

A Century of University Education in Optometry in Canada: The Contribution of the Université de Montréal — Part 1: 1925–1990

Dear Editor,

In Canada, 2025 marks a century of university education in optometry. In June 1925, l'Université de Montréal welcomed le Collège d'optométrie, administered by l'Association des optométristes et opticiens de la province de Québec. This centennial is an opportunity to trace the history of l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal (ÉOUM) and appreciate how far it has come as a teaching and research institution.

The first part of this historical overview covers 1925 to 1990 and presents the avenues taken by l'ÉOUM to transition from a simple vocational school to an institute aligned with other North American schools of optometry.

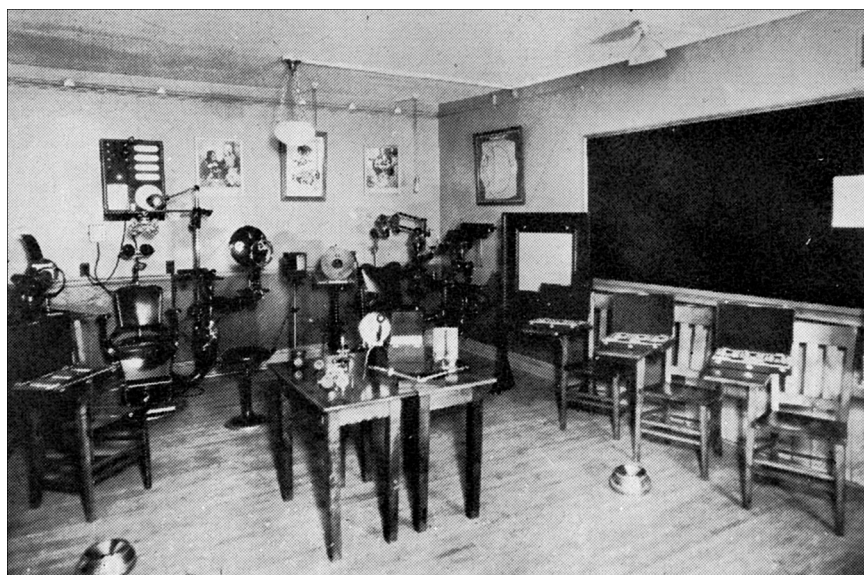
A Vocational School and a Young University (1910–1925)

The Collège d'optométrie was established in 1910 at the initiative of a professional association with fewer than 100 optometrists and opticians practising in Quebec. This creation happened the year after the first legal definition of the practice of optometry stated by the act assented to April 27, 1909. The latter modified the act proclaimed on March 6, 1906, which established the Association des opticiens de la province de Québec.

The Collège d'optométrie was first housed at the association's headquarters on Sainte-Catherine Street in Montréal. It was relocated to a building on Saint-André Street in the Latin Quartier in 1915. The building had 3 floors, each measuring about 65 m². It served the school and the association, which became l'Association des optométristes et opticiens de la province de Québec (AOOPQ) in 1914. Theoretical courses and practical sessions were held there. The school's budget initially came from students' tuition fees. In 1916, it opened an onsite clinic offering free eye exams, so students could develop their skills. The school offered only a 1-year program, initially through evening courses then as a full-time program.

L'Université de Montréal was still a young university when le Collège d'optométrie became affiliated with it. In fact, the act to incorporate the Université de Montréal was not passed until February 14, 1920. Before that, and since January 6, 1878, it had only been the Montréal branch of the Université Laval. The first French-language Catholic university in

