4. Optometry and the University of Rochester: 1917–1936

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Optometry is that branch of applied optics limited to measurement and correction by means of spectacles, of abnormal refraction of the eye. Unwittingly optometry played a vital role in crystallizing the final decision by the University of Rochester to found without further delay an Institute of Applied Optics.

In 1917 Ernest Petry, self-appointed Dean of the Rochester School of Optometry which he founded in 1911 or 1912, contacted Dr. Rhees with regard to the problem confronting his school of a hundred students and six faculty members. In 1908 the State of New York, following the lead of other states, began to regulate the practice of optometry, thereby placing small private optometry schools in considerable jeopardy. Rhees had at least some knowledge of this School of Optometry, for in his 1916–17 Presidential Report he stated: “I have to report the resignation of Assistant Professor Howard D. Minchin, who has accepted the position of President of the Rochester School of Optometry, Professor Minchin came to the University as Instructor in Astronomy and Physics in 1903. Since 1906 he has been Assistant Professor. In recent years he has interested himself increasingly in the rapidly developing profession of optometry. The representatives of that profession in Rochester have recognized that interest in the honorable appointment to which they have called him.” Minchin was at that time in good standing in the world of optics in Rochester, for he was a charter member and serving on the council of the young Association for the Advancement of Applied Optics. He was also a charter member of the more recent Optical Society of America.

In 1923 another State law was passed whereby on and after January 1930 all newly qualified optometrists in New York State had to be graduates, B.S. or B.A., of a recognized university and certified in optometry. In the early 1920s an M.S. alumnus and Assistant in Physics, Gordon H. Gliddon, became a part-time teacher in physical optics at the Rochester School of Optometry while holding a regular job at Eastman Kodak Company. It would seem that the School of Optometry was trying to strengthen the academic standing of its faculty. However this 1923 law doomed the separate existence of such schools, and conversations between the University and Petry were accelerated. The subject, very understandably, also became a matter for discussion with regard to the proposed Institute of Applied Optics. Since optometrists qualifying in 1930 had to have a university degree, it was necessary that they enter as freshmen in 1926, becoming seniors in 1929–30.

Rhees, interested as always in all useful knowledge, persevered, consulting with Southall of Columbia where some teaching in optometry was already offered, with departments in his own University with the State of New York, and with A. E. C. Drescher and Adolph Lomb of the Bausch & Lomb Company. Even so, more years elapsed before the final decision in 1928 to found an Institute of Applied Optics.
Between 1923 and 1925 the University, through the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, the Treasurer, and others concerned, came to an agreement with regard to such matters as curriculum for optometry, transfer of equipment, and use of the faculty of the School of Optometry. In 1926 most of Petry’s equipment was temporarily moved from its quarters at 38 South Washington Street to the Carnegie Building for Applied Science on the Prince Street campus, and two members of the faculty—Ernest Petry himself and his instructor in optical shop work, Herbert E. Wilder—were retained to teach their own specialties.

The following information was given on page 105 of the 1926–27 Annual Catalog of the University, in the section on courses for the bachelor’s degree and under the title of Optics: “It is the intention of the College to develop advanced work in optical theory and practice as part of the work of the department of physics. A first step in this direction is the organization of a course which will enable students to meet the requirements of the State of New York for registered optometrists.” The Bulletin described the requirement of the State laws for optometry, and the sequence of courses that was to be offered by the University to obtain the necessary degree of B.S. in Optometry. It further stated that only freshmen would be admitted in 1926–27 in optometry. Exactly the same notice appeared in the 1927–28 Annual Catalog of the College of Arts and Science. Ernest Petry and Herbert Wilder, optical shop instructor.

Members of the first class in Optometry.
Herbert Wilder were listed in both years among the faculty as, respectively, Lecturer in Optometry and Instructor in Optometry.

Plans for an Institute of Applied Optics began to move ahead again, now under considerable pressure since the University was admitting freshmen students in optometry who would need lectures and laboratory work in geometrical and physical optics at least by 1929. The history of the years 1926–36 are recorded in the following chapter on The Founding of The Institute of Applied Optics. A total of 40 students had obtained the degree of B.S. in optometry when the department was closed in 1936, at which time all teaching in optometry in New York State was concentrated at Columbia University. Several of our optometry alumni have a fine record of service and contribution to the University of Rochester.