New England College of Optometry is committed to providing exemplary education to future optometrists and has created a culture that encourages students to embrace opportunities beyond the Beacon Street campus. For Florence Lee, OD ’16, this meant applying for and being selected as an Albert Schweitzer Fellow for the 2013-2014 academic year.

Albert Schweitzer, physician and humanitarian, noted, “The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.” Dr. Schweitzer lived this philosophy by dedicating his career to underserved populations and seeking ways to improve their lives. The Albert Schweitzer Fellowship was created to honor Schweitzer’s legacy and his work. The Schweitzer Fellows represent academic disciplines such as optometry, medicine, occupational therapy, public health, and social work. It awards graduate student leaders a stipend around $1,500 to address a social factor affecting health care in their area of expertise or interest.
Florence first heard about the Fellowship during her first week at NECO. “What drove me to apply was my favorite class, Vision Health Care, taught by Dr. Gary Chu. This class, along with my early clinical experience of conducting vision screenings, set the stage for my fellowship project.” As Lee began to explore the idea, Dr. Chu offered to be her mentor.

During her first year at NECO, Lee and classmates had conducted vision screenings in Roxbury’s Higginson-Lewis School. “I quickly realized that following a failed screening, few of the children referred for a comprehensive eye exam actually received one. Many of the families did not realize that the screening was not a replacement for a comprehensive eye exam. For my fellowship, I wanted to find a way to ensure that people got the vision care they needed.”

Lee was one of fifteen area graduate students to receive the 2013-2014 Albert Schweitzer Fellowship. In her work at Higginson-Lewis, Lee partnered with Lena Galloway-Reddick, Director of Community and Partnership, who already had a five-year grant from the Department of Education to set up special programs for students. Lee's project fit in perfectly with this model of community outreach. “I learned so much being at this school. Many of the kids didn’t have basic things that most people would deem as necessary.” The two attended vision screenings with first-year NECO students and focused on identifying those who needed follow-up care. Ms. Lee then worked with Dr. Chu to schedule visits from New England Eye’s On-Sight mobile eye clinic to provide comprehensive eye exams and eyeglasses. Ms. Lee also worked with the school nurse to provide follow-up care after the fellowship ended, building in a level of sustainability.

“We tracked screenings, eye exams, and glasses dispensed and then conducted follow-up interviews to see if the students were still wearing their glasses weeks and months later.” In these conversations, Ms. Lee began to understand that providing education on the correlation between healthy vision and academic achievement was necessary. “I learned about the barriers we face for delivering comprehensive eye care to underserved populations. For instance, how do you demonstrate a need for glasses if a child’s parents don’t read or speak English?”

During her fellowship, Ms. Lee met like-minded people from different backgrounds who shared their ideas and learned from each other. The experience has taught her about the challenges of community health and the limitations of her work. Despite the challenges, she felt supported by the College during her fellowship. “Dr. Scott provided three scholarships for students to attend the Schweitzer Leadership Conference in Boston.” According to the conference website, “The Schweitzer Leadership Conference is an opportunity for established and emerging professionals interested in creating healthier communities to learn from leaders who are shaping the way we think about, talk about, and act on health equity, health care, social change, and public policy.”

Ms. Lee has appreciated the numerous opportunities she has found at the College. At NECO, students are inspired and motivated to make an impact beyond the College itself and into various communities. “For instance, I was a competitive fencer for many years. When I heard that there were some blind fencers in the area, I talked to Dr. Richard Jamara who connected me with them and the experience was incredible. I also had the opportunity to travel to Aalen Germany through a NECO program. I had the chance to meet Peter Baumbach, former director of R&D at Rodenstock, who helped create and patent certain modern progressive lens designs. We also visited the Zeiss and the Rodenstock factories. I even stayed with a family in Germany where both the husband and wife were opticians! This allowed me to learn more about the role of optometry and opticians in Germany and connect to a new culture.” Ms. Lee believes that “NECO opens up many doors, but it is up to students to take the first steps. Your experience at NECO really is what you choose to make it.”