

Report to Faculty, Administrators, Trustees, Students
of

State University of New York
College of Optometry
New York, New York

Prepared following analysis of the institution's
Periodic Review Report

First Reviewer:

Richard Dalby, PhD

Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences
University of Maryland School of Pharmacy

Second Reviewer:

Hubert Benitez, DDS, PhD

President, CEO & Barbara Meinke and Robert A. Kleist Endowed Chair
Saint Luke's College of Health Sciences

Financial Reader:

Gerald Silberman, MS, CPA

Vice President for Finance and Administration
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

Compliance Reviewer:

Dr. Lynda Fuller

Director, Undergraduate Programs & Assistant to the Dean,
College of Business, Wilmington University

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Evaluation of the Periodic Review Report of State University of New York College of Optometry

I. INTRODUCTION

The State University of New York College of Optometry (SUNY OD) graduates professional optometrists and seeks to advance eye and vision care through research, graduate education and provision of community care within midtown Manhattan. It operates on one of the 64 campuses that constitute the New York State's public university system. President David Heath reports to the Chancellor of SUNY, while administering the College with the assistance of Directors of Health Care Development, Institutional Research & Planning and Communications; and vice presidents of Administration & Finance and Institutional Advancement. The school Dean, who also serves as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs; VP for Clinical Administration, and VP for Student Affairs & International Programs also report directly to the President.

At the time of their report the College had approximately 376 enrolled students - most seeking a Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree. Approximately 10% of students were working towards their PhD in Vision Science or were enrolled in a dual OD/MS program. The ratio of accepted OD students to applicants currently exceeds 1:5.5 and admitted students had the second highest mean *Optometric Admissions Test* score in the US and an average entering G.P.A. of 3.52.

The 2011 evaluation report issued by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) contained two recommendations. Specifically:

1. "The College needs to develop a comprehensive and systematic equipment lifecycle process that proactively supports the leadership's identification of future budget requirements."
(Standard 3: Institutional Resources)
2. "The goals and objectives of the PhD program need to be articulated."
(Standard 11: Educational Offerings)

These recommendations are thoroughly analyzed and actioned in the Periodic Review Report (PRR), which was clearly assembled following widespread assessment and discussion among administrators, faculty, staff and students. The institution is commended for the candor, completeness and quality of its PRR and the way it was reviewed at all levels culminating in endorsement by the College's Institutional Research and Planning Committee and the President's Council.

The PRR describes how it was conducted and clearly responds to the two recommendations above while providing a thorough picture of the major institutional changes and developments that have occurred at the College since 2011. As discussed below, the PRR specifically details a 2013-2018 strategic plan, a new institutional assessment plan and university-wide performance program, administrative changes, an enrollment management plan, capital, workforce and academic improvements, a fund raising campaign and creation of a Clinical Vision Research Center.

This report first addresses the two recommendations described above before summarizing how challenges and opportunities self-identified by the College might impact the remaining standards.

II. RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Response to Recommendation 1 concerning Standard 3: Institutional Resources

“The College needs to develop a comprehensive and systematic equipment lifecycle process that proactively supports the leadership’s identification of future budget requirements.”

As reported in the PRR, the Office of the VP for Administration and Finance at the College has implemented an *Equipment Replacement Policy and Procedure* specifically designed to address Recommendation I. It outlines a biannual reporting process associated with annual budget development (planned for March, April and May) and inventory control (planned for September and October). A spring budget call allows for justified funding requests while the fall inventory process feeds into a spreadsheet which tracks the expected lifecycle for each piece of equipment. In the view of the reviewers this should provide area heads and senior administrators with a tool to identify replacement needs and proactively budget for new equipment – particularly when aligned with Strategic Plan goals.

With these processes in place the reviewers consider the College is compliant with Standard 3.

Response to Recommendation #2 concerning Standard 11: Educational Offerings

“*The goals and objectives of the PhD program need to be articulated*”.

The goals and objectives of the PhD program are specified in a document which includes Mission, Goals, Objectives and Assessment. Specifically:

The PhD program in Vision Science aims to recruit and train bright and motivated students who will go on to do groundbreaking research. As part of their research training, students participate in thinking of:

- *Significant questions*
- *Innovative ways of attacking these questions*
- *Systemic ways of analyzing and modeling the results*
- *Drawing broader theoretical implications*

The reviewers were unsure how this information is shared with existing and prospective students and suggest it could be added to the *Doctoral Student Handbook* (http://sunyopt.edu/pdfs/academics/Doctoral_StudentHandbook.pdf) or other prominent location on the College’s *PhD in Vision Science* website (https://www.sunyopt.edu/education/academics/graduate_programs/phd-in-vision-science).

