



PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE

# Clear Eyes on Campus: A Plan for Improving Access to Eye Care for College Students

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** During the summer of 2024, Tanya Pai Dhungat was appointed as the Youngstown State University (YSU) Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow. This position was designed to allow a student to work with leadership at a local nonprofit organization to gain experience. Pai Dhungat organized the Clear Eyes on Campus event to expand vision resources for college students.

**Program Development:** The partnership of the 2 entities made the event successful by selecting an appropriate date, establishing an on-campus location, marketing and advertising the event, and coordinating the personnel required to provide complete eye exams. A mobile vision van was reserved, an optometrist was hired, and ophthalmic technicians were recruited. Exams included visual acuity testing; pupil, visual field, and extraocular muscle assessment; binocular vision assessment; intraocular pressure testing; refraction; and ocular health assessment. Following the completed exam, students received a new pair of eyeglasses for free. During the exams, students with more complex ocular health problems requiring specialty testing were assisted with coordination of follow-up care.

**Program Results:** On September 17, 2024, the Clear Eyes on Campus event was able to provide 49 students with a free eye exam and 35 students with a free pair of eyeglasses. Six students required follow-up specialty care with a community eye doctor. The cost of the Clear Eyes on Campus event was estimated to be approximately \$8700.

**Program Evaluation:** Through the partnership with Sight for All United, The YSU Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow initiated the Clear Eyes on Campus event because she believed eye health and vision are critical for academic success. Pai Dhungat did this by reducing barriers to eye care such as cost, insurance, and transportation. This event made advancements in addressing the vision care needs of college students and could be used as a model for campuses across the country to improve access to medical care.

**Public Health Implication:** There is a lack of data surrounding college students and access to eye care. An event was established to bring a vision van to campus providing eye exams at no cost proving that reducing barriers to eye care is critical for college students' eye health and academic success.

**Keywords:** Optometry; Ophthalmology; University; Vision; Public health

## INTRODUCTION

Youngstown State University (YSU), founded in 1908, is a public university located in Youngstown, Ohio. Youngstown State University is known for its affordable tuition and unique approach to education. With

a small campus atmosphere, the university aims to create a strong community engrained in academic success and passion for others. Community engagement is a cornerstone for its values in contributing back to the surrounding region's opulence and growth. In March of 2024,



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YSU's Office of Community Engagement and the Sokolov Honors College kicked off the "Road to Carnegie" community engagement exhibit. This exhibit serves as a physical reminder of all the collaborative work being done on campus and in the community as YSU applies for the Carnegie Foundation Elective Classification for Community Engagement in 2026.<sup>1</sup>

Youngstown State University is home to 10 580 students from diverse backgrounds including lower-income, domestic, and international students. Affordable tuition is a major factor in why many students choose to attend YSU. Most lower-income students who attend YSU receive financial assistance in the form of Pell Grants and federal student aid. Pell Grants do not require repayment and are granted to students who demonstrate significant financial need, defined as 275% of the poverty threshold for the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>2</sup> As of fall 2020, 36% of YSU students were eligible to receive a Pell Grant from the federal government.<sup>3</sup> This means around 36% of YSU students come from lower-income households and require financial assistance to make college affordable and possible.<sup>3</sup> Federal student aid is financial assistance requiring repayment and comes in the form of loans. As of fall 2020, 98% of YSU's first-year, full-time students received financial aid.<sup>3</sup> Youngstown State University also has a large international population. In the fall of 2024, the international student program had a total of 1352 students enrolled at YSU from Nepal to the Netherlands, making up approximately one-tenth of the student population.<sup>4</sup> Youngstown State University takes pride in diversity on campus, but academic success and community engagement unites the students during their time on campus.

Academic success is achieved on YSU's campus through a variety of resources. Youngstown State University creates an environment where students are comfortable learning and growing. Students are supported in the classroom with peer support and easy access to faculty. Outside the classroom, students receive further encouragement from on-campus organizations, community resources, and health and wellness support. While YSU prioritizes academic success through healthy students, there is a gap in vision care resources on campus. Studies show that vision plays a major role in academic success.<sup>5</sup> This data directly impacted vision screenings and the development of in-school eye exams for primary and secondary school students to remove this barrier to success. The impact of vision on academic success, while not well studied, does not end after high school. Reliable and accessible vision care is necessary for all students to achieve academic success.

