan.

“My parents and others in education had always suggested I look outside of education for a career because the work is hard and the pay is not ideal,” she said.

When a faculty position opened at NSUOCO in 1999, she and her husband, Chuck, chose to remain in Tahlequah and take the opportunity. Twenty-seven years later, both remain in education locally, with Pack at NSUOCO and her husband at Tahlequah High School.

“We love sharing knowledge, investing in students’ lives and seeing them do great things,” Pack said. “We love the quality of life that a career in education provides and the people we work with.”

In addition to teaching, Pack helps guide updates to the contact lens curriculum, evaluating new products and determining their clinical relevance for instruction and patient care.

“I work with others at the college to find a way to purchase and implement new technology,” she said.

Her connection to the profession extends into her family. Pack’s daughter, Morgan, and son-in-law, Trenton, are third- and second-year students at NSUOCO.

“I am the first optometrist in my family,” she said, “but the love for math, science and helping others definitely runs in my family.”

Pack’s professional service includes the Executive Board of the Association of Optometric Contact Lens Educators, leadership of NSUOCO’s Contact Lens Clinic for 17 years, and supervision of the Cornea and Contact Lens Residency for more than two decades.

## SURGICAL TRAINING PARTNERSHIP

Dr. Dawn Holsted, an NSUOCO alumna and president and CEO of nJoy Vision in Oklahoma City (OKC), has maintained a strong connection to the college since graduation.

When selecting a program for optometric education and residency, she said NSUOCO was an easy choice.

“NSU was the best in the nation,” she said. “I wanted to attend a place where we could see more patients and have more access to patient care.”

After graduating, she served seven years as an adjunct faculty member and residency supervisor in Tulsa, then fourteen years in OKC with TLC Laser Eye Centers, before opening nJoy Vision. Today, she continues to support NSUOCO by supervising residents and externships focused on refractive procedures, including PRK.

“Refractive surgeries belong with optometry,” Holsted said. “We’ve taught PRK courses to students since the ‘90s, and doing the actual procedure is in line with what we should be teaching.”

Her commitment recently extended through the donation of a high-quality ophthalmic laser, allowing PRK training to take place directly on campus.

“I always want to make sure I’m supporting those that have been good to me in my career,” she said.

The addition also expands student access to hands-on training.

“They’ll be able to schedule their own patients at any time because they have access to the machine instead of coming to nJoy Vision in OKC or to Tulsa to see the training,” she said.

For Holsted, the most meaningful part of teaching remains student growth.

“Watching their eyes light up when they learn something new or when they finish their first surgical procedure is the most rewarding aspect,” she said.

### RURAL CLINICAL EDUCATION

Dr. Dalton Cunningham (Cherokee Tribal Member) joined NSUOCO in July 2025 as a Rural Eye Program (REP) clinical faculty member. The role is part of his commitment through the Indian Health Service Scholarship Program, which supported his education in exchange for service in Native communities.

“NSU was opening a new position at the Cherokee Nation Outpatient Health Center in Tahlequah,” he said. “It was a win-win for me because I could move back home and be around family, especially with a baby on the way. At the same time, I could pay off the IHS scholarship.”

As REP faculty at Cherokee Nation, Cunningham provides third- and fourth-year students with hands-on clinical instruction.

“My focus is helping students connect what they’re learning in the classroom to the clinical setting and become good optometrists, not just good students,” he said.

He also teaches clinical case management in diabetes care, ocular disease, emergencies and primary care, exposing students to a broad range of patient scenarios.

“It helps students prepare for the complexity of patients,” Cunningham said. “They learn to understand systemic diseases that affect the eyes and how we can work together with the patient to ensure a better quality of life.”

### SHARED IMPACT

Though their paths differ in experience and focus, Pack, Holsted and Cunningham share a common purpose: investing in students.

Whether through decades of classroom instruction, advancement of surgical training or hands-on clinical mentorship, each contributes to shaping the next generation of optometrists at NSUOCO.

Together, their work reflects a sustained commitment to world-class instruction and the future of optometric education. 





## WORLD-CLASS STUDENTS

# Chase Bowerman models world-class work ethic

For Chase Bowerman, the path to optometry wasn't a straight line. It was shaped by circumstance and refined through experience. A Fayetteville, Arkansas, native and double-major alumnus of the University of Arkansas, Bowerman earned degrees in kinesiology and biology before finding his direction during the global disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Half of my school was in the middle of the peak COVID era," Bowerman said. "I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field, but everyone was closed down for shadowing."

That pause led him to a full-time role as a technician at a Fayetteville optometry and ophthalmology practice. There, working alongside surgeons and primary eye care providers, he was introduced to the pace and complexity of clinical care, including the diagnosis and management of ocular disease that many outside the profession never see.

When it came time to choose a doctoral program, NSUOCO stood out.

"It's one of the top schools for ocular disease and scope of practice," Bowerman said, now in the spring of his third year. "I wanted those advanced capabilities where I'm learning them in-house as a student, rather than having to find them elsewhere after graduation."

### LEADING WITH PURPOSE

While his clinical training is demanding, Bowerman's impact extends well beyond the Tahlequah clinic. He currently serves as president of the American Optometric Student Association, representing more than 7,100 students across the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

The organization is built on four pillars: student experience, education, advocacy and tools for success. For Bowerman, advocacy stands out.

“We [optometrists] are a legislative profession,” he said. “Our rulings go through state and national governments to allow us to prescribe medications or perform procedures. We go to state capitals and Washington, D.C., to advocate for our patients, ensuring they receive the highest quality of care.”