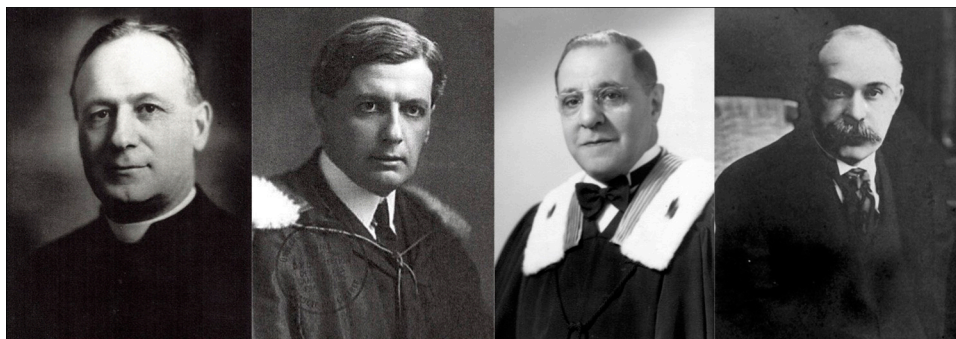
Figure 1. The refraction room of the Collège d'optométrie when it was located in the building on Saint-André Street in Montréal



Suggested citation

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Figure 2. The signatories of the affiliation contract



From left to right: Monsignor Vincent Piette, rector of the Université from 1923 to 1934*; Édouard Montpetit, secretary general of the Université from 1920 to 1950*; Alfred Mignot, president of the Association des optométristes et opticiens de la province de Québec; Maurice R. de Meslé, secretary of the Association from 1909 to 1934. Alfred Mignot served as director of l'École d'optométrie from 1941 to 1954. He also served as president of the Canadian Association of Optometrists from 1943 to 1945.

* Source: Albert Dumas. Archives UdeM, Fonds Division des archives et de la gestion de l'information, D0036-1FP01143 and D0036-1FP01150.

North America, Université Laval was founded in Québec City in 1852 through a royal university charter granted by Queen Victoria. Although it obtained its administrative autonomy from Rome in February 1889, l'Université de Montréal still depended on Université Laval for its educational activities when it moved in October 1895 to a building it erected on Saint-Denis Street, which went on to become the heart of the Latin Quarter.

Once l'Université de Montréal was legally established, discussions began about the Collège d'optométrie becoming affiliated with it. The talks concluded in the spring of 1925, and an affiliation contract was signed by the rector, Monsignor Vincent Piette, and the secretary general, Édouard Montpetit, as well as Alfred Mignot and Maurice R. de Meslé, president and secretary of l'AOOPQ, which oversaw le Collège d'optométrie. That affiliation makes l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal the oldest public optometric educational institution in North America that has continuously maintained university status.

L'École d'optométrie Moves on Campus (1925–1946)

With this affiliation, the name École d'optométrie was definitively adopted, and Alphonse Phaneuf became its director. The school then offered a 2-year program, with the first year at the Faculty of Science in

l'Université de Montréal's building, and the second year on site at the school, where 3 part-time teachers provided training. The university was responsible for the program, while the association was responsible for the funding and management of

Figure 3. Alphonse Phaneuf, first Director of the School of Optometry from 1925 to 1941



Figure 4. First cohort of optometrists to have a university education in Canada



the school. In 1934, the program transitioned to a 3-year program. The school provided 2 years of training and doubled the faculty, who still worked only part-time. The resulting university degree was a bachelor of optometry (BAO). In 1941, Alfred Mignot succeeded Alphonse Phaneuf as director.

On June 3, 1943, l'Université de Montréal opened its campus at the top of Mount Royal, where the tower and wings of the large pavilion designed by Ernest Cormier stands. The school and association requested that the school be moved to the new campus. On October 5, 1944, the university's academic council, la Commission des études, decided to recognize l'École d'optométrie as one of its amalgamated schools, in the same way as l'École de chirurgie dentaire et Hôpital dentaire, l'École de médecine comparée et Hôpital vétérinaire, and l'École de pharmacie had been in 1920.

The amalgamation meant that the association had to surrender its rights over the school, so it would be completely autonomous. The school obtained its letters of patent from Quebec on January 23, 1946, and became a private corporation administered by the optometrists who were teaching there.

