

# A Century of University Education in Optometry in Canada: The Contributors of l'Université de Montréal – Part 3: 2001 to 2025

Dear Editor,

In Canada, the optometric profession has now benefited from 100 years of university education, since l'Université de Montréal welcomed l'École d'optométrie as an affiliated entity in 1925. Two previous articles of the *Canadian Journal of Optometry* (CJO) presented the first parts of this school's history, from its inception in 1910 to 2001.<sup>1,2</sup> We conclude this historical overview in this issue by analyzing the growth of l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal since 2001.

## A Committed and Engaged Leadership

In the first quarter of the 21st century, l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal (ÉOUM) was led by six professors committed to its development.

In 2000, Pierre Simonet received a second term of office as director, which he held until September 2003 before being called to other positions at the university. The school then developed a mission statement and defined its four areas of research.

Jacques Gresset, who was already the school's assistant director, was appointed in turn, first to a six-month acting position and then to the full director. As a continuation, he served two full terms and oversaw the school's grand centennial celebration in 2010.

In 2011, Christian Casanova became the new director. He was the first director who was not an optometrist, but he led l'ÉOUM as if he was. He also served two terms, the second of which was a five-year term, equivalent to a dean's term, in accordance with the new practice at the university.

Appointed director in 2020, Langis Michaud had the difficult task of leading l'ÉOUM through the pandemic and succeeded brilliantly. Due to personal reasons, he ended his term prematurely in October 2022.

Julie-Andrée Marinier, who previously served as the school's secretary, became director.

Then, Jean-François Bouchard took the torch in 2024, at the time Assistant Director of Research, Graduate Studies, and Academic Affairs.

The school's development was based on several elements under the guidance of all these people.

## A Faculty-Like Administrative Operation

L'Université de Montréal gave l'École d'optométrie the budgetary prerogatives of a faculty by affiliating it with the executive committee upon its integration in 1969. Therefore, the school submitted its financial forecasts directly to the university's Budget Committee, where the school's director defends the forecasts, as do the deans. In addition, the university's budget and financial statements presented the school as a faculty. Furthermore, since the integration, the appointment to the director position was carried out under the procedure applicable to deans. Finally, the school's director fully participated in regular meetings between the university's management and deans.

By accepting the creation of the school's secretary and administrative director in 1996, the university implicitly admitted that the administrative

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**Figure 1.** The six directors of l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal since the beginning of the 21st century, including (from left to right) professors Jacques Gresset, Langis Michaud, Julie-Andrée Marinier, Christian Casanova, Jean-François Bouchard and Pierre Simonet



These professors gathered in this photo as part of a philanthropic recognition event organized by the school that took place at the end of 2024.

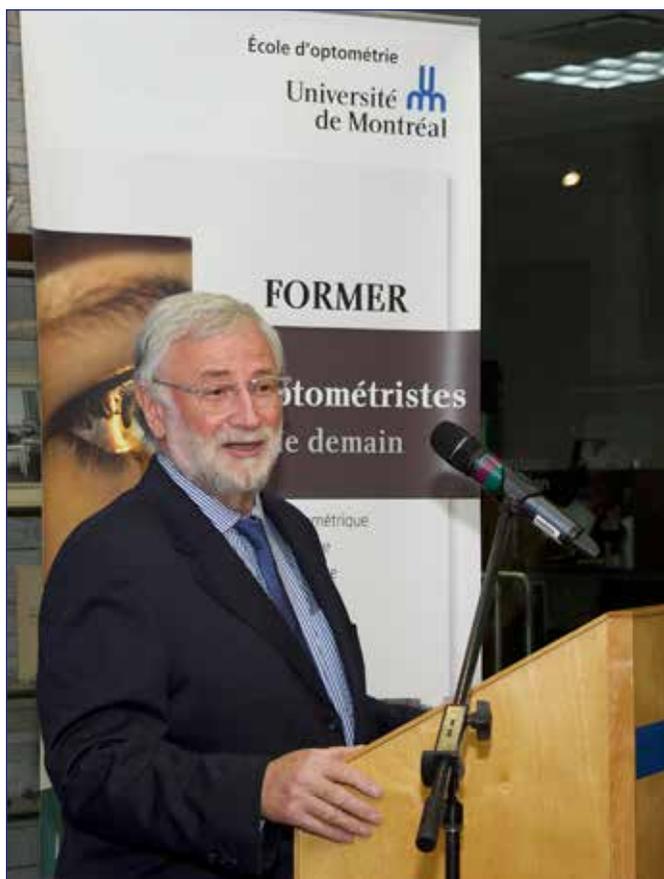
functioning of the school was indeed as a faculty. At the director's request, this recognition became explicit and formalized in 2004 with the addition of the position of secretary of the school to Regulation 10.39 concerning faculty officers, whose appointment is made by the University Council. Finally, the executive team was structured like a faculty as early as 2005: one assistant director was responsible for undergraduate levels, and another for graduate studies and research, in addition to the positions of director of clinics and administrative director.

