



The leadership of optometry schools is crucial as mentors and facilitators for student association interactions. During his long career, Lesley Walls was Dean at Northeastern Oklahoma State University, Pacific University, SCCO, and most recently at the new Worcester (MA) optometry school. Walls receives 2001 Ray Myers award from AOSA VP Andkur Kalra (Photo courtesy of AOSA).



Christopher Wolfe, president of AOSA in 2007-2008 (Photo courtesy of AOSA).

## KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AT NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY FROM 2001-2009

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### ABSTRACT

*Highlighting the factors in play that resulted in five American Optometric Student Association (AOSA) presidents from Northeastern State University during the period 2001-2009 can illustrate how to shape future leaders of our profession. Important factors include a clear teaching of the roles played by regulatory, advocacy and educational bodies as well as a culture of identifying and fostering students to pursue their passions within the profession.*

In writing this article, I set out to tell the story of how a small school in Oklahoma had developed five American Optometric Student Association (AOSA) presidents over a period of nine years (2001-2009). My goal was to speak to these past presidents and other leaders in optometry and hear the stories surrounding the motivating factors that lead them to their decision for leadership. I also wanted to compare their reasons for leadership with mine to see if there is something to be learned from this history. I was able to do taped interviews with the following optometrists during April-June, 2017: Chad Fleming, Ryan Parker, David Cockrell, Bobby Christensen, Kippi Wyatt, and Jason Ellen.

In 2004, I was entering optometry school at Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO). I specifically chose to attend school there because the

unique scope of practice in Oklahoma provided training commensurate with that scope of practice to students at that school. While in Tahlequah, I was inspired by so many mentors who understood the complex dynamic between education, advocacy and the regulation of our profession that ultimately results in excellent patient care. This story is about those optometric giants who provided inspiration, guidance and insights to so many optometric physicians regionally and nationally.

To tell the story completely, I will begin with how I came to Oklahoma from Nebraska. When I was applying to optometry schools, my father, who is an optometrist and one of my mentors, insisted that on my list of potential schools should be a school in the small town of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, NSUOCO. He called an optometrist friend of his, Bobby Christensen, and asked him to relay what they were doing in Oklahoma to me. Bobby painted a vivid picture of a profession in control of its destiny. And so my fire to help our profession reflect what was occurring in Oklahoma at that time began to burn.

As first year students we had a class on the history of optometry. It was there that we were taught about the importance of advocacy because ours is a legislated profession. George Foster discussed the "three-legged stool" that was the reason for optometry's prominence in Oklahoma. He expressed to us "that each leg of the stool was of the exact same length and exact same importance."<sup>1</sup> This

model he described was all about excellent patient care and outcomes. The three legs include the Oklahoma College of Optometry (OCO), The Oklahoma Board of Examiners in Optometry (OBEO), and the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians (OAOP). Each of these legs play a vital role that could not be accomplished by the other two legs. The synergy of these associations is not by chance, it was developed by design.<sup>2,3</sup> This has become clearer to me over time and is really a microcosm of what occurs nationally with our different national associations. This class with Dr. Foster, who was the Dean of NSUOCO at that time, was something every student was required to take, and it was foundational to the leaders that NSUOCO was developing at that time in helping to motivate them to move the profession forward.<sup>1,4</sup>

### THE OKLAHOMA ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRIC PHYSICIANS (OAOP)

The OAOP advocates for the profession and patients in Oklahoma, which includes presenting to legislators and regulators the level of knowledge, education and training that optometrists receive in school and through continuing education programs. It also includes presenting the historical safety of the profession as evidenced by OBEO documentation and mission.

While all associations rely on many volunteers to educate the public and legislature, the foresight that those leaders have had over the years has been truly inspiring. David Cockrell has a unique perspective on these inter-workings as a past president of the OAOP and American Optometric Association (AOA) and as a member of the Optometric Board of Examiners in Oklahoma since 1996. He has served as a mentor and motivator to me,

and many others who recognize that he always takes time to understand and articulate issues with grace and wisdom. According to Cockrell, the foresight of the OAOP dates back to 1955 with a law that was enacted which prohibited the practice of optometry from occurring in a location that earned more than 50% of its revenue from services that were unrelated to eye care. This law promotes the professional nature of optometrists and prevents their services from being diluted as a loss leader or in lieu of additional purchases that would be made during that visit.

