

# THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL OF OPTOMETRY: A BRIEF 50-YEAR HISTORY

**John F. Amos, O.D., M.S., D.O.S.**

Dean and Professor Emeritus  
University of Alabama at Birmingham  
School of Optometry

[eyedoc@uab.edu](mailto:eyedoc@uab.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

*This article traces the history of the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry since its founding 50 years ago. The article highlights notable leaders of the university as well as individuals important in paving the way for the school of optometry's founding, the school of optometry's evolving mission, programs and expanding footprint.*

## KEYWORDS

*UAB; UABSO; University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry; University of Alabama Medical Center*

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for a school of optometry in Alabama appears to have been first conceived with passage of the Health Profession's Educational Assistance (HPEA) Act. This legislation was introduced by Alabama Senator Lister Hill on February 24, 1961. The rationale for its introduction was precipitated by the reports of several consultant groups. It was also in anticipation of the need to increase the number of health professionals necessary to provide care for the increased number of patients envisioned by the passage of federal entitlement programs and growth in the U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> The HPEA Act was signed into law by President John Kennedy on October 13, 1963.<sup>1</sup> This legislation would have a profound impact on the education of many health professions in the United States for many years to come.

Specific federal legislation amending the original Act was introduced in January 1962 by U.S. Representative Torbert MacDonald (D-Mass) and passed in 1964 and 1965.<sup>2</sup> Initially optometry was only eligible under the program for construction grants but was not included in the student loan program. Eventually optometry was included in all of the HPEA programs through subsequent legislation that would also include student loans, support for professional education, and funding for research facilities.

In 1963, Donald Springer, O.D., persuaded the Alabama Optometric Association (ALOA) to form a Health Manpower Committee to investigate the need for an increased optometric workforce in the state of Alabama. He also served

as chairman of a similar committee for the Southern Council of Optometrists (SoCO).<sup>3,4</sup>

Ultimately the passage of the HPEA legislation set in motion a series of activities by the ALOA. A joint committee of legislators was appointed to determine if there existed the need for a school of optometry in Alabama. The Report of the Joint Committee on June 23, 1967 determined that such a need existed. The Educational Appropriations Bill, known as H. 24, was signed as Act 383 by Governor Lurleen Wallace on September 6, 1967. Of the \$100,000 appropriated for the initial feasibility study for a school of optometry, \$50,000 was for FY 1967-68 and the same amount for FY 1968-69. Dr. Joseph Volker, Vice President for Health Affairs, of the University of Alabama Medical Center, was requested to prepare a report on the project for the 1969 Alabama legislature. On May 14, 1969 the Educational Appropriations Bill H. 22 as passed by the legislature, was approved as Act No. 91 and signed into law by Governor Albert Brewer. Thus, the University of Alabama School of Optometry was established by passage of the educational appropriations bill that included funding in the budget of the University of Alabama Medical Center.<sup>5,6</sup> The many actions taken by the members of the ALOA in support of this legislation were all voluntary since the ALOA did not employ any staff at this time.

## VISIONARIES

There are several people worthy of specific mention, as being responsible, for the inception of the UAB School of

Optometry (UABSO). Donald Springer, O.D., of Anniston, Alabama, had a vision for such a school (Figure 1).

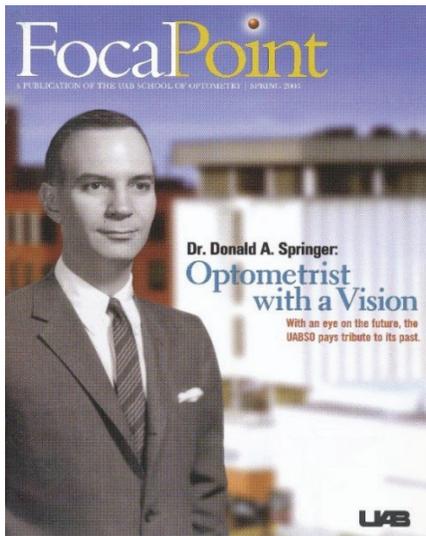


Figure 1. Cover of *FocalPoint*, (Spring) 2003 featuring portrait of Donald Springer, O.D. Dr. Springer, who did much to initiate and stimulate efforts to establish a school of optometry in Alabama, was responsible for the vision of such a school. Image courtesy Mrs. Theresa Springer..

