Creating a Research Alliance

New Facility Aligns Interdisciplinary Researchers in Fight Against Blindness
Dear Alumni and Friends,

We held the dedication ceremony for our Volker Hall project September 23-24 with special guest Dr. Paul Sieving, director of the National Eye Institute. I have known Dr. Sieving for a number of years through the eyeGENE project, and I had a chance to follow up with him at a meeting at the National Eye Institute the week after our dedication ceremony. He was very impressed with the concept, the facilities, and the participants. This new space (featured in this issue’s cover story) will provide office and laboratory space for faculty who conduct primarily retinal research and will include researchers from our Department of Vision Sciences and the School of Medicine’s Department of Ophthalmology. There is really nothing like it anywhere else, and we all hope that this collaboration of researchers can pave the way to other avenues of collaboration between optometry and ophthalmology.

Speaking of research, the 16-member team of aerospace engineers in our Center for Biophysical Sciences and Engineering (CBSE) earns continual funding as well as a seal of approval from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). They received a recent extension of more than $70 million to be shared among UAB and three out-of-state engineering firms. Their primary project is building freezers that fly on the Space Shuttle and are used on the International Space Station. Show me another school of optometry that has that! This is just another example of what a fascinating mix we have at the UAB School of Optometry (UABSO).

The economic downturn has led to decreased state funding for our program, with both UAB and the UABSO experiencing an overall decrease in state funding of around 28 percent. One of the few options we have to garner additional funds is to increase tuition. Our tuition increase for the professional program this year was 11 percent. Three new schools of optometry have been created in recent years, and there appear to be two more in development, potentially raising the number of optometry schools in the United States from 17 to 22 in just a few years. That presents a significant change in the dynamics of student recruitment. The applicant pool will be stretched thinner, and prospective students may view ‘less expensive’ as better. This is where we need your help, and Dr. Greg Jackson echoes that need elsewhere in this issue.

Sightings of faculty, students, and friends of the school—from social gatherings to scholastic milestones. News of note from Alumni Association president Gregory Jackson, O.D.

Endowed scholarships are an increasingly important tool in keeping the cost of an optometry degree within reach for future students. Learn why many UABSO alumni have chosen to forge a permanent connection with the school through endowed scholarships.

I remain positive about the future. We have a productive and collegial faculty, staff, and student body that make this a great place to work and to learn. We also have a great Alumni Association and alumni whose support and financial gifts are helping us maintain our position as the finest school of optometry in the world! Please help us spread that word.

Rod Nowakowski, O.D., Ph.D.
Interim Dean, UAB School of Optometry
When officials from the UAB schools of optometry (UABSO) and medicine dedicated a newly renovated research space in Volker Hall this past fall, it signaled more than just an expansion of laboratories. The state-of-the-art facility marked the start of a historic collaborative arrangement designed to break through the current limitations of vision science research and bring the scientific world closer to a full understanding of the diseases that cause blindness.

The EyeSight Foundation of Alabama Vision Science Research Laboratories will provide space for 15 researchers—including six from the UABSO’s Vision Science Research Center—who formerly occupied separate laboratories in the Callahan Eye Foundation Hospital, Worrell, Shelby, and Spain-Wallace buildings. “Our Vision Science Research Center has long been known for its innovative approaches through interdisciplinary research efforts,” says UABSO interim dean Rodney Nowakowski, O.D., Ph.D. (“75). “This new facility will accelerate many of our ongoing projects by bringing the participating researchers together in the same space. Our hope is that this arrangement will also help generate new ideas and new lines of inquiry for future research endeavors.”

Beating Blindness

Vision loss stems from a wide variety of diseases, including glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and age-related macular degeneration. Scientists in the new vision science research laboratories will focus on examining the underlying pathologies of these conditions and on uncovering the reasons why blinding diseases are so common in the southeastern United States. “The incidence of partial vision loss and blindness is disproportionately high in the Southeast,” says Paul Gamlin, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Vision Sciences, “so UAB is particularly well-suited for this type of facility. We hope to provide the infrastructure for research that will help prevent vision loss throughout the state, region, and nation.”

The facility was created through a $1.2-million grant from The EyeSight Foundation of Alabama, plus additional funds from the provost’s office and the schools of medicine and optometry. The open-lab design concept will enable several faculty members to share large, conjoined lab spaces, creating more opportunities for collaboration.