In September 1946, the school moved to the seventh floor of the east wing of the only building at

the time, where it had nearly 450 m² for its clinic, teaching facilities, and offices. It also shared classrooms and labs with other departments. The school had only about 20 students. Despite the addition of a few teaching optometrists, the faculty remained part-time and had no more than 10 people with an optometry degree.

Transitioning to Integration with l'Université de Montréal (1946–1969)

In the early 1950s, l'École d'optométrie adopted a new 3-year program developed with the 12 North American schools of optometry. The degree awarded from 1954 onwards became the licentiate of science in optometry (LScO). Over time, this degree became increasingly specific to Quebec as the North American trend shifted to a doctor of optometry (OD) and longer programs. The College of Optometry of Ontario also adopted the OD in 1954.

With the adoption of the new program, student enrolment increased to 58 students and remained around 60 until the school's permanent integration. In 1953, J. Armand Messier succeeded

Figure 5. The clinic of L'École d'optométrie around 1949 on the 7th floor of the east wing of the only university pavilion at the time



Alfred Mignot as director of the school and its corporation.

In 1957, the school quadrupled its space by moving to the second floor of the D Wing in the main building, but its financial resources remained very limited. It took one particular education legislation passed in 1961, la Grande Charte de l'éducation, before the school was able to secure its first \$40,000 grant in 1963. Government subsidies made it possible for the school to hire its first full-time professors in 1965. In 1967, the school moved to the outskirts of the campus at 3333 Queen Mary Road but only gained 50 m² of space.

Because it remained a corporation run by its part-time teachers with limited resources, leaders of the profession and its young graduates viewed the school as stagnant and gradually losing the ability to align with academic requirements elsewhere in North America. For example, in 1968–69, full-time teachers included only 1 with a PhD (in psychology), 2 with a master's degree, and 4 with no post-graduate education. In addition were 10 half-time teachers. Even the director of the school only worked part-time. In total, there were 12 full-time equivalent positions. A change was therefore in order.

In 1964, tasked with analyzing Quebec's education system, the report by the Parent Commission recommended that the charter of the Université de Montréal be amended to integrate l'École Polytechnique, l'École des Hautes Études commerciales, l'École

d'optométrie and l'École de médecine vétérinaire into the university as constituent faculties or schools. In August 1967, the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Québec sanctioned a new charter for the university. Now independent from

Figure 6. J. Armand Messier, Director of the School of Optometry from 1954 until it was integrated into the Université de Montréal in 1969

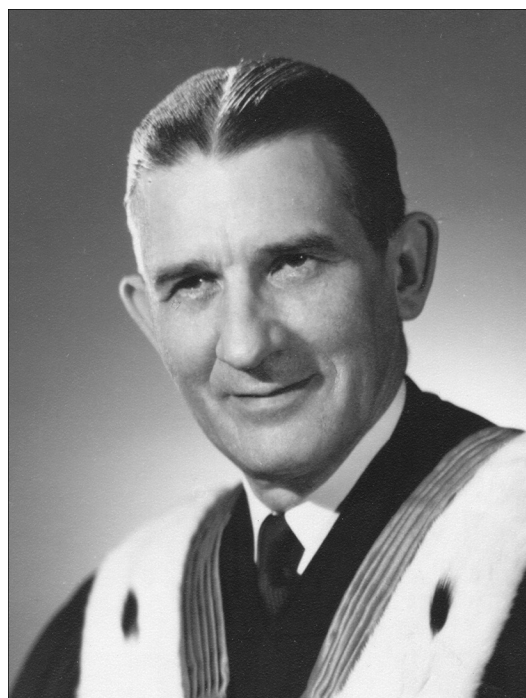


Figure 7. Clinic of the School of Optometry around 1958, when it was located on the 2nd floor of D wing of the university pavilion



Rome, l'Université de Montréal became a secular public institution focused on higher education and research. That same year, the University of Waterloo added the College of Optometry of Ontario to its Faculty of Science.