Elbert “Bert” Coshatt, O.D., of Aliceville, Alabama, had the political passion to help plan the passage of the legislation. Eleazer C. “Doc” Overton, O.D., of Fairfield, Alabama, played a critical role in developing community support for the program’s affiliation with UAB. Senator Alton Turner, of Luverne, Alabama, had the political knowledge and skill to shepherd such a vision through the Alabama legislature and into reality.<sup>5</sup> (Figures 2-4)



Figures 2-4. L-R, Elbert C. “Bert” Coshatt, O.D. Dr. Coshatt was dedicated, through his political involvement, in the development of a school of optometry at UAB. Eleazer C. “Doc” Overton, O.D. through his service on the Birmingham City Council, Dr. Overton was instrumental in developing community support for the location of the UABSO. Alabama State Senator Alton L. Turner, generally regarded as the most knowledgeable and powerful legislator in the Alabama legislature, at the time legislation was passed and enacted into law. His involvement was central to the establishment of the UABSO. Images courtesy UAB Archives., University of Alabama at Birmingham.

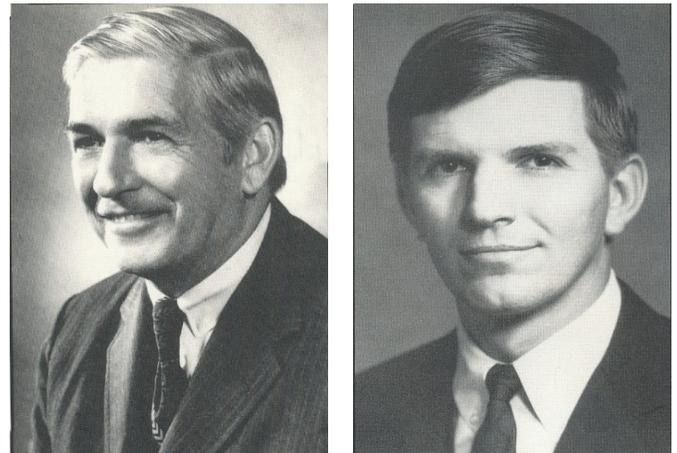
*HINDSIGHT: Journal of Optometry History*

Two other optometrists who worked diligently behind the scenes to secure Senator Turner’s assistance, among many other efforts, were Dr. Donald Snellgrove, of Greenville, Alabama, and Dr. Edgar Warr, of Opp, Alabama. Also of great assistance was Dr. Joseph Volker, Vice President for Health Affairs, of the University of Alabama Medical Center (Figure 5).

### THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL OF OPTOMETRY

Henry B. Peters, O.D., was appointed as the first dean of the UABSO in early August 1969. The UABSO officially began on September 1, 1969, the same day UAB was established as a separate university and campus of the University of Alabama system.<sup>7</sup> Dean Peters lost little time in recruiting the first class. The first class of the UABSO consisted of eight students who began the professional program on September 25, 1969. Dr. Peters envisioned that the UABSO would gradually increase the size of the class until a full class of 40 students was admitted. This goal was achieved in 1981. The class was to be composed of approximately 50% in-state students and the remainder preferably from the southeast region of the United States.