School of Optometry faculty relocating to the new labs include Paul Gamlin, Ph.D.; Alecia Gross, Ph.D.; Kent Keyser, Ph.D.; Timothy Kraft, Ph.D.; Thomas Norton, Ph.D.; Steve Pittler, Ph.D.; and Om Srivastava, Ph.D. Xincheng Yao, Ph.D., from the School of Engineering, will join them. Faculty from the School of Medicine moving into the new labs include Christine Curcio, Ph.D.; Christopher Girkin, M.D.; Clyde Guidry, Ph.D.; Judith Kapp, Ph.D.; Russell Read, M.D.; Ph.D.; Shu-Zhen Wang, Ph.D.; and Yuhua Zhang, Ph.D.

Answering the Call

There are many practical advantages to bringing researchers together into a shared space. Less obvious, however, are the potential advantages that could come from the favorable impression such a facility might have on organizations funding research. After all, collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts between scientists have been commonplace at UAB for years, but having a facility dedicated to those collaborative relationships will increase visibility of the projects, thereby making UAB even more competitive for funding. “While much of the initial focus is on increasing the limits of basic research, there is an increased emphasis from the National Institutes of Health on translational research and even clinical treatments,” Gamlin says. “And the new labs put UAB in position to take advantage of that.”

Of Mice and Men and Tadpoles

Tadpoles aren’t normally listed among nature’s mighty creatures, but in the lab of Alecia Gross, Ph.D., their rod cells are downright bestial. Gross has long been studying mutant proteins that have been shown to cause blinding diseases in humans. By studying the cells of tadpoles and mice, Gross hopes to develop a better understanding of the diseases congenital stationary night blindness and retinitis pigmentosa. “While night blindness is not necessarily devastating in humans, retinal pigmentosa is,” Gross says. “But while I can re-create the mutant proteins in transgenic tadpoles and mice, I don’t have the expertise to actually test the rod cells in these animals, and I don’t have the kind of data needed to take the next step—comparing those findings to that of human patients.”

For that, Gross relies on colleagues such as Tim Kraft, Ph.D., who can test the function of rod cells electrophysiologically, and Christine Curcio, Ph.D., who studies the retina and works with patients. By moving into the new lab space, the vision scientists will be able to work together much more efficiently to take advantage of each researcher’s knowledge and expertise. “It’s going to be fantastic working alongside some extremely knowledgeable researchers,” says Gross. “Before this, there were researchers who shared common interests but were working separately.”
"When you're focused on your own area of research, which goes all the way down to the molecular level, it's easy to wonder, 'Is what I'm doing ever going to translate into a treatment for disease in my lifetime?'" adds Judith Kapp, Ph.D., the Department of Ophthalmology's vice chair for basic research. "This facility creates an excellent environment where researchers can work together and imagine how their work is going to translate, and it will keep them focused."

"The proximity of researchers will foster collaboration," agrees Steven Pittler, Ph.D., who is currently working on retinal degeneration. "I am trying to understand the basic mechanisms of how the retina functions as well as conducting translational research in finding disease of the retina and related disorders. To have access to other researchers with different areas of expertise, as well as the opportunity to share some specialized equipment will be a huge advantage."

The research labs were dedicated during a two-day celebration in September, which included a reception, dedication, and lab tour. Additionally, Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Eye Institute, was the featured speaker of the Vision Science Symposium, which coincided with the event.

"The goal of relocating the work of UAB's outstanding vision scientists to Volker Hall is to facilitate collaboration and, in so doing, advance research goals, increase funding opportunities, and ultimately affect and improve vision health care on the patient level. The EyeSight Foundation board and staff are excited about the positive outcomes that are sure to be realized from this state-of-the-art new space."

TORREY DEKEYSER, Executive Director of The EyeSight Foundation of Alabama

Pushing the Limits

Tim Kraft, Ph.D., is a victim of his own success. During his career as a researcher in the UAB School of Optometry's Vision Science Research Center (VSRC), Kraft has studied the electrical signals generated by cells in diseased retinas. But in spite of his high level of expertise, Kraft is looking for help to go even further in his research. "I have a theory that retinal degenerations follow a common pathophysiological status," says Kraft. "In other words, no matter what triggers the degeneration, there is a stage common to all of these diseases when the cells are sick—but salvageable. The question is how do we make sick cells stronger? To do that, I need to go outside my area of expertise; I need to work with cell biologists, and I need to work with molecular biological tools that my colleagues have developed and perfected."