The Université de Montréal then tasked its academic development committee with exploring the most appropriate way to integrate l'École d'optométrie. In September 1968, the committee recommended that the school be integrated into the university by being temporarily affiliated with the institution's executive committee, after rejecting the idea of affiliation with the Faculty of Medicine or Faculty of Science. The academic development committee justified the temporary nature of the affiliation by the forthcoming consolidation of all health disciplines into one large faculty. It also recommended the development model adopted by the University of California, Berkeley for the School of Optometry.

The university assembly approved the change on November 11, 1968, and an integration contract was signed on May 28, 1969, wherein the private corporation ceded l'École d'optométrie to l'Université de Montréal for one dollar. The school's final integration into the university became effective on June 1, 1969. Claude Beaulne was appointed as the new director for a 4-year term.

However, the entire health sector was ultimately never consolidated into one faculty at the Université de Montréal, meaning the school's temporary affiliation with the executive committee has lasted over 50 years. Nevertheless, in retrospect, the decision of the academic development committee has proven useful because the hybrid status recommended for the school would not be a disservice. Indeed, since it is not a faculty (due to its size) or cannot affiliate with another faculty, l'École d'optométrie has been able to work the angles.

The “Quiet” Evolution of l'École d'optométrie (1969–1990)

Much like the Quiet Revolution that slowly transformed Quebec, l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal (ÉOUM) evolved over 2 decades at what can be described in many ways as a quiet pace.

During this period, the school had 3 different directors. The first was Claude Beaulne, who held the position until 1973, although he spent the last year of his tenure on a career development leave at the University of Houston. William Larson and then Michel Millodot (who both held post-graduate degrees) served as Interim Directors. From 1973 to 1977, the second director was Yves Papineau, a skilled teacher who had been on staff for nearly 25 years but only on a part-time basis. In 1977, Claude Beaulne was

Figure 8. The 1967 relocation provided the School clinic with exam rooms



It should be noted that around 1970, the use of a slit lamp had not yet been systematically established.

reappointed director and served two 4-year terms. In 1985, the third director, Daniel Forthomme, became the first with a PhD.

The beginning of this period of evolution for l'ÉOUM was marked by professional upheaval. In 1970, Quebec's health insurance plan was introduced, establishing oversight over optometrists' actions. In addition, the National Assembly of Québec adopted the *Professional Code* in 1973, as well as the *Optometry Act*, from Bill 256.

Faculty Issues

At the time of its integration with l'Université de Montréal in 1969, l'École d'optométrie systematically established a career development leave policy, which began in 1967. This resulted in Michel Millodot going to Brown University to pursue a PhD that he obtained in 1970. In the first 5 years following the integration, 4 other professors went on this type of educational leave. One pursued a PhD in the Faculty of Medicine's Pathology Department, another obtained a PhD through the Pharmacology Department, while an assistant professor completed a master's degree

in the Anatomy Department before leaving to obtain an OD in Houston, where Claude Beaulne was completing his master's degree. Upon their return from career development leave, the full-time equivalent faculty complement remained practically unchanged (11 positions). However, in the meantime, the number of optometrists without a post-graduate degree holding a half-time position went from 10 to only 2.

While this development policy obviously provided optometrists with the qualification expected of academics, it did not result in active involvement in research. Michel Millodot was the only exception, but he left Montréal in 1974 to become director of the School of Optometry at Cardiff University and, subsequently, at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He remained an internationally renowned researcher. In addition to that departure, the professor with a PhD in pharmacology left for the pharmaceutical industry in 1977.

