



## **America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses Sole Sponsor of the Pennsylvania College of Optometry's Summer Enrichment Program to Increase Black Representation in Optometry**

The Pennsylvania College of Optometry (PCO) at Salus University announced today that America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses will be the sole sponsor of the University's Summer Enrichment Program (SEP) with its vision to increase the number of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) in the optometric profession.

Totaling \$300,000 through a five-year commitment, it is the largest sponsorship Salus has received to date in support of this program. SEP, now called the Robert E. Horne Summer Enrichment Program, was originally founded by 1977 by Horne, vice president and dean of Student Affairs who retired in 2012, and was offered every summer for 39 years continuously through 2015, but was discontinued due to loss of grant funding and support. During that time, it served 700 students and America's Best commitment will reach up to 100 potential new PCO/Salus students.

"To fully achieve the level of diversity in Optometry that we all hope for requires that we overcome a variety of systemic obstacles. Salus' Summer Enrichment Program, founded by the legendary PCO Dean Robert E. Horne, played a pivotal trajectory setting role in the lives of many minority Optometrists practicing today," said National Vision. CEO Reade Fahs. "There would be fewer minority Optometrists practicing today were it not for this program. National Vision's America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses brand is proud to be reigniting this program and hopefully laying the groundwork required for as many as 100 new minority Optometrists to someday join the profession."

BIPOC remain underrepresented in educational attainment in the science, health, and engineering workforce. This program will increase the number of students, residents, and faculty in the Optometry program in order to create a diverse and inclusive educational environment and to improve the health outcomes of the minority population PCO graduates serve in Philadelphia and beyond. **In the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years, PCO had 14 (168 total OD students or 8.3%) and 11 (171 total OD students or 6.4%) Black students.**

"We are thrilled to partner with National Vision and America's Best to provide opportunities for Black Indigenous People of Color and other minorities to obtain an optometric education," said Dr. Michael H. Mittelman, president of Salus. "Their generosity to underwrite our Robert E. Horne Summer Enrichment Program for five years, potentially enrolling up to 100 students over

that course of time, will not only help to diversify and enrich optometry and PCO/Salus, but also allow us to more directly serve those communities we live and work in.”

Dr. Mittelman’s sentiments were echoed by Dr. Melissa E. Trego, dean of PCO/Salus. "PCO at Salus University is incredibly grateful to National Vision for their support of the Robert Horne Summer Enrichment Program. The impact of this generous gift will ensure PCO's commitment to diversity and inclusion in optometric education and the optometric profession," said Dr. Trego.

The purpose of the SEP program was to introduce underserved and underrepresented prospective students to the curriculum of PCO via a six-week residential program, which consisted of mini-courses on topics such as optics, human anatomy, biochemistry, neuroscience, pathology, and clinical applications. The same faculty who taught these courses during the academic year taught the SEP courses.

Past programs provided an invaluable experience for those who participated.

“I’m a product of summer program after summer program after summer program,” said Essence Johnson, OD, PCO class of 2010, FAAO and Chief Visionary Officer for Black Eyecare Perspective. “A barely second-generation college student and if it wasn’t for the exposure that I had in the Summer Enrichment Program and the pipeline created for me into the eye care industry I wouldn’t be the wife, mother and entrepreneur practicing and preaching optometry to her community today.”

This newly designed program will feature a five-week hybrid program, which includes three weeks of remote (online) instruction and mentorship and two weeks of in-person instruction and mentorship. While full immersion into the didactic program is an important element of the SEP, facilitating peer interactions and face-to-face faculty mentorship has been found to be an integral part of an underrepresented minority (URM) student’s experience and success in the SEP and optometry school. This new format was designed with the intention of meeting the needs of modern-day students and creating greater accessibility for those who are interested in participating.

"We are excited to receive this gift from National Vision for a transformational program that plants a seed to address the inequality found within the eye care profession," said Jacqueline Patterson, MPA, vice president of Institutional Advancement and Community Relations at Salus.

Now that the program is being revived, the goals remain as ambitious as they were when Dean Horne established it: they include improving the matriculation, attrition and graduation rates of URM applicants while fostering a safety net of support and mentorship.

“The Summer Enrichment Program completely changed the trajectory of my life,” said Darryl E. Glover Jr., OD, PCO class of 2011 and Cofounder of Black Eyecare Perspective. “By allowing me the opportunity to learn with grace, I was able to understand the tools I would need in order to excel in optometry school. Having been a college student who worked a full-time job, I had previously not been able to reach my full potential as a student. The Summer Enrichment

Program, led by Dean Horne, gave me the opportunity to fulfill my dream of attending optometry school.”

The new iteration of the SEP will be under the direction of Ruth Shoge, OD ‘06, Resident ‘07. Before she started at PCO in 2002, Dr. Shoge, participated in the SEP, which is where she developed a passion for the program. When she joined the faculty in 2008 Dean Horne asked her to be a mentor and teach one of the SEP courses.

Dr. Shoge anticipates the participation of 20 students in the revived program annually.

The University will pilot the new iteration “specifically for the optometry program, but long term goals include expanding the program to other Colleges in the University, especially to those that lack diversity,” Dr. Shoge said with the hopes that this type of program will help recruit URM candidates into various healthcare professions.

### **About Salus University**

Salus University, founded as the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in 1919, today is a diversified, globally recognized professional academic center of learning that offers a wide range of degree programs in the professions of Optometry, Audiology, Physician Assistant, Blindness and Low Vision Studies, Biomedicine, Occupational Therapy and Speech-Language Pathology. Salus operates four clinical facilities in Philadelphia and Montgomery counties that provide highly specialized vision, hearing and balance, and speech-language pathology services. The University has more than 1,200 students, and more than 14,000 alumni worldwide. For more information, please visit [www.salus.edu](http://www.salus.edu).

### **About National Vision Holdings, Inc.**

National Vision Holdings, Inc. (NASDAQ: EYE) is one of the largest optical retail companies in the United States with over 1,200 stores in 44 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. With a mission of helping people by making quality eye care and eyewear more affordable and accessible, the company operates five retail brands: [America’s Best Contacts & Eyeglasses](#), [Eyeglass World](#), [Vision Centers](#) inside select Walmart stores, and Vista Optical inside select [Fred Meyer stores](#) and on select [military bases](#), and several e-commerce websites, offering a variety of products and services for customers’ eye care needs. For more information, please visit [www.nationalvision.com](http://www.nationalvision.com).

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