The PRR contains evidence that the College is committed to providing graduate students with thorough training and experience in the development, execution, and presentation of significant new knowledge in the vision sciences, and preparing them for successful careers. It is suggested that the institution create and implement a tracking and follow-up mechanism for its PhD graduates to assess the extent to which the program is meeting this goal.

The reviewers consider the College to be compliant with Standard 11.

Standard 1: Mission and Goals

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

The College is commended for using a sound strategic planning and institutional assessment model to drive program development with appropriate support of its educational, research and patient care programs. The College is nearing completion (in 2017) of a workforce analysis-based plan to increase enrollment in its Doctor of Optometry Program by 32% (up to 100 from 75 per entering class) which they report has strengthened patient care capabilities and fiscal strength with no loss in student or program quality. The PRR makes clear that a SUNY OD education, once low-cost on a national scale, is now in line with national norms so unlikely to be a viable contributor to future revenue growth. The reviewers suggest that the College continue close monitoring of its student body to ensure the overall academic quality of its incoming class and graduates remains at its currently impressive level.

Standard 3: Institutional Resources

One recommendation was addressed in Section II.

The College has maintained research expenditures in spite of cutbacks in federal funding and reports diversifying grant income through creation of its *Clinical Vision Research Center* which opened in 2013. New grants approximating \$3.5M have been received since January 1, 2015. Patient care revenues from the *University Eye Center* have been stable, but in common with other academic health centers, the College self-identifying growth as challenging in the current health care environment. The College has recently restructured the administrative organization of Center, appointing a Director for Health Care Development to promote program growth while better preparing students to work in an evolving health care system in which inter-professional education and practice is the new-normal. Combined with increased tuition revenue and a new budget process the College is demonstrably planning for budget uncertainties. It is suggested that the College further identify and formally establish linkages to other healthcare professionals to promote growth and sustainability.

The self-reported cost of living challenge for students, staff and faculty in the New York metropolitan area is noted. The College is commended for minimizing student indebtedness and improving faculty recruitment packages and compensation. It is suggested that both these remain an area of focus as competition for the best students and faculty intensifies.

Extensive cuts to State operating revenue and capital funding are self-reported challenges to the College and University Eye Center, which are intensified by a lack of clarity concerning state support in the future. The College is commended for proactive steps to address these issues, but the reviewers suggest it develop contingency plans to address potential shortfalls in State funding and address student, faculty, maintenance, and infrastructure expansion needs.

Standard 4: Leadership and Governance

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

The College reports, “Our ability to attract mid-career faculty demonstrating academic credentials and leadership skills is a significant obstacle. “ This appears related to the cost of living issues described above. It is suggested that the College seek innovative ways to further attract talented individuals to join the College’s faculty.

Standard 5: Administration

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

Since the 2011 site visit the position of Vice President for Clinical Affairs was eliminated and responsibilities were divided into two positions. (1) The Director for Health Care Development (also discussed under Standard 3) is responsible for expanding the College’s external partnerships within the New York healthcare community and for advancing the College’s patient care interests (2) A Vice-President for Clinical Administration (a healthcare executive rather than an optometrist) was appointed at the University Eye Center to align its administrative structure with that of other hospitals and health centers. The primary goal of this change seems to be to ensure the viability of the University Eye Center as health care reform continues and the ramifications of the Affordable Care Act unfold. Quality of care is now the responsibility of a Chief Medical Officer who reports directly to the VP of Clinical Administration. The College appears very proactive in adapting to healthcare changes with the administration being careful to balance patient care-related financial imperatives with the education of its professional and graduate students.

The challenge of required regulatory reporting associated with education, research and clinical service is noted.

Standard 6: Integrity

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

The College is commended for its ongoing assessment which the PRR makes clear is necessitated by a need to manage its resources in the face of uncertain state funding and healthcare reform which impact all areas of its operations.