Fortunately, Kraft's problem is not uncommon. Ambitious researchers in the VSRC have long been known to push the limits of their own areas of expertise, which leads them to reach out across disciplines in collaborative efforts that open up entirely new lines of investigation. For Kraft's particular area of interest, he is collaborating with Shu-Zen Wang, Ph.D., and Clyde Guidry, Ph.D., from the Department of Ophthalmology; as well as Alecia Gross, Ph.D., from the VSRC. "The advantages to having this shared space is enormous," says Kraft. "We are able to talk every day and to set up collaborations on the same models. They all have expertise in areas that can help shed light into what is going on in these cells, so by working together, we hope to gain a fuller understanding of these diseases than any of us could have gained by working alone."
The Gift that Lives On
Endowed Scholarships Forge a Lasting Connection

There are many different ways alumni can contribute to the UAB School of Optometry, but none have a more lasting impact than an endowed scholarship. More than a one-time gift to the school, more than a financial boost to one student, an endowed scholarship provides needed funds to future generations of students in perpetuity, ensuring not just the health of the school, but also the health of the optometric profession as a whole.

“An endowment is something that stays within the school forever,” says Peggy Striplin, the UABSO’s senior director of development. “Once it is given, the name lives on in the school as the investment grows over time. Many of our alumni worked while they were in school and may have received some help from scholarships, but in today’s world, scholarships are becoming more and more of a necessity.”

To emphasize her point, Striplin points to the fact that tuition across the professional schools at UAB has increased more than 125 percent over the past 10 years and to national trends that show student debt soaring to many times the levels of previous generations. So far, Striplin says student debt at the UABSO is still well below the national average, but increasing financial burdens such as rising tuition could discourage students from considering a career in optometry.

“We had a student recently who worked three jobs while taking classes,” she says. “You shouldn’t have to take on that burden to get an education. Optometry school is hard enough on its own.”

An Appeal to Alumni

In its early years, the UABSO rose quickly to prominence as one of the top optometry schools in the nation. With many renowned professors and researchers on its faculty, the school was able to attract top students. Today the school still maintains those high standards of excellence, but the financial landscape for prospective optometry students is markedly different from that of the 1970s.

One significant difference that is in the school’s favor, however, is that the school now has an alumni base that is able to provide much-needed financial support. Several corporations and groups have contributed to the school’s endowment, bringing the total number of endowed scholarships to 43, as of the end of 2010. Included in that number are scholarships given by individual alumni. Whether in honor of a loved one, to show appreciation to a school, or simply to contribute toward the betterment of the optometric profession, an endowed scholarship is the perfect way to give a gift that will last forever.

Aharon Sternberg: Opening Doors of Opportunity

Aharon Sternberg, O.D., has lived most of his life thousands of miles from Birmingham. But thanks to his endowed scholarship, his presence will forever be felt at the UABSO.

A native of Israel, Sternberg served three years in the Israeli military before coming to the United States on a student visa in 1967. Prior to applying for optometry school, he worked on a diabetic retinopathy study at Johns Hopkins University, and says he chose UAB specifically for the opportunity to study optometry at a major medical center.

That choice, however, came at a price. “When I arrived, I was still on a foreign student visa, and I had to find my own resources to pay the tuition,” Sternberg says. “At the end of my first year, I became a resident and was able to apply for both state and federal loans. I relied completely on those loans to pay my tuition.”

Much like any modern-day optometry student, Sternberg graduated with a significant amount of debt. But by lucky coincidence, his personal preference for his future matched nicely with a government incentive that eased the financial burden considerably. “I wanted to live in cold weather, because I could not tolerate the weather in Israel for the 20 years that I lived there,” he says. “Also, I always wanted to live in Alaska and drive a Jeep. At that time, Alaska was in need of optometrists, so when I agreed to go to work in an underserved area, 85 percent of my loan was forgiven.”

In the years since, Sternberg’s practice has grown to include six physicians. But while he was building a successful practice on the other side of the continent, Sternberg says he felt it was important to ensure the legacy of the UABSO remains unchanged. “I was accepted at many schools, but I wanted to go to UAB,” he says. “I would like for other people to be able to have some money for their education so that qualified people who want to go to optometry school at UAB can go there, regardless of their circumstances. This will be a much better place if top students don’t have to pick schools based on what they can afford.”

Tom Azman: The Chance for a Successful Start

Unlike Sternberg, Tom Azman, O.D., didn’t cross an ocean to pursue an optometry degree, but he may have traveled enough miles to make the trip several times over.

“My parents helped me out with what little money they had, but it would never have been enough to get me through school,” Azman explains. “So I would go home to Baltimore during the summer and work as a cab driver. By law, you were only supposed to drive eight hours a day, but that doesn’t pay much money. I would pick up extra shifts and work 12-hour days to make about $100.”

