55. The Dennis Hall Years, 1993–2000

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In 1993 Dennis Hall became the eighth director of The Institute of Optics. He continued as director until his departure from the University in 2000 to become the associate provost for research at Vanderbilt University.

Prior to becoming director, Dennis had been associate director of the Institute during the latter part of Duncan Moore’s directorship. Earlier, in 1980, he joined the Institute’s faculty, enhancing the Institute with his excellence in guided wave optics research and in teaching, and also with his humor. When a newspaper reporter in the mid-1980s asked about helping to build the future economy of New York with the newly formed Center for Advanced Optical Technology, Dennis replied, “We’re just twelve guys trying to save the universe.” The quote appeared as the lead sentence in a Rochester newspaper article reporting the awarding of the CAOT program, and, for a while, was posted in big letters on the front window of the Institute. Of course, Dennis received lots of good-natured kidding about it—lots of fun.

Throughout his directorship, Dennis maintained an active research program. In addition to maintaining his own research funding, he was responsible for obtaining two million dollars in support for Institute graduate student stipends and tuition from Department of Education grants through the GAANN program.

An imaginative, collaborative course was created during the Hall years. Over lunch, Dennis Hall and the English Department chair, Morris Eaves, discussed the radical idea of offering a joint optics/English course. This led to the formation of the course, “Clockwork to Chaos,” taught jointly by English Professor Dan Albright and Optics Professor Ian Walmsley. It focused on the ways scientific ideas enter and influence important literature, and how those portrayals contribute to the popular view of the natural world. The course was very enthusiastically received, and was recognized by the University for teaching innovation.

The Institute’s summer school and industrial associates programs continued to thrive. A highlight of the thirty-second summer school program in 1993 was the lecture on lens design by one of the Institute’s original leaders.
faculty members, Rudolf Kingslake. In the early 1990s, a small business category was added to the industrial associates program, enabling the immediate addition of eight small companies to the fold.

The Institute was included in the 1995 study of U.S. physics Ph.D. programs performed by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council. If the Institute had been a physics department, it would have been justifiably proud of its ranking in the study. But considering the incomplete overlap of the fields of optics and physics, the Institute's rankings in the physics study were astounding. Of the 147 physics programs ranked, the Institute placed twenty-fifth overall, including rankings of first in publications per faculty member, second in percentage of faculty with external funding, eleventh in faculty effectiveness, and fifteenth in citations per faculty member.

The student numbers were fairly constant through the 1990s, with around a hundred undergraduates and a hundred graduate students in the Institute. Undergraduate classes typically numbered in the upper twenties or low thirties. M.S. class sizes fluctuated the most, from less than ten to nearly thirty. Ph.D. classes were always twelve or thereabouts.

The excellence of the Institute's faculty was recognized by the awarding of many honors during the Hall years. Dennis Hall himself was appointed to the William F. May Professorship in Engineering and Applied Sciences. Nicholas George was named the Wilson Professor of Electronic Imaging. Duncan Moore was awarded the Rudolf and Hilda Kingslake Chair of Optical Engineering. Optics Professor Brian Thompson concluded ten years as provost of the University of Rochester in 1994, and was honored by being named Provost Emeritus and Distinguished University Professor. David Williams became the Allyn Professor of Biomedical Optics. The endowments for two other professorships were formed. The endowment of the Robert E. Hopkins Professorship of Optics was built by over 350 separate gifts by friends and alumni of the Institute. The groundwork was laid by Dennis Hall for the endowment by James and Louise Wyant of the M. Parker Givens Professorship. Additionally, an endowment for the Institute itself was created.

The latter half of Hall's tenure as director was more challenging. University resources were tighter. A national trend continued of decreasing numbers of students entering the physical sciences and engineering. Throughout these challenges, however, the strength of the Institute continued. The leadership, energy, and friendly support of Dennis Hall kept spirits up and the focus where it belonged, on academics and quality.

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