In 1973 the UABSO began participating in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) out-of-state contract program. David Mathews, Ph.D., was the president of the University of Alabama and a member of the Executive Committee of SREB at this time. (Figure 6)



Figures 5 and 6. L-R, Joseph Volker, D.D.S., M.S., Ph.D., Vice President for Health Affairs, gave the Alabama optometrists information on the steps necessary to establish a school of optometry. He was named the first president of UAB when it became a separate institution in 1969.. David Mathews, Ph.D., was instrumental in assisting the UAB School of Optometry in becoming a participant in the Southern Regional Educational Board out-of-state contract program. Image courtesy UAB Archives, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

This program allowed a small number of well-qualified students from the states of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina,

South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Louisiana as eligible for admission based on an in-state tuition rate. At the time of the inception of this program none of these states had an optometry program. As a result of this status, the home state of the student would pay the difference between the in-state and out-of-state tuition cost. This program continues to this day but in a somewhat modified form.<sup>8</sup>

## CLINICAL PROGRAMS

The UABSO needed to provide administrative, faculty and staff offices, clinics, laboratories, research space, among other needs, for new faculty, staff, and the anticipated increasing number of incoming students. Fortuitously, the University had purchased the Crippled Children's Hospital Building in the Spring of 1970. The basement and first two floors had been assigned to the UABSO. With a Special Projects grant from the Bureau of Health Manpower, the required interior spaces were renovated for classrooms, laboratories, and a clinic. The UABSO moved into the University Ambulatory Center in the fall of 1970, which Dr. Peters described as "one wild and hectic summer."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Peters instituted a number of unique programs that had both state and national implications for optometric education. Many of these programs remain as part of the contemporary curriculum.

### Teaching Clinic in UABSO—University Ambulatory Center

The renovation primarily centered on the construction of a teaching clinic in the newly assigned space. The clinic contained a reception and waiting area, 12 examination rooms, an optical dispensary, and a consultation office for attending faculty. A unique feature of the examination rooms, or "operatories" as Dr. Peters referred to them, was that each operatory had two mirrors at the end of the room. One mirror was for the projection of targets and the other for the patient to view the targets, such that they were "optically folded", and therefore required less linear space. There was also a room that was used for binocular vision assessment. Two of the examination spaces were utilized for specific purposes; one as a demonstration area and the other for special types of visual field instrumentation. The demonstration operatory had elevated areas on each side of the examination area, such that the faculty clinician could demonstrate to student interns, specific techniques or procedures. Obviously, it could also be utilized for patient care. Although this facility was not large, it was very cleverly designed and many of these design features would be included in the clinic of the future new building.

### Veterans Administration Affiliation

The Medical Center at UAB had a contract with the Birmingham Veteran's Administration Hospital (BVAH) for faculty and clinical services. This contract was broad enough to include the services of the UABSO. As a member of the Dean's Committee, and with the support and encouragement of UAB and BVAH administrators, Dean Peters set about establishing an affiliation and funding for an optometry clinic in the BVAH. This clinic would be staffed by UABSO faculty, fourth-year optometry externs, and optometric technician students. The contract for the necessary remodeling was signed November 2, 1971, the affiliation agreement was approved February 2, 1972 and the facility was occupied by December 1, 1972.<sup>9</sup> As the first such program involving the affiliation of a school of optometry and a Department of Veteran's Administration hospital, this program helped pave the way for greater opportunity for providing primary eye care services to veteran's across the United States.<sup>10</sup> By FY 2019 there were 966 staff optometrists, 225 optometric residents, two fellows, and more than 1,400 optometry externs involved in providing eye care to veterans.<sup>11</sup>

### Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind

Clinical rotations for fourth year externs at the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind (AIDB) began in 1972. This clinic affiliation between AIDB and the UABSO provided externs exposure to this comprehensive educational and training center for children with hearing and vision impairments located in Talladega, Alabama. For many years, faculty members and students drove a van to the facility twice per week to provide low vision rehabilitation services. Eventually a small space was allocated for an eye clinic and, in time, this space was expanded and equipped. In this manner, student interns were provided a unique opportunity to provide low vision services to a relatively large resident population of children, teens, and young adults up to 21 years of age, in need of rehabilitation.

### Center for Developmental and Learning Disorders

The first optometric examining room was set up in the Center for Developmental and Learning Disorders (CDLD) in 1969. This rotation provided interns with the opportunity to examine a broad range of children with learning delays or intellectual disabilities, autism, low-birth weight infants, and later, children with pediatric infectious diseases. This multidisciplinary facility was one of some 24 centers established across the United States to provide diagnostic services for these populations. These centers were supported by federal funding until such funding expired several decades later.