Even with the extra money, Azman says he needed a scholarship and a federal loan to pay his way through school, but the work paid off. He started a practice and was successful enough to pay off his loan within five years of his graduation. But as his practice continued to flourish over the next 25 years, Azman says he felt there was a debt still unpaid.

In addition to his endowed scholarship, Azman also donated funds for an examination room at UAB Eye Care in memory of his father.

“I owe so much for the education and care I received at UAB,” Azman says. “The professors I had took a personal interest in me, and there was a closeness among the faculty and students that was very special.”

The amount of money students have to borrow today is a tremendous burden. Through endowed scholarships, we can help keep costs down and ensure that optometry remains a viable career option for the best students.”

—Doug Clark, O.D. (‘82)

“Working my way through school wasn’t easy in 1975, but the financial hardships on families are so much worse today that I don’t believe there is any way a student could afford optometry school with the kind of work I was able to do. I felt there was a need to do what I can to make sure the most qualified young men and women have the opportunity to get off to a successful start in this profession.”

Barry Gaffney: In Memory of a Loving Sacrifice

Martin Gaffney never conducted an eye exam. He never even finished high school. But future generations of optometrists will be indebted to him and his wife, Rita, for the sacrifices they made.

Barry Gaffney, O.D., graduated from the UABSO in 1978, and in 2008, he endowed a scholarship in honor of his parents. “My father grew up dirt poor in a small town in Florida,” Gaffney says. “He served in the Air Force and learned to work on jet engines. My mom was a war bride from Scotland, so they were common people who never earned a whole lot of money.”

Despite their modest income, the Gaffney’s found a way to pay Barry’s way through optometry school. “It was a tremendous sacrifice,” Barry Gaffney says. “Because of them I was able to graduate debt free and buy a fairly nice prac- tice. The weekend I signed the papers and wrote the check for the scholarship was the weekend my father died. I can’t think of a better way to honor them than to give a gift that will ensure future students have the financial assistance they need to be successful in this profession.”

Doug Clark (‘82), left, endowed a scholarship in 2007.
UAB School of Optometry Class of 2010

AWARDS OF DISTINCTION

Beta Sigma Kappa International Optometric Honor Society Medal
Hartley Else Grubbs

Alabama Optometric Association Leadership Award
Micah Jason Kinney

Southern Council of Optometrists Clinical Excellence Award
Justine Marie Siegers

Jess Boyd Eskridge Clinical Excellence Award
Hartley Else Grubbs

Dean’s Award of Excellence
Lauren Rose Oshinski Hoffman

ENDOWED SCHOLARSHIPS

Abraham Azman Endowed Optometry Scholarship
Steven Daniel Bowser

The Clark F. Amos Endowed Presidential Scholarship
Anna Lessley Davis
Kelley Lynn Davis
Wilson Walter McGriff

Dr. Elbert “Bert” Coshatt Alumni Endowed Scholarship
Sarah Elizabeth Shim

Frederic and Marion Rosemore Family Foundation Scholarship
Given in Memory of
Frederic M. Rosemore, O.D.
Lauren Ashley Kaluzne
Justine Marie Siegers

The Lee Dickerson Endowed Optometry Scholarship
Steven Daniel Bowser

Dr. Lester Kaplan/CIBA Vision Corporation Endowed Scholarship
Micah Jason Kinney
Jennifer Logan Stevens

ANNUAL AWARDS

ABBA Optimal Excellence Award for Fitting of GP Contact Lenses
Laura Leigh Thompson

ABBA Optimal Excellence Award for Prescription of GP Contact Lenses
Hartley Else Grubbs

Alcon 4th Year Optometry Student Scholarship Award
Justine Marie Siegers

COVD Award for Excellence in Vision Therapy
Micah Jason Kinney

Vistakon Excellence in Contact Lens Award
Erin Raynaud Heckman

Winchester Optical/David J. Kerko Low Vision Award
Nathaniel Spielberg Stevens

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

GOLD KEY INTERNATIONAL OPTOMETRIC HONOR SOCIETY
Lawrence Edward Addison Jr.
Steven Daniel Bowser
Kelley Lynn Davis
Rebecca Jones Doss
Micah Jason Kinney
Rena Ishwaral Patel
Sarah Elizabeth Shim
Justine Marie Siegers

