

THE JOURNAL RECORD



Helping shape local business. **MIDFIRST BANK** Mem

Learn More >

At the center of local business. **MIDFIRST BANK** Member FDIC

NSU to expand optometry program

By: Kathryn McNutt The Journal Record February 11, 2021 0



A rendering of the future home of the Oklahoma College of Optometry at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. The 101,500-square-foot complex will provide more classroom and laboratory space, as well as increased patient services. (Rendering provided by NSU)

Northeastern State University officials have proposed the construction of a 101,500-square-foot complex for the Oklahoma College of Optometry to expand and upgrade teaching facilities and patient services.

The optometry training program opened on the NSU Tahlequah campus more than 40 years ago in the original W.W. Hastings Hospital built by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1936. The new facility – four years in the planning – will more than double the existing space.

The historic building is beautiful, but poses logistical, structural and technical challenges that limit instruction and patient care, said Dr. Nathan Lighthizer, associate dean for the college.

The new complex will feature state-of-the-art equipment and classroom technology, as well as a suite for refractive (vision correction) surgery currently not available in Tahlequah.

"The Oklahoma College of Optometry is known across the world as a leader in optometry when caring for disease and advanced procedures," Lighthizer said. "We've got the reputation, we've got the education, we've got the patient care. This will give us the facility that matches that reputation."

That reputation is what attracted Dr. Jessica Lucas to the college from Texas. Since graduating from NSUOCO in 2011, Lucas has practiced at Dean McGee Eye Institute in Oklahoma City.

"I'm very grateful for my education," she said. "It laid the foundation for me to work at a very prestigious eye institute."

The new college complex will give future optometry students an opportunity for a more diverse experience since there will be room to study more subspecialties, Lucas said.

"They already have a very good clinical education program, but this will add to the value," she said.

The faculty also provides continuing education in surgical and laser procedures to practicing eye doctors across the nation. The college was recognized in 2019 by the American Optometric Association as a pioneer and leader in this area.

NSUOCO is the smallest of the 23 optometry schools in the country, accepting 28 students annually for the four-year program from about 200 applicants, Lighthizer said. The new facility may allow the college to accept more students in the future, he said.

Larger classrooms and laboratory space will enhance instruction, while more space for testing equipment will increase patient care, Lighthizer said.

Through its partnerships with the Cherokee Nation and other area entities, the college sees more than 40,000 patients each year on campus and at clinics throughout the 14-county Cherokee Nation.

“The vast majority of patients are Native American,” Lighthizer said. “We’ll be able to serve more patients both Native and non-Native.”

The timeline for the project is fluid. Lighthizer said fundraising will take place this year with a goal of finalizing plans in early 2022.

NSU President Steve Turner announced a fundraising campaign for the \$33 million project early this month. He said the goal is to raise half of the cost through private donations and to fund the remainder with institutional infrastructure reserves, auxiliary revenues and a revenue bond.

“It is time our nationally recognized program has facilities that reflect the first-class instruction, graduates and community services that have become synonymous with the Oklahoma College of Optometry over the past four decades,” Turner said.

The new college complex will be across from NSU’s Branscum Alumni Center at the intersection of N. Cedar Avenue and Crafton Street. Go to <https://optometry.nsuok.edu> for information about the college and the “Building Excellence: A Vision for the Future” campaign.

