

# EDITORIAL

## 75 YEARS OF PROGRESS

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**O**n Saturday, October 6, 2007, Dr. Richard Phillips was inaugurated as president of Southern College of Optometry (SCO) in Memphis, TN. He becomes the sixth president of SCO as the institution celebrates its 75 year of existence. This issue of the *Journal of Behavioral Optometry* honors this milestone anniversary and recognizes the many contributions of Dr. William E. (Billy) Cochran as SCO's fifth president. It also serves to highlight the beginning of Dr. Richard Phillips' administration as its sixth president.

The history of SCO is a winding path. The school was founded in 1932 by J.J. Horton, a medical physician. The first classes met in a converted home. Two faculty members taught five students in the first class that graduated in 1934. Its beginning curriculum was eight quarters of education that included both didactic/laboratory instruction with clinical encounters. Today, SCO enters classes of 120 students from all 50 states and several foreign countries. The class of 2010's grade point average was 3.46, and its average OAT score was 332. Of its ranks, 123 students were admitted from a pool of 665. The male-to-female ratio of this class is 57/43, and this particular class comes from 29 states and three foreign countries. The 10-semester curriculum is challenging and prepares the graduate optometrist for practice in the 21st century.

The physical plant of the college includes an 11-story, 100,000 square foot college and a three-story, 55,575 square foot clinic, The Eye Center. The school, in its 75-year history, has graduated more than 6,500 optometrists. This translates to approximately 15% of the practicing ODs in the United States.

There have only been six CEOs at SCO, beginning with Dr. Horton to the present president, Dr. Richard Phillips. After the college's founding, Dr. Wilburn R. Cramer, MD, DOS, the dean of SCO under Dr. Horton, purchased the college and became president in 1939. By the mid-1940s, SCO was a non-profit institution. With the end of WWII, the college began an unprecedented period of growth and prosperity. As enrollment grew, the college required even more space and moved to its current location in 1954. In 1961, President Cramer retired and M.E. Broome, PhD, served as president until his untimely death in 1965. Spurgeon B. Eure, O.D., was the first SCO graduate to become the College's president.

A 1954 SCO graduate, Dr. Eure had practiced in Mississippi and had served four years in the Mississippi Legislature. He had been hired as the Academic Dean in 1963. Under his leadership SCO received a federal grant to construct the 11-story tower on the site of the previous campus. When the new building opened in 1970, it was named one of the nation's top 10 buildings for educational design. This building remains a modern facility housing classrooms, laboratories, a computer learning resource center, library, student areas and administrative offices.

Dr. Eure retired in 1984 and a third-generation optometrist, William E. "Billy" Cochran, O.D., (a 1968 SCO graduate) took the leadership reins. Under Dr. Cochran's administration, SCO was not only the oldest, but also the largest, optometry school in the South. His direction allowed the college to dramatically improve its financial situation. A non-existent endowment fund grew to almost \$10 million, and the institution's reserve fund increased from \$2 to \$38 million during his tenure.



*William E. "Billy" Cochran, O.D.*



*Richard W. Phillips, O.D.*

Most important, admissions standards improved from the 1980s to the 1990s. Since 1992, SCO student performance on National Board examinations (NBEO) has consistently exceeded the national average on all parts of the exams. The class of 2008 scored a 98 percent passage rate on Part I of the NBEO exams.

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Graduation rates have climbed from 85 to 98 percent. Entering grade point averages rose from 2.80 to a 3.50. Faculty recruitment and development were made special priorities, resulting in enhanced teaching, scholarship and patient care.

By the late 1990s, SCO's extraordinary success in educating men and women in the art and science of optometry mandated growth. Growth was necessary to continue to lead the profession as optometric knowledge, equipment and therapies expanded. Only through expansion of the clinical facilities could SCO's outstanding track record of achievement be continued. The Board of Trustees decided that the college should remain in its same location to meet the needs of serving an urban population within the heart of Memphis. To serve this population, a new, state-of-the-art clinical facility was designed.