BETA SIGMA KAPPA INTERNATIONAL OPTOMETRIC HONOR SOCIETY
Lawrence Edward Addison Jr.
Krishan Raman Bhima
Steven Daniel Bowser
Kelley Lynn Davis
Rebecca Jones Doss
Micah Jason Kinney
Rena Ishwaral Patel
Sarah Elizabeth Shim
Justine Marie Siegers

GATHERING WITH DIRECTOR OF STUDENT AFFAIRS GERALD SIMON (‘85) ARE LAURIE HOFFMAN, AUDRIA LACE, RENA PATEL, STEVEN, LALTHA HARDWARY, MICAH KINNEY, AND SARAH SAGEZ-BARNETT.
About the School
News from In, Around, and Beyond UAB

UABSO Reunion
The UABSO Reunion was held in August, in conjunction with a long weekend of continuing education. Among the education and other social events, we celebrated the reunion classes of 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005. This is the second year that we have had an on-campus reunion, and we expect that this new tradition will continue.

Dr. Jess Boyd Eskridge
I am deeply saddened by the recent passing of former UABSO faculty member Dr. Jess Boyd Eskridge. His final years were spent in Saint George, Utah, battling Alzheimer’s disease.

As the first chairman of the Department of Optometry, Dr. Eskridge recruited many of the original clinical faculty at the UABSO. He recruited me in 1980 from the University of Houston with the specific goal of enhancing the binocular vision area, both didactically and clinically. He made it clear that he expected me to also pursue clinical research. He had a tremendous influence on my development as a faculty member at the UABSO.

Dr. Eskridge was a gifted teacher, mentor, and colleague. His presentations, regardless of the topic, were always well-organized and concise. I remember vividly the first lecture of his that I attended. It was for the dedication of the new facility at the University of Houston College of Optometry in 1977. The dedication included a weeklong series of lectures and seminars by distinguished persons throughout the world in vision care and vision research. Dr. Eskridge’s topic related to the technique of direct ophthalmoscopy. I skeptically wondered how this lecture would interest me, a young know-it-all assistant professor. His presentation, however, left a lasting impression, after he correlated retinal anatomy with clinical observation.

Dr. Eskridge was a dedicated clinical instructor. Always wearing his white coat with an occluder in his pocket, he was at his best when demonstrating patients manifesting complex binocular vision disorders to his interns. Dr. Eskridge was my mentor. He saw the need for binocular vision research and guided me accordingly. I knew he would be very pleased with the present status of clinical research at the UABSO.

More importantly, Dr. Eskridge was a kind, thoughtful, and gracious person. A dedicated family man, he would delight in telling me about his grandchildren. He will be missed, but his legacy at the UABSO and within the optometric profession will continue.

Dr. Eskridge is survived by his wife, Beth L. Eskridge, daughters Chris and Cheryl, six grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Bowles, Kristin
Kristen Bowles, O.D., entered UAB in 2005 with double-vision. She had high hopes set on simultaneously receiving two postgraduate degrees: a doctor of optometry title as well as a master’s degree in vision science.

Bowles says she came to Birmingham from Oklahoma specifically because UAB was one of the few universities in the nation that allowed students to pursue both degrees at the same time. She says doing so was extremely challenging, which is probably why only one other student in her class went for the dual diploma.

“Most people go into optometry school wanting to own their own practice,” says Bowles, who graduated from UAB in 2009. "I went into optometry school knowing I wanted a career in academia, and specifically patient-oriented research. So the dual degree was perfect for me.” That ambition has led Bowles to a two-year clinical fellowship in ophthalmic genetics with the National Institutes of Health (NIH). She says she splits her time between seeing patients and conducting research focused on electrophysiology and genetics. “It’s very interesting,” Bowles says. “I work with patients who are not a part of the typical optometry or ophthalmology practice. These patients have diseases that most eye doctors see only once or twice in a lifetime, and I’ve seen 20 in the past year.”

While the work at NIH can be challenging, Bowles says her years at UAB helped prepare her for the difficulties she has encountered. “While I was at UAB, some of the work seemed unnecessarily hard, but now that I’m here, not only do I understand why UAB was so difficult, but also I really appreciate it,” Bowles says. “I think whenever I become a faculty member, I will probably be what students consider to be unnecessarily difficult as well. It’s incredibly important to have a firm foundation of knowledge to be successful.”