The integration conditions did not specify the school's representation in the University Assembly. Thus, the school's management has long been confined to an observer role without voting rights, while being relegated to the back benches of the University Assembly. To be able to vote and sit with the deans, l'ÉOUM's directors from 1998 to 2008 were appointed by the school's council as representatives of the administrative unit, under the composition rule of the University Assembly. Eventually,

the university's faculty union opposed it. However, the school succeeded in convincing the university and the University Assembly to change the composition rule, so the school's director could sit as a full-fledged member, on par with all the deans, in addition to their professorial representatives. Ultimately, the school earned faculty-like representation in the University Assembly.

During the last institutional transformation leading to the 2018 adoption of a new charter of l'Université de Montréal, the Faculty of Theology — which has existed since the institution's inception — became l'Institut d'études religieuses within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, while the Department of Kinesiology — affiliated with the Executive Committee of the university — integrated the Faculty of Medicine. L'École d'optométrie advocated for its independence and managed to maintain its affiliation with the Executive Committee. Now unique to l'ÉOUM, this status is not a disservice to the school, has never hindered its development, and has never prevented it from functioning as a faculty.

**Figure 2.** Professor Jacques Gresset, OD, PhD, speaking at the “Optométristes de demain” event at l’École d’optométrie de l’Université de Montréal



Under the direction of Professor Jacques Gresset, the school obtained faculty-like representation from the University Assembly, as well as formal recognition of the position of secretary of l’École d’optométrie, was granted the accreditation renewal of its seven-year doctorate in optometry program, and celebrated its 100th anniversary by designating 100 builders within the profession. This graduate of the class of 1978 was appointed professor emeritus in 2017.

## Expanding and Optimizing Spaces

By integrating its new premises in 1991, l’École d’optométrie had tripled its clinical spaces. However, since the new pavilion had no classrooms, students and professors had to travel to other pavilions for theory courses. In 2001, the school succeeded in convincing the university to establish a classroom

on the ground floor of the pavilion, close to its Clinique universitaire de la vision. Then, in 2004, it obtained a second room on the ground floor, converted into an amphitheatre, and the relocation of l’Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille’s point of service to the entrance of the pavilion. The relocation allowed it to recover the vacated rooms for various professionals. Simultaneously, the clinic expanded into vacant spaces left by the university’s recruitment office. In 2008–2009, IRIS, the Visual Group, funded the complete renovation of the clinic’s waiting room, its reception desk, and all optical department premises.

When it moved into the pavilion, the school occupied just less than two thirds of the ground floor. It now had all the available space, nearly 2,600 m<sup>2</sup>. It retained all the space on the second floor (nearly 3,000 m<sup>2</sup>), and, in 2009, obtained a 163 m<sup>2</sup> room on the third floor, where it relocated many of its professionals’ offices.

