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Salus University Summer Study Starts Diverse Undergrads on Path to Success



Summer Enrichment Program participants (from left) Dominica Dzakah, Charlene Caldwell and Ijeoma Onyejiukwa.

Elkins Park, Pa. — The Pennsylvania College of Optometry (PCO) at Salus University recently welcomed a cohort of 14 PCO/Salus Doctor of Optometry applicants to its recently relaunched Summer Enrichment Program (SEP), renamed the Robert E. Horne SEP as a tribute to its founder, for high-achieving students of color.

This year, the program's recruitment efforts placed special emphasis on Black and African American students who are historically underrepresented in health science.

"I know it was just a fraction of what I'll experience in the fall, but I still greatly appreciated it," said **Charlene Caldwell '25OD**, a recent graduate of the University of Texas at San Antonio who earned her bachelor's degree in public health. "I'm the daughter of a retired military officer. I learned adaptability and resilience, but I still appreciate that this program really gets you adjusted to the rigor and the higher level of thought and the deeper level of critical analysis that you're going to need to become a doctor."

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, three of the five weeks students spent completing the program were held virtually followed by two weeks of in-person sessions at the University's Elkins Park campus. The enrichment program, which offers participants coursework with current PCO/Salus faculty, peer mentors, and seminars on a variety of topics covering study skills, test taking, financial literacy and wellness, prepares students for the rigors of an optometry education.

A closing ceremony with special guest and original founder of the SEP Robert E. Horne wrapped up the events in mid-July. Horne, former vice president and dean of Student Affairs who retired from Salus in 2012, originally established the program in 1977. Now renamed in Horne's honor following a \$300,000 donation from America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses to revive the program after a six-year hiatus, the original intent of SEP was to introduce disadvantaged students and underrepresented prospective students to the curriculum at PCO/Salus. Since reestablishment, the goals include improving the matriculation, attrition and graduation rates of Black and other underrepresented applicants of color while fostering a safety net of support and mentorship to meet the increasingly diverse nation's optometric needs.

This year's cohort was led by **Ruth Shoge, OD '06, Resident '07**, a previous SEP participant and former faculty member. Like Dr. Shoge, many times SEP is the reason aspiring optometry students choose PCO/Salus to pursue their doctorate degree.

Ijeoma Onyejiukwa '25OD participated in SEP this year after learning about the program from a PCO/Salus alumni. Onyejiukwa is also an incoming student who will start at PCO/Salus in the fall semester. As a non-traditional student, she felt confident choosing a school willing to invest in her from the start.

"I think it was really SEP that kind of helped me decide I want to go to PCO/Salus. If I'm going to be prepared in the summertime ahead of the actual fall semester, I want that kind of enrichment because I haven't been in school in so long, taking a ton of science classes," said Onyejiukwa. She earned her bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in pre-health from Hunter College of the City University of New York in 2015 before earning her master's degree from CUNY Graduate School of Public Health in 2019. "I felt like an institution that would provide that kind of resource for students, actually investing in students in this way, from that, I just ranked Salus really high," she said.

The enrichment program, along with staff members from the Office of Admissions at Salus, also helped PCO/Salus earn recognition among peers this year. For its ongoing commitment to accept and enroll Black and African American students, PCO/Salus has been named the 2021 School of the Year by the National Optometric Association (NOA). Attracting a diverse student population has been a primary goal of SEP since its inception.

Dominica Dzakah '25OD emigrated from Ghana to the U.S. when she was a sophomore in high school. Prior to participating in SEP this year, she received her bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in sociology from the University of Texas at Dallas. Her father's visual impairment called retinitis pigmentosa helped develop her interest in optometry. Dzakah will also start optometry school at PCO/Salus in the next few weeks.

"Going through this program has actually opened my eyes as to what to expect in the fall," she said. "This experience has been so, so helpful. The professors have been great, just dedicating their time to us and teaching us, taking time to help us understand what is going on. I feel a lot more prepared knowing what to do and what not to do."

Students like Dzakah not only get introduced to the coursework while participating in SEP, but they also get acclimated to life in a new city, making a few new friends along the way.

"It has been feeling really great, especially because of the other classmates we have met so far," she said. "They have been so nice, helping us, answering our questions, and making us comfortable already in a city that most of us are not familiar with. So, right now, I already consider it my home because I already feel welcome and loved here."

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, speech-language pathology and occupational therapy services. The University has more than 1,200 students, and more than 14,000 alumni worldwide. For more information, please visit www.salus.edu.