A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN OPTOMETRIC FOUNDATION: INVESTING IN FUTURE EDUCATORS, RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMIC LEADERS FOR OVER 70 YEARS

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Abstract

The American Optometric Foundation (AOF), an affiliate of the American Academy of Optometry and now called the American Academy of Optometry Foundation (AAOF), has a proud history of financially supporting graduate optometric education since 1947. This article reviews its mission, history, governance and success in establishing the requisite academic foundation for an ever-evolving independent health care profession.

Keywords

Foundation, Philanthropy, Graduate Education, Ezell Fellowships, Research Support

Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, the fledgling optometric profession was transforming itself from a small mercantile optical business into an independent health care profession. This transformation required several components that all legitimate professions must possess: autonomy, a unique and scientifically-based body of knowledge, a formal and rigorous educational process, governmental recognition through state licensure, a code of ethics, and a unifying purpose to serve humanity. National organizations such as the American Optometric Association (established as the American Association of Opticians in 1898, its name was changed to the American Optical Association in 1910 and then to the American Optometric Association in 1919) and the American Academy of Optometry (established in 1922) were formed to assist early practitioners in providing much-needed vision care services to a growing American population. And new schools and colleges were established to educate future practitioners and provide solid academic foundations.

Education and research were paramount

After ten years of planning by leaders of the American Optometric Association (AOA) and prominent educational leaders in the 1940's, the American Optometric Foundation (AOF) was established in 1947 to help finance the graduate education of optometry's future educators and researchers.

According to Hirsch and Wick, the nascent AOF encouraged "...research in physiological and psychological optics and their application in the practice of optometry..."¹ Mr. Harold Kohn, who was legal counsel for the American Optometric Association from 1934 to 1968, was a critically-important advisor to the AOF founders at that time; said:

*The need for a Foundation for research, education and the advancement of optometry is self-evident. A profession which fails to recognize and provide for this need **must die** (author's emphasis added). Optometry is too progressive and virile not to embrace and achieve the aspirations of creating a Foundation second to none which will provide students, optometrists, and more importantly, the public, with the latest and greatest in the care of vision.²*

And Henry W Hofstetter, the inaugural Director of the Indiana University School of Optometry and a past-president of both the AOA and the Optometric Historical Society, wrote in 1948:

The objective of the Foundation is to make funds available for worthy students of optometry, through scholarships, fellowships, and loans; for research in optometric and related problems, through grants to educational institutions and individuals; for worthy optometrists who need help in starting ethical professional practices, through loans; for preparation of needed optometric textbooks, through grants in aid; and for similar purposes which will advance the profession.³

Laying the foundation for fellowships

For the first fourteen years of its existence, the President of the AOF was William C. Ezell from Spartanburg, SC, who was a past-president of the AOA. Six other prominent optometrists who served on the initial AOF board were Harold V. Hutcheson of Tarrytown, NY, Weston A. Petty of Lubbock, TX, John J. Brody of Sheldon, IA, Leslie R. Burdette of Salem, OR, Walter I. Brown of New Bedford, MA, and Frederick A. Stengel of Marion, OH. Under their dutiful leadership, the AOF did indeed accomplish many of the goals cited above by Dr. Hofstetter. It funded optometric research initiatives on such varied topics as motorists' vision, visual training, and eye movement photography. Books, manuals, and a dictionary were published with the help of AOF funds. And graduate educational grants, later known as coveted Ezell Fellowships, were provided to promising future academics in the profession.⁴

Charles R. Stewart, who received his PhD degree under Glenn Fry at Ohio State in 1951 and was the inaugural Dean at the University of Houston College of Optometry, was the first Foundation Fellow in 1949. He and twelve other early Foundation Fellows are listed in Table 1.⁵ Of the first thirteen award recipients, six became future deans/presidents at schools and colleges of optometry: Baldwin (PUCO, NECO and UH), Heath (IU), Hebbard (OSU), Rosenbloom (ICO), and Wild (PUCO and UAB).