Moreover, about 500 m<sup>2</sup> of l’ÉOUM’s 2015 expansion to the sixth floor enabled it to house teaching and research laboratories, faculty offices, and the school’s council, previously located on the second floor. These new research spaces on the second and sixth floors, including their equipment, were funded in large part by a \$3.7 million grant from le Ministère du Développement économique, de l’Innovation et de l’Exportation.

In 2018, after raising \$1.6 million through a philanthropic campaign, the school undertook a major renovation of its clinic by renovating all clinical examination and discussion rooms. This enabled an increase in the number of rooms and welcomed the offices of professors involved in the clinic. The clinic also expanded by relocating one of the classrooms to an amphitheatre at the pavilion’s entrance. Improved clinical spaces increased the number of patients per year, from about 18,000 before work to more than 25,000 after the pandemic. In addition, revenues increased to more than \$3.5 million.

Since it arrived at the pavilion located at 3744 Jean-Brillant Street, the school has expanded by more than 1,500 m<sup>2</sup>. However, space requirements remain essential for both student life and research.

**Figure 3.** The new clinical exam and discussion rooms built after the success of the major 2018 philanthropic campaign



## The Leveraging Effect of Program Creation

The year 2004 marked the graduation of the first class of the 11-session doctor of optometry (OD) program. The creation of the program allowed l'ÉOUM to add eight regular faculty positions, resulting in a

full-time equivalent faculty complement of 24.5 in 2003–2004 at the school.

In 2018, the school began redesigning its OD program to provide training that responded to changing professional issues regarding attitudes, skills, and knowledge. The update of teaching content and the integration of varied pedagogical methods (for example, role-playing, simulation, and interaction with actor patients) were completed in 2023. The projected increase in student cohorts over the next few years should be accompanied by an increase in faculty to meet the student–professor ratio. This ratio remains balanced, despite the increase in graduate student enrolment, where more than 184 master's degrees have been awarded since 2001.

The school developed a pool of graduates with expertise to become lecturers and clinical staff by offering the Clinical Sciences option in its master's program and creating a residency program in optometry leading to a graduate certificate in 2003. In 2019, the community optometry option was added to the graduate residency certificate, and the school established a mobile clinic to serve community organizations.

In addition to the creation of the advanced graduate diploma (AGD) in Visual Impairment Intervention in

**Figure 4.** A new, larger amphitheatre was added to the school's space when one of its classrooms was relocated to the pavilion entrance



**Figure 5.** In May 2025, Tanya Packer and Dan Zbacnik from Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada. (front right) presented the Distinguished Community Partner Award to the faculty team of the master's Visual Impairment Intervention option



This team brought together professors Judith Renaud, OD, PhD, Natalina Martiniello, PhD (front left), Joe Nemargut, PhD, Walter Wittich, PhD (back) and Julie-Andrée Marinier, OD, MSc, who is not in the photo.

2000 and the Visual Impairment Intervention option in the Master in Vision Sciences (MSc) in 2002, the school offered two concentrations within the AGD in 2004–2005: one in orientation and mobility, and the other in rehabilitation of visual impairment. In 2012, two microprograms were added to the AGD: one in low vision and the other in computer programs adapted to visual impairment. In 2016, the AGD was abandoned in favour of integration into the Vision Impairment Intervention option, which had three concentrations: orientation and mobility, low vision, and visual rehabilitation. A microprogram was proposed in each concentration for graduates wanting to train in more than one specialty. Some concentrations were already recognized by a licensing body. These programs are unique to Canada as they are offered in both English and French. With the hiring of three research professors, they helped train about 120 professionals offering visual impairment services with optometrists.

Although the school's professors have helped train PhD students in psychology, pharmacy, neurology, biology, and biomedical programs since 1995, the creation of a doctorate in vision sciences (PhD) in 2011 allowed the school to align with the best optometric institutions in North America. Established in collaboration with the Faculty of Medicine's Department of Ophthalmology and presented jointly to be offered in each unit, the PhD in vision sciences program embodied the collaboration that now prevails at l'Université de Montréal between optometry and ophthalmology. Since its inception, the school has awarded 19 doctorates in vision sciences.