### Diabetes Research and Education Hospital

In 1972 an eye clinic was also established in the Diabetes Research and Education Clinic. A broad array of diabetic patients was examined specifically for the effects of diabetes on the eye and vision system.<sup>12</sup> These included changes in refractive errors, ocular motility, those involving the anterior structures of the eye and especially those involving the retina and vitreous. Particular emphasis was placed on changes occurring in the refractive error and the central and peripheral retinal areas. Within several years a new hospital, known as the Diabetes Research and Education Hospital (DREH) was opened in close proximity to the UABSO. This provided optometry interns an opportunity to observe all manifestations of diabetes mellitus on the eye.

### Community Eye Care Program

Vision screening services were offered to the community initially through Head Start programs and then later to community school systems, senior citizen groups, and other organizations interested in providing this type of service to their specific population.<sup>13</sup> This program continues to thrive with the assistance of second-year students providing vision screenings and third- and fourth-year students providing comprehensive eye examinations at specified community health centers. All of these activities are overseen by faculty members of the UABSO.

### Faculty Practice

Dr. Peters also offered faculty an opportunity to provide private eye care services to patients in an effort to keep faculty clinical skills at a high level. This arrangement was known as the intramural faculty practice and was similar to other arrangements offered to physicians and dentists on faculty at UAB. Later this clinic became known as the University Optometric Group and has occupied space both within UABSO Eye Care and other buildings on campus.

### A NEW BUILDING

From its inception, the UABSO was first located in the Life of Georgia building on the UAB campus from 1968 until 1970. The first two rooms of the building were utilized by Margaret D. "Peggy" Crosswhite, administrative assistant to Vice President Volker. She was assigned to coordinate the activities of the university with regard to the optometry school. She arranged the consultants' travel plans, kept records of their meetings with the President's Committee, and prepared the 1969 report for Dr. Volker as requested by the Alabama legislature in 1967. She served as Dr. Peters' administrative

assistant during his first four months at UABSO. In 1970 the UABSO moved to the University Ambulatory Center for five years until the new building was ready for occupancy.

Some files, furniture, equipment, and other heavy or bulky items, may have been moved as early as the week before; however, faculty moved into the new UABSO building beginning on Monday, August 25, 1975, just before the start of the fall semester. The dedication ceremony for the new building was held on Friday, September 12, 1975. The new UABSO building was to be located on 8th Avenue, later to be named University Boulevard, between the Eye Foundation Hospital and The Lister Hill Library for the Health Sciences.<sup>14</sup> A groundbreaking ceremony was held on December 1, 1972 with Governor George Wallace as the principal speaker.

Exactly how the location for the new building was selected has not been recorded. It seems likely that the optometry school, perhaps directly and indirectly, had some input into this decision. The site of the building would have been selected before the architectural plans could have been prepared. According to Jim Day, Sr., O.D., who served as the ALOA President during the years 1972-1973, Senator Pat Vacca and Birmingham City Council member Nina Miglionico, with Dr. Overton's guidance, provided valuable input into this decision.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Peters was most likely very involved in the discussion and amenable to this location since it was next to the Eye Foundation Hospital. The University Administration very likely determined this was the best location given the educational mission of the optometry and ophthalmology programs.

Dr. Peters secured a majority of the funding for this building through the HPEA grant process and from state revenue-sharing funds provided by Governor George Wallace. Donations from optometrists, optical laboratories, and equipment manufacturers were also utilized in funding this project. The building was named the Henry B. Peters Building after its founding dean, October 14, 1994.<sup>16</sup> (Figures 7 and 8)

