CLINICAL EDUCATION: A SPECIALIZED APPROACH

NECO’s diverse and robust clinical education component has long set the institution apart from other optometry schools. Only a few weeks into their professional education, NECO students begin to perform vision screenings in Boston-area preschools and elementary schools. Throughout the program, they spend increasingly more time in the clinic, and by their fourth-year clinical rotations are devoted to full-time delivery of vision care.

Students in Dr. Elise Harb’s Special Populations Experience Course (SPEC) have the added opportunity to provide specialty care alongside fourth-year students and residents at Boston health centers, hospitals, and New England Eye affiliates.
“Timing of clinical education is crucial,” says Harb, OD ’04, MS ’05. “It’s best when delivered concurrently with classroom work so that students can see firsthand the very conditions they are learning about and put into practice the techniques they’re studying in the classroom.” First offered in 2011, the SPEC elective was designed by Dr. Harb and her colleagues in NECO’s Specialty and Advanced Care Department to give third-year students earlier and broader clinical experience in the specialty areas of optometry: pediatrics, advanced contact lenses, low vision, individuals with disabilities, and vision therapy.

“Part of our job as an optometric institution is to make sure we expose our students to the patient populations that will help them decide if they want to focus on a specialty or apply to an optometric residency,” says Dr. Harb. It’s rare that optometry students have the opportunity to work in specialties until the final year of their program – sometimes too late to apply to an appropriate residency program. But Dr. Harb’s third-year students have an advantage. “SPEC allows students to practice their skills early on and begin to follow their passion along a career path,” she says.

The SPEC course introduces students to the diverse populations they’ll serve in their final-year clinical rotations and provides a foundation for the delivery of comprehensive care in their future practice. “Students gain experience in all the specialty areas of optometry,” says Dr. Harb. “If a child with Down syndrome or a 90-year-old comes to a NECO graduate’s optometry practice, he or she will have had experience working with that population.”

To be considered for the elective, students complete an application identifying the specialty they’re most interested in and outlining their goals in working with that population. Once accepted, students are paired with a clinical mentor in their specialty area – a NECO faculty member based in one of New England Eye’s clinical settings. Once a week, student and mentor meet to discuss challenges and goals, classroom assignments, and cases they observe in the clinic.
“THE SPEC ELECTIVE HELPED SOLIDIFY THE DIRECTION I WANT TO TAKE MY OPTOMETRIC CAREER.”

–N.O., NECO student in pediatrics specialty at Codman Square Health Center

IN THE CLINIC
Students spend an average of eight hours each week in their mentor’s clinic, learning firsthand about eye care delivery, applying coursework, developing clinical decision-making skills, and becoming adept at articulating case findings.

“We’ve carved out space for each student in our clinics so they can see patients independently,” says Dr. Harb. Working alongside their mentors, students are responsible for the delivery of all aspects of comprehensive eye care, including pediatric eye exams, contact lens fittings, and determining the device needs of low-vision patients. Students provide personalized care, working closely with patients during every phase of treatment from conducting the initial exam to making sure they’re comfortable with new low-vision devices to instructing them in prescribed vision therapy exercises.

“SPEC students work side by side with residents and fourth-year NECO and the Special Populations Rotation students and participate in weekly grand rounds with them,” says Dr. Harb. Sharing the clinic with more experienced students sets the stage for building peer-to-peer mentorships and a professional network. “A family relationship develops, in which they’re able to help each other and discuss their career paths.”

IN THE CLASSROOM
In conjunction with their time in the clinic, SPEC students attend classes that foster critical thinking and independent learning. “Doctors must be able to recognize when they need more information about a case or a condition – and where to turn to learn more,” says Dr. Harb.

The course emphasizes the importance of clinical research, basic scientific principles, and the interpretation of scientific studies. Students hone their skills by participating in and leading journal clubs throughout the term, and present a clinical case in a grand-rounds format to their peers, residents, and faculty. The presentation improves students’ ability to analyze and articulate a case and requires the integration of relevant clinical research. As a final requirement, they complete a paper focused on a self-chosen topic in their specialty area, in which they incorporate a clinical research literature review.

THE ROAD AHEAD
More than a chance to explore their interests, SPEC is an opportunity for students to gain an advanced knowledge base in a specialty area. “SPEC students are better prepared for the specialty clinics they’ll attend in their fourth-year rotations and are introduced to populations they’ll encounter throughout their optometric career,” says Dr. Harb.

Whether their plans include private practice, research, or academia, NECO’s SPEC students emerge as well-prepared clinicians equipped with a strong practical foundation in the delivery of comprehensive specialty care.
SPECIAL POPULATIONS
CLINIC SITES

- New England Eye clinics including the New England Eye mobile clinic
- Pediatrics
  - Boston Medical Center,
  - neighborhood health centers,
  - school-based clinics
- Contact lens
  - New England Eye Commonwealth,
  - area hospitals
- Individuals with Disabilities
  - Perkins School for the Blind,
  - Cotting School
- Low vision
  - Boston University Eye Associates,
  - area hospitals
- Vision therapy
  - Private practices