On Friday, May 25, 2001, ground was broken on SCO's new eye and vision center. The Eye Center at Southern College of Optometry is adjacent to the college's 11-story building. Construction on the \$8.2 million project actually began in June 2001, and on September 20, 2002, The Eye Center at Southern College of Optometry became a reality. Equipped with 69 exam rooms, The Eye Center also features two diagnostic technology centers, a computer simulation lab, seminar and teaching rooms, a medical lab, and centers for laser treatment and angiography. In addition to the clinical facility, students also enjoy an activities center housing quality fitness equipment, racquetball courts and a gymnasium.

In 2006, President Cochran announced his intention to retire. A nationwide search led to the appointment of a 1978 SCO graduate as the college's sixth president, Richard W. Phillips, O.D. Dr. Phillips practiced optometry for nearly 30 years. He began in solo practice, formed the first optometry/ophthalmology partnership in Tennessee and spent the last 10 years as Regional Executive Director for The Laser Center's Tennessee Operations, and Regional Clinical Director Advisor for the Southeast United States. He served as Chair of the Professional Relations Committee of the American Optometric Association, and is a Past President of SECO International, LLC.

Dr. Phillips has indicated keen interest in the continued development of the clinical services at SCO. In addition, he is em-

phasizing the need for a college of SCO's stature to increase its involvement in research, particularly clinical research. The research will include studies in anatomical and physiological processes of the eye and vision system. Dr. Phillips has told the faculty that he wants the curriculum at the college to not only prepare students with the education they will need for today, but to anticipate the future direction of the profession... preparing them for the practice of optometry as it will be in 5, 10 or even 15 years.

Dr. Phillips also recognizes that optometry is a global profession, and he is committed to expanding the influence of optometry. There is a critical need for optometric services worldwide, and SCO is positioning itself to assist in meeting those needs. Dr. Phillips is investigating cooperative programs with optometry programs in South Africa and England. SCO faculty members are currently collaborating with other optometrists in Mexico, Belgium, Poland and Spain. Other international interactions will be pursued in the near future.

Current research includes studies on tear film and how the eye responds to the aging process. Dr. Charles Connor and Dr. Charles Haine have developed a patented drug that is used to increase the natural tear production of the eye and will be particularly important for those who wear contact lenses. Other research includes various studies on the sight-threatening condition of glaucoma and amblyopia. Children have not been forgotten in this research thrust. Studies are being conducted on the visual conditions of inner city pre-school children. Plans are being made to begin investigation on populations such as autism spectrum children, ADD/ADHD and other special needs individuals.

From the beginning of the institution, there has been an emphasis on the vision process. The tumultuous times of the last 30 years has seen optometry move into diagnostic and therapeutic pharmaceuticals. The understanding that vision is a total human process, modified by development and function, has never been lost at SCO. Today, you see a re-emphasis of these functional aspects of vision in clinical experiences.

SCO's graduates practice in all 50 states and nine foreign countries. Many have gone on to lead organized optometry, with 10 having served as president of

the American Optometric Association. Among those are Drs. Richard Hopping, John Gazaway, Mike Jones and David Sullins, to mention only four of the 10.

Dr. David Sullins, a 1965 SCO graduate, after serving as President of the AOA, instituted a program to focus on the vision development of infants and preschoolers. He enlisted a long-time SCO faculty member, Dr. Glen T. Steele, to assist in the development of the AOA project InfantSEE™. This program has already made a great contribution to the health and visual welfare of Americans by identifying, and subsequently treating, life- and vision-threatening conditions. As the program continues, it is envisioned that many abnormal conditions impacting the infant's growth and development will be identified and treated, greatly improving the quality of life of the child and of society.

The college administration also recognizes its obligation to the "baby boomer" population. As this group reaches its 50s and 60s, the incidence of stroke that impacts the function of the person becomes more important. As a corollary to stroke, there is also an increase in traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Medical care of accidents and acts of violence has dramatically improved over the last decade. As a result, individuals are now surviving who might have otherwise died from wounds. It is important that vision rehabilitation services be offered to improve the quality of life and decrease the dependence of these victims on others.

As in the College's beginning, SCO continues to emphasize placing the welfare of the patient foremost, while providing optometric education at its best to students. SCO has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century better prepared to meet its mission of educating men and women in the science and art of optometry than at any period in its remarkable history. The SCO story continues to unfold, as some of optometry's best and brightest students take their place, adding new and exciting chapters to the college's historic legacy.