Bowles’ fellowship at NIH continues through this summer. She says she is already looking into other fellowships, as well as applying for Ph.D. programs around the country. “In the next 10 years, I think we’ll see more treatments available for a lot of these genetic diseases that right now we consider to be incurable,” Bowles says. “I’d like to be a part of that, and that’s why I’m continuing my education, so I can play a bigger role.”
Alabama Optometric Association honors UABSO Alumni

The Alabama Optometric Association named two distinguished UABSO alumni O.D. of the Year and Young O.D. of the Year. Fred Wallace, O.D. (’82), was named Alabama Optometrist of the Year. Wallace practices in Bessemer and is the executive director of the Alabama Board of Optometry. Zachary Steele, O.D. (’03), was named Alabama Young Optometrist of the Year. Steele practices in Trussville and Chelsea.

Frazier appointed to AOA Committee

Marcela Frazier, O.D., M.P.H. (’02), has been appointed chair of the American Optometric Association’s Healthy Eyes Healthy People Committee (HEHP). HEHP promotes collaboration among government agencies, health care advocates, and optometrists to develop innovative strategies for community outreach to help prevent good health and optimum vision. The goal of HEHP is to empower optometrists to change community health programs so that vision services are provided and optometrists are recognized as vital to the health-care system.

Simmons named Tennessee Young Optometrist of the Year

Jody Simmons, O.D. (’08), was named the Tennessee Young Optometrist of the Year. Simmons practices with her twin sister Reynolds (’79); Chris Deibert (’83); Jim Fisk (’01); Terry Ashley Holloway Bowers (’04), with husband, Scott, and daughter Lilly. Greg Jackson (’88), visits with Cathy Lee, Peggy Striplin, and classmate Interim dean Rodney Nowakowski visits with Jenny Drake (’08); David Lee (’88).

Annual Alumni Breakfast

Speaker: Dawn DeCarlo (’92), spoke to Alumni Breakfast guests about her experiences as a veterinary ophthalmologist with the UAB SOAR program. Dr. DeCarlo’s research focuses on the application of optics to the study of retinal degeneration.

Alumni of the Year: Sam Pierce, O.D. (’88), was named the UABSO Alumni of the Year for 2011. Pierce has been in private practice in Trussville, AL, since 1989 and has a distinguished history of community service to the Trussville area as well as a long record of service to the profession of optometry and to the UABSO. Pierce is a past president of the UABSO Alumni Association. He is active in many facets of school support, including mentoring students at the school. Pierce also supports the AOA and DCAC golf tournaments. Here Pierce is pictured with incoming Alumni Association president Tim Nichols (’81) and outgoing Alumni Association president Greg Jackson (’88).

Joe Benjamin, O.D., Ph.D.

In 1971, William J. “Joe” Benjamin was on top of the world. With two outs in the last inning, Benjamin hit a pinch-hit triple to win the state high school baseball championship. Four years later, Benjamin gave up baseball to pursue a future in optometry—and he has been hitting home runs ever since.

After collecting four degrees from Ohio State, Benjmin spent five years on faculty at the University of Houston College of Optometry before coming to UAB in 1988. He has helped shape the eye-care field as both a researcher and clinician.

As a researcher, Benjamin has gained recognition in the areas of material oxygen permeability, the aerobic needs of the cornea, the tonicity of the tear fluid, and clinical investigations of new ophthalmic devices. Benjamin’s laboratory is the central site worldwide for measurement of oxygen permeability of polymeric materials composing contact lenses, intraocular lenses, refractive implants, and in situ polymerizing hydrogels. He coined and defined the terms “hyperpermeability” and “hptertransmissibility” that are now used throughout the contact lens field.

Benjamin became associated with the famed clinician and advocate of clinical research, Irving Borish, O.D. “Through my association with Dr. Borish, I tried to organize the thinking about how bifocal and multifocal contact lenses operated,” says Benjamin. “The overall concept met with a lot of resistance at first, but over time it became the concept that most people adopted to explain how bifocal lenses work and fit them in practice.”

Another area of research interest is how contact lenses stay wet in the eye. Benjamin developed a method measuring the wettablility of rigid lenses on the eye called the in vivo contact angle. “Through this method, I showed that the traditional contact angle measured in vitro were of little prognostic value,” he says.

While eye care is a passion for many clinical researchers, Benjamin says one aspect of his clinical interest is more personal than most. “I have keratoconus, so I like to see and help patients with that condition,” he says.

In recent years, Benjamin became the editor and a substantial author of the book Borish’s Clinical Refraction, considered by many to be an authoritative text on the subject of the eye examination.