Table 1. First thirteen American Optometric Foundation (AOF) Fellows

Neal J. Bailey	Gordon G. Heath
William R. Baldwin	Frederick W. Hebbard
Darrell R. Carter	Robert Mandell
Paul Eskildsen	Alfred A. Rosenbloom
Jess Boyd Eskridge	Charles R. Stewart
Merton C. Flom	Bradford W. Wild
	Daniel Woolf

By 1998, 204 Ezell Fellowships had been awarded to clinicians, educators, researchers, and scientists in countries around the world.⁶ And according to AAOF President Pete Kollbaum, that number was an astonishing 422 in 2018!⁷

Independent governance and operations

From 1947 until 1993, the American Optometric Foundation was operated as an independent nonprofit membership organization incorporated under the laws of the State of New York. Although it was commonly referred to as "an approved fund-raising project" of the American Optometric Association (AOA), it was in fact never part of the official AOA organizational structure.³ The AOF had its own officers and board of directors, its own membership rolls and accounting practices, and its own internal processes for

distributing educational and research funds. However, over the years the American Optometric Association formally recognized the AOF's purpose and good works through several Resolutions that were passed by the AOA House of Delegates (HOD) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Three AOA HOD Resolutions passed in support of the American Optometric Foundation. Courtesy Kirsten Pourroy Hebert, Heritage Services Specialist, The Archives & Museum of Optometry, Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation, St. Louis, MO.

- 1947: "...the American Optometric Association most strongly urges every optometrist to become a member of the American Optometric Foundation, and to support the same by liberal contributions of his time and substance."
- 1957: "...the American Optometric Association does hereby extend greetings to the American Optometric Foundation upon its Tenth Anniversary and congratulations to Dr. William C. Ezell for the role he has played in this important endeavor..."
- 1972: "...the American Optometric Association does hereby extend congratulations to the American Optometric Foundation upon its twenty-fifth Anniversary."

Unique recognitions of excellence

In addition to awarding Fellowships, and to further augment its support of optometric research, the AOF established an annual cash award in 1969 that is given to a distinguished scientist or clinician-scientist in recognition of the quality, significance, impact and relevance to optometry of his or her current research contributions. The award is known as the Glenn A. Fry Lecture Award, and is presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Optometry.⁸ The Award was named to honor Glenn A. Fry, who was a Regents Professor at The Ohio State University and was widely recognized as an exemplary optometric researcher and educator. Fry also served as the Director of the School of Optometry at The Ohio State University from 1935-1967.⁹ The first two recipients of the Fry Lecture Award in 1970 were Anthony J. Adams and Arthur J. Afanador.¹⁰

Future AOF investments in education and research would also include numerous scholarships, travel stipends, direct research grants, and many other named awards given to optometrists, vision scientists, students, graduate students, and residents.

A new home for the AOF

At the 1992 annual business meeting of the American Academy of Optometry, then-President Rex Ghormley made a major announcement:

This past June, the membership of the American Optometric Foundation (AOF) directed its Board to develop an affiliation with the American Academy of Optometry. In August, the Academy's Executive Council and the AOF Board of Directors mutually agreed to transfer the governance of the AOF to the Academy. The new AOF Board has identified past problems, set new goals, adopted a new mission statement and initiated plans for AOF growth so it will become a major factor in supporting optometric research. Your Executive Council feels that the AOF will assist the Academy in fulfilling its goal of supporting optometric research.¹¹

By joining forces (both economic and volunteer) with the AOF, the Academy at that time continued its tradition and mission of supporting optometric research without actually funding research grants. And since the purpose of the AOF was to raise much-needed funds to support graduate fellowships and the annual Fry Lecture Award, the synergy was good for both organizations. In addition, it was to become an easy transition because all of the AOF Board members at that time (President Dale Lervick, Bert Corwin, Mert Flom, Norman Haffner and Jerry Jacobs) were already Fellows of the Academy.¹²

In 2017, the AAO changed the name of its highly successful Foundation to the American Academy of Optometry Foundation (AAOF).

Summary

It has been recorded that the famous English mathematician and physicist, Sir Issac Newton (1643-1727), stated in 1675: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."¹³ If they were alive today, the shoulders of William C. Ezell and other early AOF visionaries would certainly be feeling sore!

Sources of financial support for the AAOF now include optometrists, corporations, other foundations, optometric auxiliaries, state optometric associations, and private citizens interested in the science and art of vision care. Thanks to the generosity of these donors - and also to the wise stewardship of those gifts by many dedicated board members over the years - AAOF net assets have increased from \$1 million in 2000¹⁴ to \$7.5 million in 2019.¹⁵

As the AAOF approaches its 75th anniversary in 2022, the profession of optometry can be justifiably proud of the many dividends that have resulted from investing in its future educators, researchers, and academic leaders.

Ed. Note: Dr. Newcomb was a member of the American Academy of Optometry's Board of Directors when the AOF officially became affiliated with the AAO in 1992.

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