Standard 8: Student Admissions and Retention

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

The College reports continuing high application rates since the last PRR; and GPAs and *Optometry*

Admissions Test scores remain impressive despite increased enrollment in its doctor of Optometry program and a 51% jump in in-State tuition. The College justly emphasizes its 0% loan default rate and quality of its programs as contributors to its continuing appeal to well qualified applicants.

The reviewer's suggest that the College continue its emphasis on financial literacy and business education in its professional students which seems directed to preparing them for successful careers in the fluid healthcare space. The reviewers suggest the College to look into incorporating similar skills training into their PhD program.

Standard 9: Student Support Services

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

A new VP of Student Affairs was appointed in April, 2016. An isolated 2012 drop in student satisfaction was associated with curricular redesign and a construction project impacting student spaces and did not raise ongoing concern with the reviewers. See Section V for additional details.

Standard 10: Faculty

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

A challenge highlighted in the PRR is recruitment of well qualified faculty resulting from the high cost of living in NYC. This is addressed in a prior section of the report.

The College reports seeking to increase its full time faculty head-count following a 10 person reduction in Full Time Equivalents in 2013 during which twenty-four part-time and two full-time faculty retired or did not have their contracts renewed. While this was financially positive with staffing remaining highest among members of the Association of Schools and College of Optometry, the impact on morale was acknowledged in the PRR to be negative.

The reviewers suggest that the College increase their focus on faculty morale, diversity, career development training, and the reinvigoration of the ranks as part of their ongoing assessment processes. The College is commended for seeking to develop and expand its research enterprise through creation of the *Clinical Vision Research Center* and providing new faculty with career path preparation and research/scholarship opportunities within it.

Standard 11: Educational Offerings

One recommendation was addressed in Section II.

Changes in the Doctor of Optometry degree program have included adjustments to accommodate the larger class, increased use of educational technology including virtual reality and simulation, increased emphasis on evidenced-based teaching practices, and inter-professional education/collaborative practice. Student outcome measures and professional engagement have remained strong, with students performing well above the national average on board examinations.

The College is commended for developing new education opportunities dovetailed with its core OD program to support specialized student interests. These include an *Optometric Business Management Certificate and MBA* in partnership with Empire State College (8 students enrolled), an *Advanced Standing International Program* for internationally trained optometrists and physicians (2 students enrolled) which grants credit for prior experience and allows completion of the OD degree coursework in three years, and a *Graduate (MS or PhD) Residency Program* which allows student-residents to continue in the PhD program as clinical fellows following completion of the residency portion of their OD program.

The reviews commend the College for the latter initiative which seems consistent with its desire to develop clinician scientists with an interest in pursuing a career in academic optometry and supports efforts to recruit the first candidate.

It is suggested that the College explore partnerships (internally, locally and beyond) to expand its inter-professional education and collaborative care offerings, and consider attracting other healthcare practitioners into the *University Eye Center* as it plans capital improvements in support of its mission.

Standard 12: General Education

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

As stated in the PRR, “The College offers only first professional and graduate degrees. Admission to degree programs requires entering students to have completed general education courses and/or an undergraduate degree.”

Standard 13: Related Educational Activities

The Site Visit Team did not make any recommendations.

The PRR presents compelling evidence that the College continues to provide students with experiential, patient-based learning opportunities as required by its specialty accreditation in optometry. The percentage of clinical experience in the curriculum has expanded and consumes the fourth year of the professional program. Beginning in 2014 students completed one quarter (down from two quarters) of their clinical experience at the *University Eye Center* with the balance completed off-site at affiliated hospitals, multidisciplinary practices, health care centers, at private practices or specialty clinics. This development was viewed positively by reviewers who encourage the College to proactively monitor the quality of these sites and explore their potential to provide inter-professional education / collaborative practice. The reviewers note that this may also provide scholarship on novel educational opportunities consistent with the College goal of developing faculty and recruiting excellent students.

It is suggested that the College continue to explore strengthening its international connections in order to provide more opportunities to its community while increasing its prominence and ability to generate revenue from Continuing Professional Education, certificate programs and international students.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

See section V

III. MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, CHALLENGES AND/OR OPPORTUNITIES

The State University of New York College of Optometry has presented in its PRR, challenges and opportunities aligned with the MSCHE Standards of Excellence. Subtitles below mirror those in the PRR. Accomplishments were discussed under the relevant standards above.