Benjamin is married to Patricia C. Benjamin, O.D. Their son, Daniel, recently earned a degree in materials engineering and is currently assigned to the Department of the Army in the Washington, D.C., area.
From the President

The current economic environment requires a business owner to evaluate every aspect of operation to ensure maximum efficiency along with maximum customer service and satisfaction. This is just as true for an optometry practice as for any merchant. I know most of us already evaluate our practice, but in addition to routine evaluation, I want to challenge each of you to participate in another important optometric arena—recruitment.

Bringing the brightest young minds to our profession is an area where we must be proactive. The success and growth of our profession depends on competent doctors positioned to serve the vision and eye-health demands of a growing and aging population in America. Insurance carriers will deal most favorably with those doctor groups in health care that are organized, competent, well distributed geographically, and strong in number. We can all afford 15 or 20 years from now to wonder what happened to our position in the new, larger health-care system—that ends up being Optometry can’t grow complacent in attracting and training the best and the brightest to practice this great profession.

Now is a great time to invite prospective candidates for optometry to your office. Encourage them to give serious consideration to optometry as their career by showing them what you do on a daily basis. The UABSO is recruiting regularly at colleges and universities near you. I am sure other optometry programs are doing the same. Consider accompanying the recruiters at a college or university visit to answer questions about the profession and about what daily practice is really like. The fact that you are there, taking time out from your practice, is a powerful statement to prospective students considering a career in optometry.

Another way to be proactive is to invite one who has had a change of heart. Optometry can’t grow complacent in attracting and training the best and the brightest to practice this great profession.

Alumni Board Profiles

Bryan Boozer, O.D.

Bryan Boozer, O.D., has been in private practice in Cullman, Alabama, for more than 25 years. After receiving his undergraduate degree from Jacksonville State University in 1978, Boozer went on to receive his O.D. from the UABSO in 1983. Since then, he has been a member of the American Optometric Association, the Alabama Optometric Association, and the North Alabama Optometric Society. He has served as adjunct clinical professor at the UABSO and as a proctor on the National Board of Examiners. He is a lifetime member of the UABSO Alumni Association.

Boozer and his wife, Teresa, have three children, Shannon, Shelby, and Spencer, and one grandchild, Reese.

“I realized when I graduated that I would welcome advice from other alumni as I began my optometric career, and so I joined the Alumni Association as a lifetime member immediately upon graduation,” Boozer says. “I strongly urge all alumni to join and become active in our UABSO alumni association.”

David Lee, O.D.

After distinguishing himself as a football player and state champion wrestler from Huntsville, Alabama, Lee graduated from Auburn University, where he met his wife, Cathy. Lee and his wife have two sons, Parker and Hunter, and a daughter, Jordan. He is currently involved in the coordination of the Alabama High School Athletic Association state wrestling tournament, but he says he still places a very high value on his involvement with the Alumni Association.

“I was especially impressed by the fact that UAB was part of a medical center,” Schwartz says. “At that point in time, it was the only optometry school that was part of a major medical center. Hank Peters encouraged me to consider UAB as a possibility for my Ph.D. training. He had an awful lot to do with my decision to go to UAB. I thought it would be a good match.”

Schwartz received a Ph.D. in physiological optics in 1982 and then spent a year as an assistant professor in UAB’s Department of Physiological Optics (now the Department of Vision Sciences). Since then he has held a variety of academic positions, primarily at Southern College of Optometry in Memphis and State University of New York (SUNY). Schwartz served as the dean of Southern College of Optometry from 1994 to 1997 and then held the same position at SUNY from 1997 to 2007. He currently is the director of institutional research and planning at SUNY.

“I spend much of my time on accreditation-related issues and institutional planning and assessment as well as teaching in the optometry program,” Schwartz says. “Institutional research has become more and more important to the accreditation agencies, so the school has increased its emphasis on that area.”

In 1994, Schwartz wrote a textbook titled Visual Perception: A Clinical Orientation. Now in its fourth edition, Visual Perception is used by most of the optometry schools in the United States. Schwartz was the first optometrist to receive a research grant from the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (IPSE). The grant was directed at developing a new curriculum model for optometry. He has conducted previous grant work with the New York Transit Authority on the visual acuity requirements for conductors and train operators. All told, Schwartz has published more than 40 papers and abstracts on his research findings. He said his interest in research was one of the primary reasons he chose to attend UAB.

“What I liked about it was the exciting research environment,” Schwartz says. “The program had just received a core grant from the National Eye Institute, so there was a nice research atmosphere. It was a growing program, and there was a lot of enthusiasm about its potential. It was a great opportunity to go to a developing school of optometry.”