Balancing national leadership with the demands of optometric training is no small task, but Bowerman credits the culture at NSUOCO for making it possible. He describes a supportive, close-knit environment where faculty are both nationally recognized and personally invested in student success.

“You realize the education you’re getting is from the top optometrists in the country, but they are so personable,” Bowerman said, citing Dr. Nathan Lighthizer. “He’s one of the most well-known optometrists in the country, but I’m never scared to go into his office and chat. The faculty has been incredibly flexible with my AOSA role. They work around my schedule because they’re proud of the representation.”


#### SERVICE AND MENTORSHIP

Bowerman’s future is already coming into focus. After completing his fourth year and a residency in ocular disease, he plans to return to Northwest Arkansas, driven both by a professional commitment and a desire to give back to the community that shaped him.

He is particularly passionate about the Brandon Burlsworth Foundation and its “Burlsworth Kids” program, which provides free eye exams to children in need.

“As an optometrist, I feel the obligation to be a part of that,” he said. “It’s about giving back to kids who love football and love our state.”

His advice for future students is simple.

“Ignore the overwhelming voices online,” he said. “Go find an optometrist in person. Make a connection. That’s what ignited my passion.” 

*You realize the education you’re getting is from the top optometrists in the country, but they are so personable.*

→ CHASE BOWERMAN

## NSUOCO LEADS WITH NBEO SCORE SURGE

While the culture at NSUOCO fosters leadership, student outcomes reflect that momentum. National Board of Examiners in Optometry (NBEO) scores have reached an all-time high, a milestone Dr. Jeffrey Miller, professor and assistant dean of academic affairs, describes as a significant achievement for both students and the institution.

According to Miller, the results are not an anomaly, but the outcome of intentional alignment between curriculum, technology and clinical experience.

“We are seeing a perfect alignment between advanced clinical technology and student preparation,” Miller said.

#### THREE KEYS TO THE HIGH SCORES:



##### TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

With new NSUOCO facilities and equipment, students are engaging with advanced techniques earlier in their training.



##### CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING

The NSUOCO curriculum emphasizes navigating complex, multi-variable scenarios, a skill directly reflected in board performance.



##### PEER-DRIVEN EXCELLENCE

NSUOCO student leaders like Chase Bowerman help set a high standard for involvement and achievement across the program.

For faculty, the scores are a point of pride. For students, they signal readiness to enter the profession with confidence and a strong foundation in clinical care.

# Building connection and community beyond the classroom

Students, residents, staff and faculty at the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO) are strengthened by the challenges they navigate together, forming bonds through perseverance and shared purpose. Just as meaningful, however, are the moments of joy that endure in memory and help define the college experience.

One of the many ways the community connects is through meals, including Lunch with the Deans. The event brings together competitive spirit and laughter and has become a favorite at NSUOCO—reminding participants that while they share the responsibility of providing vision care, they also share in the fulfillment that comes from making that care accessible. Sarah Lill, administrative assistant, organizes many of the college’s events, including Lunch with the Deans.

“I love the Lunch with the Deans,” Lill said. “They’re always just so fun. Seeing everyone come together, enjoying time with one another and having good, friendly competition, too.”

The construction of the NSUOCO building introduced several new spaces designed to support both academic excellence and community life, including a dedicated student lounge, a fitness center and pickleball courts.

The student lounge offers a place to study, collaborate or unwind. Equipped with a ping pong table, pool table, flat-screen television and kitchen area, the space supports camaraderie and student well-being. Students have hosted several ping pong tournaments, with Dr. Nathan Lighthizer, NSUOCO dean, joining matches and reinforcing the college’s culture of connection.

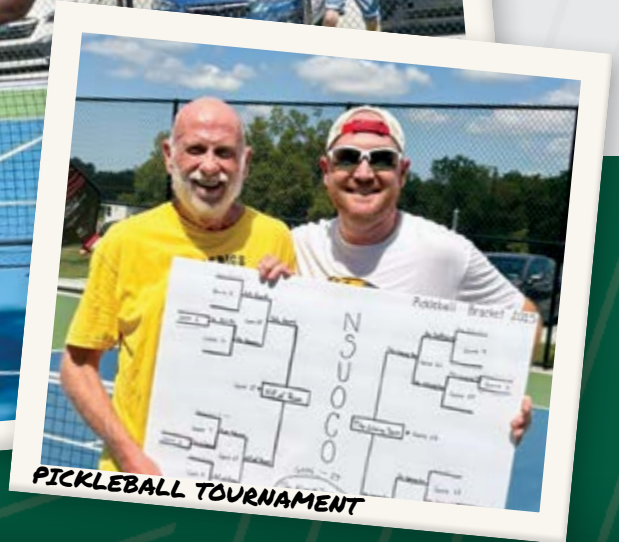
The workout room and pickleball courts provide additional opportunities for physical activity, friendly competition and informal interaction. By offering spaces where students and employees can relieve stress, engage with one another and recharge, NSUOCO reinforces a culture that prepares well-rounded optometrists to excel in the clinic and as members of a supportive professional community.

Challenge is inevitable, but so are the moments that unite people beyond the exam room. These shared experiences transform obstacles into camaraderie and turn hard work into collective accomplishment.

Together, they create a culture where joy fuels world-class training. 



PICKLEBALL COURT



PICKLEBALL TOURNAMENT



**STUDENT LOUNGE / KITCHEN**



**STUDENT LOUNGE / PING PONG**



**STUDENT LOUNGE / POOL TABLE**



**WORKOUT ROOM**



**THANKSGIVING POTLUCK**



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