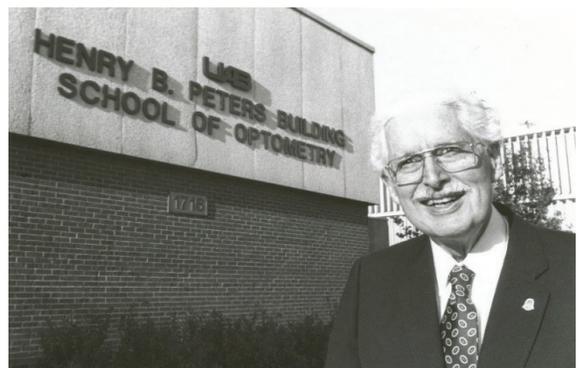


Figure 7. Dr. Henry Peters on the day the school was named in his honor in 1994. Image courtesy UAB Archives, University of Alabama at Birmingham.



Figure 8. The UAB School of Optometry as it appeared after the clinic renovation in 2004. UAB Archives.

## THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE UABSO

### The Professional Program

The UABSO was established to primarily address the workforce needs for optometrists in Alabama and the southeastern United States. This program, on the student's successful completion, grants the doctor of optometry (O.D.) degree. It has accomplished this goal over the past 50 years as evidenced by the number of optometrists who practice in Alabama and across the southeast, as well as the excellent quality of care provided by their practices. However, the most remarkable aspect of its success was the rapidity with which it established a solid reputation. This was marked by the appearance of an editorial cartoon in the Birmingham News in 1975 noting the dedication of the new building and the UABSO's ranking as the best optometry program in the U.S. after only six years.

The UABSO was planned, from its inception, to be an integral part of an academic health center. As a result of this relationship, the UABSO was strengthened by the early support of the UAB administration, the administration and faculty of the University of Alabama School of Medicine, and an excellent basic health science curriculum. Critical to the UABSO's success was the recruitment of very talented young clinical and vision science faculty interested in teaching, scholarship and research, and service. The reputation of the UABSO continued to spread as its faculty became known for their excellence in providing didactic and continuing education courses and the publication of papers and books in the ophthalmic literature. This effort by the faculty placed the doctor of optometry program among the best in the world in a relatively short period of time.

Through the decades the professional program curriculum has evolved to stay current with the constantly expanding scope of the profession. Over the past 50 years of the UABSO's

existence, the interdisciplinary cooperation of programs and faculty teaching and research, has grown significantly. It is anticipated that, as of 2019, the doctor of optometry program will have graduated 1,650 optometrists since the inception of the UABSO.

The teaching clinic in the Peters Building was redesigned and completely renovated and renamed as UAB Eye Care in 2004 (Figure 8). The first, second and third floors of the Peters Building have been completely renovated since 2015.

The UABSO professional program also provides scholarships to students who meet the requirements from 51 endowed scholarships. The UABSO professional program also has a unique state-supported scholarship and loan program that has assisted many students over the past 35 years. The amount provided by the state to the Alabama Board of Optometric Scholarships has increased significantly since the program's inception.<sup>17</sup> For FY 2020 this amount will be \$165,000.

### Optometric Technician Program

An optometric technician program was developed and funded by a Federal Allied Health Manpower grant in 1971. Eight students graduated from this program in 1972. This program was in existence for five years, which was the period of the grant funding, but the program was discontinued in 1976. The program was moved to the School of Allied Health (SCAH) where it eventually became a two-year program. This iteration of the program discontinued in 1981 due to a lack of financial support and declining enrollment.

### Graduate Programs in Physiological Optics/Vision Science

The UABSO also planned and developed a proposal for graduate programs in vision science. These programs were approved in 1975 by the University of Alabama Board of Trustees and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. To date more than 160 students have received graduate degrees in vision science. In addition, the Department of Physiological Optics received a coveted Vision Science Research Center (CORE Grant) award from the National Eye Institute in 1979. The VSRC training grant supported the UABSO graduate programs in vision science for 40 years. This program was housed in the Worrell Building from 1988 until 2018. The Worrell Building was demolished in 2019. In 2011, expanded vision research space was completed on the third and fourth floor of Volker Hall. Several vision science faculty members also have offices and laboratories in the Shelby Biomedical Interdisciplinary Research Building.