Institutional Reach

Inter-professional education (IPE) presents a challenge to all single specialty academic health centers, but the College presents evidence of administrative changes and outreach to the New York City health care community that are intended to facilitate and expand collaborations with hospitals and community health centers. The College is active in seeking contemporary health care settings in which to provide its students inter-professional practice environments and didactic IPE opportunities. While the focus is stated in the PRR to be the greater New York area, the reviewers suggest it may be advantageous to cast a wider net, which has the secondary advantage of building the Colleges already strong national and international reputation and affiliations.

Infrastructure

The University Eye Center is presented in the PRR as being critical to the College's education, service and research mission. It is reported to be in need of comprehensive renovation so it can become a state of the art clinical care facility which is sufficiently flexible to respond to future trends in patient eye care delivery and education. In view of this criticality and references to a difficult and unpredictable financial situation at the State level, which is no longer addressable by planned enrollment increases, the reviewers suggest that infrastructure improvements remain a top priority. This suggestion is based on the positive impact improved facilities could have on recruitment; non-state, non-tuition revenue generation (grants and philanthropy) and graduate and professional student education.

Intellectual Leadership

The PRR acknowledges that to remain an intellectual leader in the profession the College must continue to invest in infrastructure and human resources essential to expanding basic, translational and clinical research programs. This includes the recruitment of highly qualified researchers (students and faculty) to the high cost of living environment that exist in NYC. The reviewers suggest that the College develop a written recruitment plan and closely monitor success in this endeavor, while planning for the possibility of less than ideal federal grant funding.

Institutional Mission

The PRR references a desire to examine the possibility of offering additional health professions degree programs at SUNY OD. The motivations include enhanced opportunities for team based education, comprehensive provision of patient care services and diversified funding. This was positively viewed by the reviewers who encourage thorough financial analysis before moving forward in view of the challenges noted above.

IV. ENROLLMENT AND FINANCE TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

The College has maintained a strong financial position despite limited investment by the State which has been mitigated by incremental expanded enrollment in the OD program over four years (ending in 2017 when the OD program will admit 100 students yielding a total OD student count of 400) and faculty rightsizing in 2011. There has been no observable reduction in incoming student quality or graduate outcome measures, both of which the College monitors closely.

The College is approaching the end of its OD program expansion so anticipates a slower rate of tuition revenue growth in the future (any increase will be from higher tuition). This is partially addressed through successful completion of a College-affiliated foundation (OCNY) \$10M campaign ending in 2014. The future financial health of SUNY OD will be dependent on its ongoing efforts to properly implement its financial plans and receipt of appropriate levels of governmental financial support.

The College is commended for its handling of reduced state operating funds while continuing to make capital investments in teaching facilities (renovated lecture halls and laboratories), enhanced student life spaces (*Center for Life & Learning* and *Fitness Center*) and patient care updates (lobby and welcome area) using State appropriations from 2008 – 2013. These and other capital improvements, plus AV, EHR, simulation & virtual reality teaching capabilities, and information system improvements will represent spending approaching \$40M once completed.

V. ASSESSMENT PROCESSES: INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT LEARNING

At the time of the 2011 site visit the College's 2008 – 2013 strategic plan was in effect. By spring 2012 the College's *Institutional Research and Planning Committee* was working on the next strategic plan using a well-documented approach which started with review of strategic plans at comparable institutions, and an environmental scan and SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, and updates to institutional values statements. This served as source information in a year-long strategic planning process that used a faculty retreat and wide College engagement to communicate broadly and acquire feedback. The resulting five-year strategic plan (2013-2018, *Creating a Legacy of Leadership*), which is publically available, drives organizational priorities and resource allocation, and the PRR provides evidence it is thoroughly assessed to monitor implementation.

Follow through on difficult decisions such as faculty rightsizing and OD program expansion attest to the College's ability to envision and action change, as do appropriate staffing of assessment-related activities. Assessment data since the last site visit has resulted in creation of the *Center for Clinical Vision Research*, shared *Core* research facilities, a plan to recruit specific faculty expertise, more study seats in the library, some of the facility improvements described previously, and a decision to implement more

competitive salaries for clinical faculty. The reviewers find clear evidence that the College uses outcomes data for institutional and educational improvement.