Specifically prior to the 1955 legislation, Sears Optical was distorting the profession to a refraction, prescribe and sell model.<sup>3</sup> Seeing that the profession was moving beyond refraction, Oklahoma passed their diagnostic pharmaceutical agent law in 1978 and therapeutic pharmaceutical agent law in 1981. In 1988, they updated the law so that optometrists were authorized to “treat ocular abnormalities by any means,” which allowed optometrists in Oklahoma to utilize ophthalmic lasers. This law was challenged in 1997 and a new law was passed which specifically authorized ophthalmic laser surgery. Additionally, optometrists were performing “lump and bump” procedures because again, the law did not exclude them. When this was challenged in 2005, Oklahoma had the vision to enact a law that would be exclusionary in nature, meaning the practice of optometry was not limited except by what was specifically excluded in statute. This ultimately results in a healthcare profession that can effectively serve its patients and provide them with the most current treatment options by growing with expanding technology.

Such legislative battles illustrated that very real “stroke-of-a-pen” changes to the scope of practice were occurring to the profession in Oklahoma during the time period we are talking about, and as students we were seeing it first-hand. We were also called to act to ensure that the educational institution would be able to teach us things we were there to learn. I think that one reason we saw such a movement for national leadership from NSUOCO was for us to spread this message to our student colleagues.

### OKLAHOMA BOARD OF EXAMINERS IN OPTOMETRY (OBEO)

None of the advocacy that was done by the OAOP could have been done without the help of the OBEO. The primary role of the OBEO, just as with all state boards, is to protect the public. According to Cockrell, “the OBEO has always taken the position that the better and more expansive training ODs receive in the state of Oklahoma, the better job that can be done by the licensees that the state board is in charge of regulating.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, advancing education in the state of Oklahoma has made the OBEO’s job easier. Because of this, the state board has been a strong advocate for increased education and increased scope of practice. To that end the OBEO worked with the OAOP when there was no optometry school in Oklahoma, and once NSUOCO was established the OBEO worked with the OAOP and NSUOCO to secure the best educational model possible for Oklahoma optometrists. In order that continuing education be up to the same level of rigor as education received during school, the OBEO requires all approved continuing education to be from a college of optometry or a state, regional or

national association. Additionally, the OBEO will provide testimony on behalf of the profession and the patients we serve when the scope of practice needs to be enhanced to better serve those patients.

Beyond this one unique aspect of the OBEO compared to many other state boards is the autonomy that they have in regulating the profession. In Nebraska, as an example, our state board sits under an umbrella Board of Health that oversees the individual professional licensing boards. This autonomy in Oklahoma is pointed to by medicine as a negative; I have heard it referred to by organized ophthalmology as “the fox guarding the henhouse”. But that model seems to work for medicine so to capitalize on another analogy ophthalmology’s claim amounts to the pot calling the kettle black. This autonomy is not taken for granted by the board or the providers that the board oversees. There is an overwhelming sense of responsibility on the part of the students and the providers to be better because they know if there is a mistake that autonomy could be lost. We saw this as students, and it motivated us to be excellent.

## **NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY (NSUOCO)**

Bobby Christensen is a practicing optometrist, a past president of the OAOP, and one of the developers of the practice management course at NSUOCO. According to Christensen, Lesley L. Walls, one of the first deans of NSUOCO, took a stance of engaging the OAOP to assist pushing the education at the school further than what was being done in private practice. Over the years deans at the school nurtured this relationship, and during the period we are discussing,

George Foster was the dean. Ryan Parker put it perfectly when he told me that “Dr. Foster was the exact right person for that school at that time, just as Doug Penisten is the exact right person for the school at this time.”<sup>1</sup> Foster engrained in the school and students that the issue was not if you wanted to be involved in the political process, but rather how much you were going to be involved. Nearly everyone I spoke to for this article recalled that Foster was the driving force behind much of the leadership inspiration that occurred during this time. Jason Ellen, my former externship site clinical instructor, is one of the best clinician educators with whom I ever had the pleasure to work. He recalled that Foster had a particular knack for identifying a “diamond in the rough.”<sup>5</sup> Foster knew how to motivate students (and I suspect doctors) to take on roles that they were not aware that they could.