And even though he is now firmly entrenched at SUNY, Schwartz says he maintains contact with some of his former UAB colleagues—including Michael Loop, Ph.D, and Wendy Marsh-Tuttle, O.D., M.S. (’85)—and he still returns to campus on occasion.

“I look back on my years at UAB with fondness,” Schwartz says. “The memories I have are good ones.”

Steven Schwartz, O.D., Ph.D., has seen his career take him across the country, from New York to California and back. Most of his moves were planned, but a detour to UAB happened because of a chance meeting.

Schwartz was finishing up work on his O.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1970s when he attended the dedication ceremony for a new building on campus. One of the attendees was Henry Peters, O.D., a Berkeley graduate who had gone on to become the first dean of the UAB School of Optometry.

UAB was still in its fledgling stages at that time, and information about the university was not readily available on the other side of the country in the pre-internet age. So as Schwartz talked with Peters, he began to learn about UAB and the School of Optometry, and he was intrigued by what he heard.

“I was especially impressed by the fact that UAB was part of a medical center,” Schwartz says. “At that point in time, it was the only optometry school that was part of a major medical center. Hank Peters encouraged me to consider UAB as a possibility for my Ph.D. training. He had an awful lot to do with my decision to go to UAB. I thought it would be a good match.”

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2010 American Optometric Association Meeting

Steven Schwartz, Longtime SUNY Dean Holds Ph.D. from the UABSO

A fortuitous meeting with the school’s founding dean brought Steven Schwartz to the UABSO, where he received a Ph.D. in 1982.

Drew Eason, Robin Eason (’88), and Brenda Fland (’91), enjoy the alumni reception at the Gaylord Palms in Orleans, Florida.

Fourth-year student Chun Li and third-year studentыва Han Niu attend the reception.

Fourth-year student Chun Li and third-year student Suhua Han meet with steven Schwartz at the reception.
1973 Ronald E. Dachelet
1974 Alan G. Tavel
1975 Catherine S. Amos
1976 Paul D. Duval
1977 Jeffrey R. Hicks
1978 Thomas M. Kies
1979 Thomas Azman
1980 Larry D. Carter
1981 Dennis R. Thomas
1982 Rodney W. Nowakowski
1983 Fred B. Sezter
1984 Gilbert D. Spindler Jr.
1985 Charles David
1986 Allgood
1987 Timothy B. Reeser
1988 Gerald F. Combs
1989 Randy S. Chodash
1990 Danny L. Hargrett
1991 Leon R. Robertson
1992 Kenneth D. Strong
1993 William H. Sullins
1994 James J. Craig
1995 Andrew R. Howard
1996 John W. Boelens
1997 John T. Bender Jr.
1998 Alvaro Jorge Moreno
1999 Jeffrey B. Ford
2000 Kenneth Reid Winton
2001 Alexander A. Jill Helton
2002 David A. Carboni
2003 John T. Bender Jr.
2004 Michelle M. Cooper
2005 Michael J. Gambino
2006 Audrey Whitehead
2007 Jason R. Bandy
2008 Stephen J. Mark
2009 William D. Sullins III
2010 Leslie Graham-Dooley
2011 Adam Shaikh
2012 Anthony Trawick
2013 Thomas M. Kies
2014 Michael J. Armstrong
2015 William G. McInnish
2016 William C. Womble
2017 Ibraheem M. Alshraideh
2018 Mark P. McGuire
2019 Michael J. Gambino
2020 William F. Begg
2021 Daniel J. Stratton
2022 Barry M. Gaffney
2023 Thomas B. West
2024 Robert E. Edge
2025 Jane A. West
2026 Robert R. Sandlin
2027 G. William Doolin Jr.
2028 James W. Andrews
2029 Benjamin D. Falcón
2030 James W. Andrews
2031 Thomas M. Kies
2032 Michael J. Armstrong
2033 William G. McInnish
2034 William C. Womble
2035 Ibraheem M. Alshraideh
2036 Barry M. Gaffney
2037 Thomas B. West
2038 Robert E. Edge
2039 Jane A. West
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2041 G. William Doolin Jr.
2042 James W. Andrews
2043 Thomas M. Kies
2044 Michael J. Armstrong
2045 William G. McInnish
2046 William C. Womble
2047 Ibraheem M. Alshraideh
2048 Barry M. Gaffney
2049 Thomas B. West
2050 Robert E. Edge
2051 Jane A. West
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2098 Robert E. Edge
2099 Jane A. West
2100 Robert R. Sandlin
2101 G. William Doolin Jr.

Join us August 19-21, 2011.

Watch your mail for CE and reunion information and registration.