## Partnerships For Education and Research

By establishing a partnership with l'Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille in 1997 and welcoming its point of service in Montréal to the school's premises in 1998, the school provided its students with first-rate clinical exposure to visual impairment rehabilitation.

**Figure 6.** One of the research presentations given at la Journée scientifique de l'École d'optométrie



Held annually for two decades now, this event allows post-doctoral fellows, doctoral students in vision sciences or master's, and those at the Doctor of Optometry to present their research.

This partnership helped create one of the options for its master's program, which positions l'Université de Montréal as the only university in Canada providing professional training in visual impairment rehabilitation.

Like the University of Alabama, l'Université de Montréal is one of the few institutions in North America with a school of optometry and a Department of Ophthalmology on the same campus. The synergy between the two units took a long time to develop, but the partnership proved promising once achieved. For example, in 2001, a joint application for funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation was successful and allowed the school to invest more than \$2.6 million in research.

In 2010, residency in private ophthalmology clinics was initiated by professor Nadia-Marie Quesnel. Then, the joint PhD project and the desires of Rector Guy Breton led the ophthalmology departments of university hospitals to receive optometric student interns. Starting in 2014, the school welcomed medical students to la Clinique universitaire de la vision. These aspiring physicians rotated through the clinical modules to become familiar with eye care and

optometric procedures. In addition, an ophthalmologist was involved with the clinic and managed patients with cataracts.

After establishing Canada's first university-based eye image reading centre in 2013, the school signed a service agreement with the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission in May 2014 to serve more than 20 First Nations communities. As diabetes is a public health issue in First Nations communities, the school was proud to contribute to the eye health of Indigenous people through this first implementation in teleoptometry.

The school's partnership with the Faculty of Dentistry and the Faculty of Educational Sciences enabled the creation of L'extension centre in the Montréal neighbourhood of Parc-Extension in 2015–2016, which provided students and their families with pedagogical and health support. A multidisciplinary team of professionals and students from special education, optometry, and dentistry ensures comprehensive follow-up and intervention with children with difficulties from disadvantaged backgrounds. This centre houses one of the school's outpatient clinics. More

**Figure 7.** Professor Christian Casanova, PhD, at the 100th anniversary of la Clinique universitaire de la vision



Under the direction of Professor Christian Casanova, the school established a joint doctoral program in vision sciences with the Department of Ophthalmology, introduced student internships in the ophthalmology departments of university hospitals, was granted the accreditation renewal of its Doctor of Optometry (OD) program, and renovated its clinical spaces after its centennial anniversary. Professor Casanova received the title of professor emeritus in 2023.

recently, another cross-funding partnership with the School of Public Health and its International Health Unit (USI) has given rise to the International Visual Health Unit. Its mission is to improve vision health and reduce avoidable visual impairment in developing countries. In 2022, the school, USI, and the Department of Ophthalmology supported the School of Optometry of the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of l'Université d'État d'Haïti through an internship program.

The collaboration started with the Essilor Group for the (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada) NSERC-Industry Research Chair contributed in 2004 to transforming it into the NSERC-Essilor Industrial Chair, endowed with up to \$1.3 million and awarded to professor Jocelyn Faubert. The chair was renewed from 2014 to 2019, when Essilor and the Italian group Luxottica merged.

**Figure 8.** Students from the School of Optometry, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of l'Université d'État d'Haïti were welcomed as interns at l'École d'optométrie



The Colonel Harland Sanders Chair in Visual Sciences was created in 2006 at the school with \$1 million in funding from the Harland Sanders Foundation. Awarded to Professor Maurice Ptito, this chair studies sensory substitution and inter-modal plasticity in people who are blind or severely visually impaired.

In 2013–2014, the school benefited when the prestigious Canada Research Chair in Vision and Action was awarded to professor Aarlenne Khan, a specialist in ocular motor skills.