L'ÉOUM's attempts to recruit optometrists with PhDs were mostly unsuccessful. A candidate with extensive university experience in the United

Figure 9. When the School of Optometry was integrated into the Université de Montréal on June 1, 1969, Professor Claude Beaulne became Director for a 4-year term

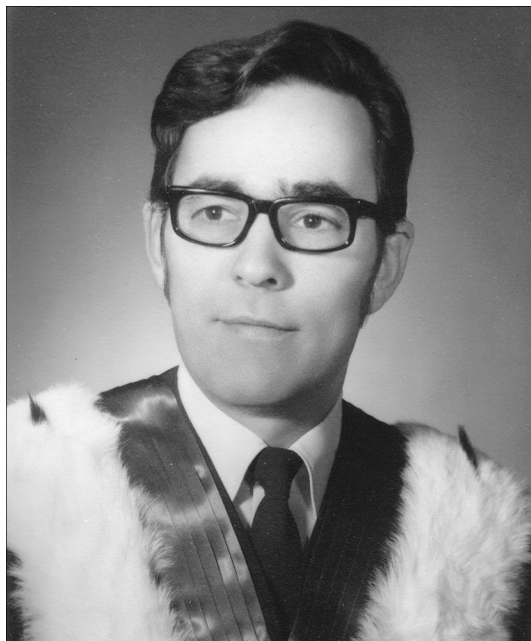


Figure 10. Teacher at the School of Optometry since 1949, Professor Yves Papineau served as Director from 1973 to 1977



States spent only the 1973–1974 academic year in Montréal, while another stayed for just 3 years, from 1979 to 1982. Only a British optometrist with a PhD from the University of Indiana, hired in 1974, remained for about 15 years before returning to the United States.

Over a 20-year period after the school's integration, its faculty complement never included more than 12 full-time equivalent positions, despite the increased size of student cohorts. After health insurance was introduced in Quebec, the number of students doubled from 20 to 40 per cohort.

It is truly unfortunate that the university failed to maintain the student–professor teaching ratio that the school had when it was integrated, as this would have considerably boosted its development. In its defence, however, the Francophone recruitment pool in vision science remained extremely limited at that time.

Program Development

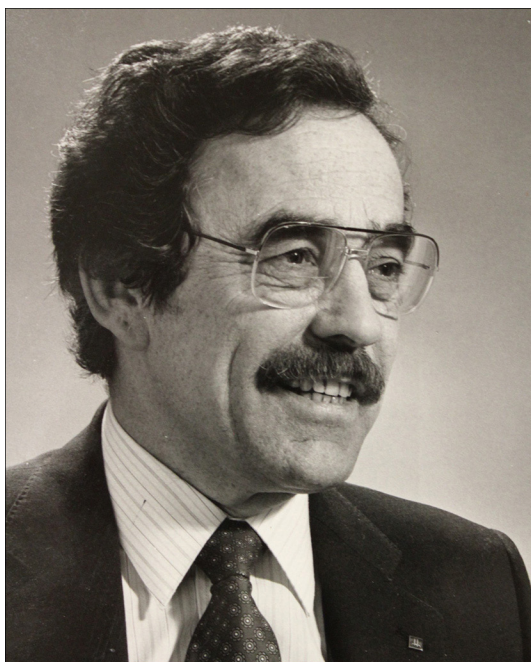
Through its 3 professors involved in research — Michel Millodot, Jacques Létourneau, and William Larson — l'École d'optométrie submitted a master's

in physiological optics program to the academic council of the Université de Montréal in 1971. It began in September 1973. In the first 15 years of the program, a dozen optometrists obtained a master's degree, and many became involved with l'ÉOUM, contributing to its renewal.

At the undergraduate level, the school introduced a summer semester between the second and third year — extending the program length to 7 semesters — for students entering the program in September 1974. Then, in 1978, at the initiative of Claude Beaulne, it presented a new program to the university's academic council that consisted of 8 semesters, covering 4 academic years over 3.5 calendar years, following the continued implementation of the summer semester. The program was then able to confer a doctorate in optometry (OD) and received ministerial approval from Quebec. The convocation for the first OD promotion took place on January 19, 1981.

Finally on a level playing field with all other optometric educational institutions in North America, l'ÉOUM went through the accreditation process for its program with the Council on Optometric

Figure 11. Professor Claude Beaulne served as Director of l'École of optométrie again for 2 terms from June 1, 1977, to May 31, 1985



Under his leadership, the four-year university program resulting in an OD was established and accredited by the COE in 1983.