Several barriers impact a college student's access to health care, specifically vision care. One of the largest barriers for students is the cost of an eye exam and eyeglasses. International students and students relying on Pell Grants and federal student aid are especially impacted.<sup>6</sup> The average cost of an eye exam in Northeast Ohio is \$194 without vision insurance coverage, and \$242 is the average cost of eyeglasses.<sup>7</sup> For decades, tropes of college students include the "broke college student who doesn't take care of their health." Sadly, this is the case for many newly independent students who are facing the responsibility of

managing their health in addition to the overwhelming responsibility of the cost of a college education.

The second largest barrier to access to vision care surrounds insurance coverage.<sup>8</sup> Many college students remain on a parent's or guardian's insurance plans but are underinsured in regard to vision services. Typical medical insurance plans do not include vision benefits unless the policyholder elects to upgrade the plan for an additional monthly fee. In many cases, though, students are attending college uninsured. This particularly stands true for international students who do not have health insurance in the United States and rely on rare visits to their home country to complete medical care. Youngstown State University, like many other large universities, requires international students to purchase the YSU health insurance plan. The YSU health insurance plan includes full coverage of services at the student health center and partial coverage of hospital visits with a small copay.<sup>9</sup> This plan does not include vision services, leaving many students without access to affordable vision services or optical correction.

Transportation to specialty medical services, such as vision care, is another major barrier to students who live on-campus at major universities.<sup>8</sup> While YSU is known to be a commuter campus where a vast number of students have their own personal vehicle, there are still many students who do not have this luxury. Many international students live on-campus without access to personal transportation or a US driver's license. The closest eye doctor's office to the YSU campus is approximately a 25-minute walk. Although not extremely far, this walk includes industrial areas and passes over a major interstate which can contribute to the deterrence students face when lacking personal transportation.

Sight for All United is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in Youngstown, Ohio. The mission of Sight for All United is to help every person reach his/her visual potential while lifting barriers for access to care.<sup>10</sup> Sight for All United was founded in 2016 and has worked toward that mission through 3 programs. The "I See Again" program provides financial assistance for sight saving eyeglasses, eye exams, and eye surgeries. In addition, the "School Vision Van" program eliminates the gap in access to care following an in-school vision screening by bringing the eye doctor to the school on a mobile vision van where children receive a complete eye exam and eyeglasses at no cost. The "School Referral" program establishes a doctor-patient relationship for students who were seen on the mobile vision van and were identified with a more serious eye health complication that needed to be monitored and managed by a community eye doctor for continued care and treatment.

During the summer of 2024, an undergraduate junior was appointed as a Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow to work with Sight for All United. The mission of the Zoldan-Yampolsky Family Executive Fellows Program in the YSU Williamson College of Business Administration's Center for Nonprofit Leadership is to allow a student to work with senior leadership at nonprofit organizations to gain practical work experience and increase capacity at local and regional nonprofit organizations.<sup>11</sup> The Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow's mission during their time was to demonstrate the



need and bridge the gap in vision services for these college students. This was done by creating an on-campus event that expands vision resources for college students by reducing the barriers students face when accessing vision care. Experience from all 3 of Sight for All United's well-established programs was utilized to create The Clear Eyes on Campus event. This campus event brought a mobile vision van to YSU's campus and provided complete eye exams at no cost to the students.

## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Clear Eyes on Campus event was inspired by a partnership between the Youngstown State University Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellowship Program in the YSU Williamson College of Business Administration's Center for Nonprofit Leadership and the nonprofit organization Sight for All United. The partnership of the entities made the event successful by selecting an appropriate date, establishing an on-campus location, marketing and advertising the event, and coordinating the personnel required to provide complete eye exams.