These three chairs held by l'ÉOUM's professors attest to the school's level of research involvement.

## **A Symbiosis with the Profession**

Upon the five-year implementation of the doctor of optometry (OD) program, the school agreed with l'Ordre des optométristes du Québec and l'Association des optométristes du Québec to approach the National Assembly of Quebec to allow optometrists to use drugs for therapeutic purposes. Thus, in the spring of 1999, the school submitted graduate training for optometrists in practice to the Academic

**Figure 9.** Professors Jocelyn Faubert, PhD, Maurice Ptito, PhD, DHC (Denmark) and Aarlenne Khan, PhD, major research chairs



**Figure 10.** On October 19, 2003, Professor Langis Michaud, OD, MSc, received his certificate of study from the Director of the school, Professor Jacques Gresset, OD, PhD and his new licence to practice from the President of l'Ordre des optométristes du Québec, Dr. Lise-Anne Chassée, Optometrist, while the regulation on the use of therapeutic drugs just came into effect



Affairs Committee with three courses totalling seven credits. These courses began in May 1999, as l'Ordre and l'Association began to lobby for a legislative amendment. The results were quick, as the National Assembly unanimously passed Bill 87 on June 14, 2000, to amend the *Optometry Act* to

allow optometrists to use therapeutic drugs and provide eye care. The provisions resulting from the legislative change did not take effect until fall 2003. All 890 optometrists who completed the training provided by the school received their proof of study and new licences on October 19th at l'Université de Montréal. Once again, the school's leadership in continuing education met the aspirations of the profession.

Since this legislative change, the continuing education activities of le Centre de perfectionnement et de référence en optométrie facilitated by professors and clinicians from the school, have regularly attracted almost 1,500 participants annually. In 2017, the approval by l'Ordre des optométristes du Québec and le Collège des médecins du Québec of a joint practice guide, confirming clear relations between the two professions, involved a mandatory 30 hours of continuing education on co-management of eye conditions that combines classroom, online, and hands-on instruction on the school's premises. Once again, the profession could count on l'ÉOUM to support its progress.

The symbiosis with the profession and a strong bond between the school and its graduates created a strong sense of belonging to the alma mater, so philanthropic support in optometry remains one of the most significant at l'Université de Montréal. This support from both professionals and the optometric industry reflects the success and dynamism of l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal.

**Figure 11.** An amphitheatre where many optometrists are seen participating in one of the activities offered by le Centre de perfectionnement et de référence en optométrie as part of the mandatory training



**Figure 12.** In March 2025, the Director of the school, Professor Jean-François Bouchard, BPharm, PhD, and Émilie L. Cayer, Executive Director of Philanthropy at the university, thanking Opto-Réseau's Board Chair, Dr. Alain Côté, Optometrist, and Ms. Christine Breton, President and CEO, for the financial support of this optometric group



## Conclusion

For 100 years now, Canada has offered university education in optometry through l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal, which has continued to increase in the 21st century. Like its counterpart at the University of Waterloo, l'ÉOUM is now among the best optometric institutions on the continent.

However, to remain a leader, the school and university will have to meet the many challenges emerging from progress in knowledge and technology. They will also need to meet the challenges involved in maintaining quality infrastructure and a balance between professors involved in research (with OD and PhD) and professors who are highly involved in clinics and teaching (OD and MSc). Given the logical consequence of l'ÉOUM's development over the past three decades, the university will eventually have to consider giving it official faculty status, without necessarily changing its name, similar to what happened with the School of Public Health.

In the meantime, the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education has just renewed the accreditation of the doctor of optometry degree offered in Montréal, which is normally scheduled for May 2033. L'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal can

be proud to have made a significant contribution over the past century to the development of optometry in Quebec, Canada, and throughout La Francophonie.

Pierre Simonet, OD, PhD,  
Professor Emeritus

Jacques Gresset, OD, PhD,  
Professor Emeritus

Jean-François Bouchard, B Pharm, PhD,  
Director and Full Professor

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