Good grades are important in optometry school, but part of optometric education that is critical is political involvement. I look back on situations where it would have been easy and understandable for me to decline attending some of the advocacy events that came up while I was in school. While some of these events conflicted with clinic or tests, and moving clinics and tests was not easy, I look back on those opportunities and realize they opened so many doors for me. Among the experiences I vividly recall that shaped my understanding of our profession and the importance of advocacy, regulation, and education is the time George Foster explained to us the familial relationship of the profession. Foster affectionately calls his optometric colleagues his “cousins.”

Additionally I recall a tear-laced story of one Legislative Chair optometrist

who spent so much time at the state capitol in the 1980’s trying to pass a topical medications bill in a southeastern state that he was about ready to lose his practice. When a remotely acquainted optometrist “cousin” found out about the Legislative Chair’s situation, the remotely acquainted optometrist gave the Legislative Chair a significant sum of money to help keep his business afloat. This gesture was out of respect and understanding of the time and treasure that the Legislative Chair invested in expanding patient access to care from optometrists. By the time I heard the story, both of these seasoned optometrists had enormous practices with multiple locations and had become the closest of friends. Such stories inspire me every day, and I hope I am blessed with those types of friendships when I look back on my career. I am grateful that was a part of my education.

## **HOW CAN THIS BE REPLICATED?**

Being out of school for nearly nine years now, I see that new optometrists who are given leadership roles during school, rarely become wallflowers for the associations they join after school, so the importance of grooming our new leaders should be started as early as possible. I spoke with Kippi Wyatt (Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at NSUOCO) about the culture at NSUOCO that led to selecting and cultivating students who could be developed into leaders. Wyatt thinks that it is important to select good students who have a history of being hard workers. She also feels that if the profession is to move forward it is important for students to be excellent didactically, clinically and at giving back, whether that means donating time to people who are not as fortunate as we are or spending time



advocating on behalf of our patients and profession.<sup>6</sup>

I had the luxury of seeing other students go before me. Directly prior to my AOSA presidency, Caleb Schoonover played a big role in motivating me, but Chad Fleming was the first of the NSUOCO AOSA presidents during the 2001-2009 time period. As the first one to go through this, Fleming recalled that he was met with resistance by many professors who made it more of a challenge for him to miss their classes for travel for AOSA, but Foster paved the way for him to meet his commitments as an AOSA president by ensuring that the faculty allowed for professional development of the students. Fleming excelled as a student and clinician, creating believers out of the faculty and making it easier for those of us who followed in his footsteps.

Interestingly, two years later, Fleming's childhood friend, Ryan Parker was the next to follow in his footsteps. Ryan Parker was involved in the profession prior to starting optometry school through his work as an optician for a few years. He never set out to be an AOSA trustee but he was passionate about the profession and he stepped up to help because there was a need. He also felt like he wanted to see the profession outside of NSUOCO. He was pushed forward by George Foster, who showed him that we could move the profession forward. Parker noted that by the time he was AOSA president, the faculty at NSUOCO embraced Foster's vision of student involvement and were no longer hesitant to facilitate schedule changes that would allow him to fulfill AOSA presidential duties.

When I speak to students from schools across the country, most

see the importance of involvement in their associations, just as we did at NSUOCO. Many of the students from other optometry schools in the past had the perspective that administrators or faculty at their schools made it more difficult for them to miss clinic or classes to attend advocacy functions and assume leadership roles. I suspect, however, that the experience of NSUOCO during the 2000's is being replicated by many, if not most, schools now. Clear evidence of this is that this summer at Optometry's Meeting, 2,300 students showed up on Capitol Hill to advocate for the profession at AOA+! I believe this is how we breed leaders of our profession.

## References

1. Interview of Ryan Parker by the author, 2017.
2. Interview of Bobby Christensen by the author, 2017.
3. Interview of David Cockrell by the author, 2017.
4. Interview of Chad Fleming by the author, 2017.
5. Interview of Jason Ellen by the author, 2017.
6. Interview of Kippi Wyatt by the author, 2017.



*Dr. George Foster, Dean Emeritus, NSU-OCO  
(Photo courtesy of The Archives & Museum of Optometry, St. Louis, MO)*