Selecting a date for the event proved to be an important aspect of the planning process. The day of the week and time of year determined the availability of the students. For example, selecting a date during midterm week would lead to a smaller student turnout. Another factor considered was the lead time needed to dispense eyeglasses. Eyeglasses provided by Sight for All United required a 1-month turnaround time, which limited the dates available toward the end of the semester. The location of the event also played a key role in how successful the event was. The on-campus location needed to be in a centralized high-traffic location which allowed students to have easy access between classes. The location selected also required adequate space with access to a remote electrical connection for the mobile vision van. After the key details were established, efforts were shifted toward marketing and advertising. Marketing was targeted toward student groups that assist international and lower-income students. Additionally, the YSU financial aid office, the office of the Dean of Students, the office of international students, the student food pantry, and other campus-based offices and service providers were notified of the event to pass the details along to the students in need. Students interested in receiving a free eye exam signed up on a private internet forum and selected an appointment time.

Day of planning required coordination of both Sight for All United staff as well as the Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow with YSU support staff. Sight for All United has prior experience providing mobile eye exams and was prepared with the required equipment and personnel. The mobile vision van was reserved, an optometrist was hired, and ophthalmic technicians were recruited. The Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow recruited student volunteers and trained them the morning of the event to aid as needed. These volunteers were required to complete the Sight for All United online volunteer training modules prior which included mission, discretion, and confidentiality training. The complete eye exam provided on the YSU campus included the full battery of testing recommended by national optometric organizations. This included visual acuity testing; pupil, visual field, and extraocular muscle assessment; binocular vision assessment; intraocular pressure testing; refraction; slit lamp exam; and

posterior segment assessment. Following the completed exam, students in need of refractive error correction selected a frame for a new pair of eyeglasses. These eyeglasses were promptly ordered through a Youngstown local optical lab, Classic Optical. Within 2 weeks of ordering, the eyeglasses were received at the Sight for All United office where the prescription was verified and prepared for dispensing. The following week, a dispensing event took place on campus where students were able to pick up their eyeglasses. This equated to a 1-month turnaround time for the no cost eyeglasses for the YSU students.

The Clear Eyes on Campus mobile eye exams were comprehensive exams evaluating refractive error and ocular health. During the exams, several students were discovered to have more complex ocular health problems that would require an in-depth exam and specialty testing. Sight for All United was able to assist these students through its previously developed referral program, designed to connect patients with community eye doctors. Should the patient be uninsured or underinsured and qualify for financial assistance, Sight for All United assumes financial responsibility. This effort continues to remove the barrier of cost and insurance coverage for those in need of medical care.

## PROGRAM RESULTS

Through the partnership between the Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow and the nonprofit organization Sight for All United, the Clear Eyes on Campus event was an incredible success. The event took place on Tuesday, September 17, 2024. The event began at 10:00 AM and concluded at 3:00 PM. It required 1 hour of setup prior to the event and 1 hour of teardown following the event. The location of the Clear Eyes on Campus event was outside of the Kilcawley Center, YSU's student center. The Kilcawley Center is in the middle of campus and near many of the on-campus and off-campus housing options for students.

The Clear Eyes on Campus event was able to provide 49 students with free eye exams. Thirty-five students received a free pair of eyeglasses. Six of the students examined were found to have a more in-depth medical problem that required follow-up evaluation and testing at a local eye doctor's office. The diagnosis for these students included ocular hypertension, uveitis, dry eye, intermittent exotropia, constant esotropia, and glaucoma suspicion. Four of these students responded to the outreach provided on behalf of Sight for All United and were seen by community eye doctors at no cost to the student.

The event required 1 optometrist and 4 trained ophthalmic technicians to see the large number of patients in the limited time frame. Three Sight for All United representatives were also assisting with the event in registration and checkout. Five students, recruited from the on-campus organization, Students for Sight, volunteered at the event, assisting with patient flow and outreach.

The cost of the Clear Eyes on Campus event was estimated to be approximately \$8700. Each exam was estimated to cost \$175 on average. The cost of each exam includes the doctor's time, technician's time, staff time, marketing resources, eyeglasses, and follow-up care. Sight for All United, the 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, assumed the financial



responsibility of this event as a part of its continued mission to serve the eye care needs of the community.