## Optometric Residency Programs

A faculty committee developed a proposal for beginning Optometric Residency Programs in, and affiliated with, the UABSO. This proposal received the approval of Dean Peters and the UAB Administration in May 1978 and the first residents were admitted in the fall of that year. These programs became the first school-based programs accredited by the Council on Optometric Education.<sup>18,19</sup> There are currently six school-based and affiliated accredited residency programs offering 11 residency positions. As of June 2019, 391 residents have been granted certificates of program completion.<sup>20</sup>

## Combined Degree Programs

While the combined O.D./M.S. in Vision Science degree has been available since the inception of the graduate program, formalization of additional degree programs occurred in 2018 including the combined O.D./M.P.H. and the O.D./M.B.A. These formalized offerings are unique to the UABSO and offer students additional professional opportunities following graduation.

## Center for Biophysical Sciences & Engineering

The Center for Biophysical and Structural Engineering (CBSE) was established in 2000. Lawrence DeLucas, O.D., was selected as a payload specialist for a trip into space on the shuttle Columbia, NASA's first U.S. Microgravity Mission. This mission lasted from June 25 until July 9, 1992. Dr. DeLucas became the Director of the Center for Macromolecular Crystallography at UAB and Acting Chief Scientist, NASA Space Station. In 2000, Dr. DeLucas became the Director of UAB's CBSE which conducted research and constructed specialized equipment for space flight.<sup>21</sup> At its peak the CBSE was a University-Wide Research Center with almost 100 scientists and 20 faculty members from the Schools of Medicine, Optometry, Engineering, and Natural Sciences and Mathematics. This program was housed in its own 75,000 square foot building on the UAB campus until 2016.

## SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

The UABSO has been active in basic vision science, translational, and clinical research since its inception. This research has been most evident through the vision science faculty and its VSRC training grant, individual National Eye Institute (NEI) grants awarded to faculty, faculty participation in the NEI supported multi-center clinical research projects investigating such topics as keratoconus, myopia control, refractive error in various patient populations, amblyopia, dry

eye, and various aspects of topical ophthalmic medications.

A Clinical Eye Research Facility (CERF) was constructed and dedicated on the fourth floor of the UABSO in 2003. This facility has been utilized for many individual and multi-center research projects over the years of its existence. It has a staff dedicated to all aspects of the clinical research endeavor.

Faculty have also been active in writing books that have been utilized in optometry schools and colleges across the U.S. and around the world. From the 1980's and over the course of the next 40 years, faculty have published more than 50 books by my count.

## NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS OF FACULTY AND ALUMNI

Faculty and alumni have distinguished themselves in numerous ways.<sup>22</sup> Among the many awards, honors, or distinguished positions held by faculty and alumni are: The Carel C. Koch Memorial Medal Award from the American Academy of Optometry, induction into the Distinguished Practitioners of the National Academy of Practice in Optometry, induction into the National Optometry Hall of Fame, selected to receive the American Optometric Association's (AOA) Distinguished Service Medal, as well as being selected as the AOA's National Optometrist of the Year, Young Optometrist of the Year, Optometric Educator of the Year, awarded honorary degrees and several faculty members have served as editors of journals. Alumni have served as president of the AOA and the Southern Council of Optometry, and faculty and alumni have received the Optometrist of the South award from the Southern Council of Optometry. Numerous faculty and alumni have served the profession as a member of one of the major state, regional, or national organizations committees, or as president of their state association. Likewise, many members of the vision science faculty have served in leadership roles as members of various committees of organizations related to vision science and on study sections for NEI-related grants.

## CONCLUSION

It is challenging to provide a concise overview of the impact and achievements of the UABSO over its first 50 years of existence. Nevertheless, in addition to the many positive developments discussed in this brief history, the faculty of the UABSO have had a positive impact on professional relations at the university, local, and state levels of education and government. Faculty and alumni have also played significant roles in expanding the scope of eye care. Most importantly, however, graduates have influenced health care by providing better quality and more accessible eye care

through the establishment of practices throughout the state of Alabama and region.

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