Figure 12. On June 1, 1985, Professor Daniel Forthomme, the first Director to hold a PhD, took office for four years



During his term, three young teachers with a master's degree were granted educational leave to obtain a PhD.

Education (COE), so its graduates could practise professionally elsewhere in Canada and in the United States.

Council on Optometric Education Accreditation and Its Impact

In May 1983, the school obtained accreditation for its undergraduate program for 5 years. In addition, the COE stressed the need for research development, leading to the revival of career development leave. Under Daniel Forthomme's mandate, the first leave of absence was granted in May 1986 to Pierre Simonet, who wanted to pursue a PhD at the University of Waterloo. Two other teachers left in turn to pursue PhDs within the next 2 years: Jacques Gresset pursued a degree in Public Health at Université Laval and Claude Giasson who attended the Berkeley School of Optometry. This time the approach paid off. When they returned, they all pursued and published their scientific research.

The other impact of accreditation was strengthened connections with the Ordre des optométristes du Québec and the profession as a whole. Actually, accreditation restored the credibility of the school, which professional leaders could no longer accuse of being stagnant. L'Ordre was concerned about the emergence of 2 clusters of optometrists (those with and those without an OD). To address this, L'ÉOUM designed a special program consisting of 31 credits leading to an OD for optometrists. The progression through this ad hoc program and course offering were then designed to be spread over 3 years as part of a continuing education framework.

The educational approach adopted by the school used educational broadcasting, which was an innovative approach at the time. By acquiring human and technical resources to produce educational materials, the school developed cutting-edge expertise. In addition, young teachers, all with a master's degree, ran the courses with vigour and

skill. Professional succession then emerged for faculty at l'ÉOUM.

The qualification program led to lasting philanthropic support. In recognition of this continuing education mechanism, l'Ordre des optométristes du Québec agreed to collect a flat rate of \$50 per credit from participating optometrists in addition to regular tuition fees on behalf of the school. Nearly \$500,000 was allocated to the new resources required over the 3 years of this program.

This ad hoc program began in the fall semester of 1984 with 320 optometrists participating (over half the potential pool). The convocation for these newly accredited OD was held on September 10, 1988. This marked an important milestone. L'ÉOUM had changed the profession's presumed view of it in a lasting and definitive way.

Impact of l'Université's Departmental Evaluation Policy

Under the rectorship of Gilles Cloutier, l'Université de Montréal introduced a departmental evaluation policy in 1987. The committee responsible for evaluating the school included 2 industry representatives. It initially conducted a site visit and then travelled to the School of Optometry at the University of Waterloo. The committee then drew clear conclusions, notably considering consultations with the directors of 3 North American schools of optometry.

Among other things, the committee's April 1988 report noted that l'ÉOUM did not have adequate and suitable space, particularly for its university clinic. It also pointed out that the school's teaching staff (including clinical supervisors) was insufficient. The student-teacher ratio was too high at 12:1, compared with only 8:1 at the University of Waterloo and even 3:1 at the top American schools. Finally, after finding that l'Université de Montréal had not paid much attention to l'École of optométrie's development since its integration, the report highlighted its research potential where it aligned with the best optometric institutions in North America.

Seized by the report, l'Université de Montréal's planning committee identified the school as a priority for development, which led to increased support. Firstly, because of the COE's renewed accreditation of the undergraduate program for 5 years, the university decided that the school would receive additional resources, particularly new spaces,

by relocating to a building under construction. Secondly, with the director's term expiring on May 31, 1989, the university adopted an appointment process to attract external candidates and actively recruiting a researcher to replace him.

The remainder of this historical overview, in 2 more parts, will highlight the growth and transformation that l'ÉOUM has experienced over more than 30 years (1990–2025).

Pierre Simonet, OD, PhD,
Professor Emeritus

Jacques Gresset, OD, PhD,
Professor Emeritus

Jean-François Bouchard, BPharma, PhD,
Director and Full Professor

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Quebec, Canada

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