### PROGRAM EVALUATION

Through the partnership with Sight for All United, the Youngstown State University Zoldan-Yampolsky Fellow was able to establish a successful event in Clear Eyes on Campus because adequate eye health and vision is critical for academic success, completing goals, and obtaining a successful career.

The Clear Eyes on Campus event provided 49 eye exams and 35 pairs of eyeglasses to college students free of charge. Many of these individuals face barriers such as cost, insurance coverage, and transportation that impede their access to vision care. This event demonstrated the importance of accessible vision care on college campuses and began to build a model that other campuses can utilize to improve access to medical care.

Looking ahead, there are many areas for improvement that could increase the efficiency of the Clear Eyes on Campus event to impact a greater number of students. Implementing a prescreening process before the day of the standard eye examinations would help reduce the number of unnecessary exams on healthy individuals. Vision screenings quickly identify individuals who have a need that can be addressed with an eye exam. This would allow for a more efficient utilization of resources to reach students who truly need care. Additionally, vision screening would provide data regarding the need on campus to allow the organizers of the event the opportunity to be prepared for the number of exams that need to be completed.

The Clear Eyes on Campus event was only possible thanks to the generosity of Sight for All United. As the leadership team at Sight for All United looks toward future Clear Eyes on Campus events, a priority in the planning process is additional funding sources. Outside financial support would decrease the financial burdens of the event. This burden includes the staff salaries, doctor fees, prescribed eyeglasses cost, and other necessary resources to make the event successful. This support could arise from several sources, including YSU alumni and donor support, YSU financial aid support, partnered nonprofit support, and support from individual donors. By increasing the funding, the Clear Eyes on Campus event will be able to reach a greater number of students and increase the long-term sustainability of the program. Additionally, creating partnerships with local charities could provide sponsorships to allow for expansion of the program to more campuses around the region.

Another key area for improvement is enhancing education and training for all support staff and volunteers assisting with the event. Volunteers play a crucial role in the success of the Clear Eyes on Campus event, assisting with outreach, streamlining the screening process, and guiding students through their appointments on the day of the event. While the online modules prior to the event jumpstarted the basics of training for

the volunteers, providing adequate in-person training, volunteers could assume more responsibilities such as serving as vision screeners to improve efficiency while maintaining the highest standard of care. Volunteers can also assist in the community engagement and public perception of the event. Many college students are unaware of the importance of eye health and routine exams. Student volunteers are able to educate peers prior to the event, encouraging them to get an exam while also assisting with education following the event such as answering questions and providing guidance on further access to medical care.

### CONCLUSION/IMPLICATION

The Clear Eyes on Campus event showed that reducing barriers to eye care, such as cost, insurance coverage, and transportation, is critical for students' eye health and academic success. This event made advancements in addressing the vision care needs of college students while also stressing the importance of relationships between eye health and performance in the classroom. We can considerably improve the efficiency of future events, reach more students, and increase the quality of life for students across YSU's campus by implementing new strategies such as a prescreening process, securing additional funding, and volunteer training.

After a thorough literature search, it is obvious that there is a lack of data surrounding college students and access to eye care, but the demand is prominent, as seen in the success of the Clear Eyes on Campus event at YSU. Sight for All United underlined the need by the sheer number of students who waited for walk-in appointments. There are many programs with reported success that assist primary and secondary school students to obtain free eye care, but these services do not continue once a person graduates high school. The Clear Eyes on Campus event could be used as a model for campuses across the country to improve access to medical care.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

### FUNDING

None

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Sight for All United is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in Youngstown, Ohio, established in 2016 with the mission of helping every person reach his/her visual potential while lifting barriers for access to care.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Kayla T. Katsadouros: data acquisition, data analysis, data interpretation, manuscript development. Tanya Pai Dunghat: data interpretation, manuscript development. Shridar Narain: data interpretation, manuscript development. Leah Sakacs: manuscript review, senior advisor. Sergul Ayse Erzurum: manuscript review, senior advisor.



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