Since 2015 this approach has been augmented by *SUNY Excels*, a System-wide effort to align the strategic goals of individual campuses with those of the entire University. The program requires reporting of data on five system-wide metrics relevant to student education. Specifically; *access, completion, success, inquiry and engagement*. The reviewers commend the College for being able to readily provide required *SUNY Excels* data and offer a *Performance Improvement Plan* efficiently as a result of the strength of assessment processes pre-existing within the College.

Assessment at the College indicates that despite OD program enrollment increases since the last site visit student performance on all three parts of the licensing examinations administered by the *National Board of Examiners in Optometry (Applied Basic Science, Patient Assessment and Management and Clinical Skills)* remains high with 97.5% of students passing all sections in 2011-2015. Since these exams are taken after Spring of the third professional year it is suggested that the College pay close attention to the next sets of scores since these will fully reflect the performance of the expanded classes.

It was clear to the reviewers that licensing exam and student perception data has driven refinements to the “low vision” section of the curriculum put in place after 2011. This a good example of the strength of assessment at the College, but the reviewers saw evidence of many others, including some that pertain to residencies and graduate programs.

VI. LINKED INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING AND BUDGETING PROCESSES

As described in the previous section the entire College community participates in the strategic planning process culminating in publication of a strategic plan which drives operations, the success of which are continuously assessed using key performance indicators associated with each goal. The current *Strategic Plan* (available at http://www.sunyopt.edu/2013_strategic_plan/#/14/) contains 11 goals, and is part of a suite of reports outlining the state of the College. In the reviewers opinion the College is committed to planning and budget transparency and has in place effective processes to assess progress towards goals and alignment with budget priorities. This is evidenced by each College unit VP (associated with Academic Affairs, University Eye Center, Student Affairs, Finance and Administration and Institutional Advancement) being responsible for implementation of the College’s mission, goals and objectives in their respective area, and each having the ability to make associated budget requests linked it to a specific component of the strategic plan. Following implementation of Recommendation 1 the College’s Equipment Replacement Policy is now linked to the annual budgeting process.

VII. CONCLUSION

The State University of New York College of Optometry has presented a well-organized and comprehensive Periodic Review Report that provides significant detail about the institution’s direction and it approach to fulfilling the *Middle States Commission on Higher Education Standards of Excellence*. As a result the reviewers offer no new recommendations and assert that the College is compliant with all standards. Suggestions and commendation are identified by underlining in the body of the report and summarized below.

Recommendations

None

Suggestions

1. Include the goals and objectives of the PhD program to the *Doctoral Student Handbook*.
2. Implement a tracking and follow-up mechanism for its PhD graduates to assess the extent to which the program is meeting its goals.
3. Closely monitor the academic quality of the incoming OD class and graduates in view of expanded enrollment.
4. Identify and formally establish linkages to other healthcare professionals to promote growth and sustainability of the institution and inter-professional education and collaborative care offerings.
5. Continue to search for ways to ensure the high cost of living in the New York metropolitan area does not detract from the College's ability to recruit the best students and faculty, including developing a written recruitment plan and closely monitoring its success.
6. Develop contingency plans to address potential shortfalls in State funding to minimize impact on students, faculty, maintenance, and infrastructure.
7. Continue to emphasize financial literacy and business education in the professional program and incorporate similar skills training into the PhD program.
8. Increase focus on faculty morale, diversity, career development training and the reinvigoration of the ranks as part of their ongoing assessment processes.
9. Continue to explore strengthening international connections in order to provide more opportunities to its community while increasing its prominence and ability to generate revenue from Continuing Professional Education, certificate programs and international students.
10. Recognizing the centrality of the *University Eye Center* to the College's education, service and research mission, maintain focus on comprehensive renovations.

Commendations

1. For the candor, completeness and quality of its PRR.
2. For using a sound strategic planning and institutional assessment model to drive program development with appropriate support of its educational, research and patient care programs.
3. For minimizing student indebtedness and improving faculty recruitment packages and compensation.
4. For seeking to develop and expand its research enterprise through creation of the *Clinical Vision Research Center* and providing new faculty with career path preparation and research/scholarship opportunities within it.
5. For developing new education opportunities dovetailed with its core OD program to support specialized student interests.
6. For its handling of reduced state operating funds while continuing to make capital investments in teaching, student life, patient care and research facilities.