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Cover Story

Cooper Medical School is helping Camden's ailing economy

'Tangible evidence of the city's future'

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While nobody has discovered a cure to treat all of Camden's economic woes, the city's 4-year-old medical school has provided an effective dose of medicine.

Last week, the Cooper Medical School of Rowan University — which occupies a block on Broadway once home to a methadone clinic, a pizza shop and an assortment of vacant or soon-to-be-vacated buildings — held its first-ever graduation ceremony.

The ceremony was held a block from the medical school's \$139 million education building at another building that is part of Camden's revitalization effort: the city's \$41 million KIPP Cooper Norcross Academy, which opened last year. Two blocks away in the other direction, preparation is underway for what will be the \$50 million Joint Health Sciences Center of Rowan and Rutgers universities. The four-story, 65,000-square-foot project will join the medical school and Cooper University Hospital in what is



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The first graduation for Cooper Medical School of Rowan University began with a procession through Camden.

envisioned to be a health sciences corridor for the economically distressed city.

“The Cooper Medical School of Rowan University has become an integral part of the Cooper Health Sciences Campus and the Cooper Lanning neighborhood in a short time,” said Susan Bass Levin, president and CEO of the Cooper Foundation and co-chair of the Coopers’ Ferry Partnership that promotes Camden’s revitalization. “The results are reflected in students who volunteer their time and energy in community service projects, investments in new market-rate rental and for-sale housing, new research opportunities, and a center of excellence committed to the city’s renaissance.”

In the beginning

Discussions about, and political maneuvering for, a four-year medical school in South Jersey date back decades. That effort became a reality in 2009 when Rowan University in Glassboro and Cooper University Hospital formed a partnership to establish a medical school in Camden. The creation of the school was a public-private project funded largely through a \$139.5 million bond issued on behalf of Rowan by the Camden County Improvement Authority. The N.J. Economic Recovery Board allocated \$9 million for the project which also received a \$15.5 million state budget appropriation. Rowan also contributed about \$20 million and Cooper contributed about \$18 million toward startup costs.

Darlene Rios Drapkin, principal of the California-based Urban Transformation organization that specializes in creating and implementing revitalization programs in neighborhoods and urban centers, said a college campus of any type is a significant addition for a city looking for ways to expand its economy.

“You always need some kind of springboard, something to serve as a catalyst,” said Drapkin, adding she was not familiar with Camden’s long-term plans for a health care corridor — the so-called “medical mile” — that would stretch about three miles from Cooper University Hospital to Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center.

When told the medical school had already brought more than 300 students and employees into Camden, she said, “That’s huge. That’s the kind of density you

want to build on. Where people spend time at work or in school they also spend time shopping. I can't imagine that kind of project wouldn't be a boon for Camden."

Part of the city

Dr. Paul Katz, founding dean of the medical school, said the institution's impact is being felt in more areas than the just health care.

"From the beginning we didn't want to just be in the city, we wanted to be part of the city," Katz said, "We tried to be very intentional about paying it forward. There was an appropriate skepticism about promises made being promises fulfilled. ... We wanted to make an impact that is real and tangible, not futuristic, and we wanted our students to have an impact on the community that is separate from what they can contribute by being providers of health care."

Katz said many students and staff at the medical school are renting apartments in Camden and some have bought homes in the city — which has boosted Camden's sluggish economy. Economists, he noted, typically use a multiplier effect of three times an institution's annual budget to calculate the economic effect a fully operational medical school has on the area where it's based.

"We're not there yet," Katz said, noting the Camden medical school won't enroll its first full-size class of 104 students until 2017. The campus won't be fully operational with 416 students until 2021. The Cooper Medical School is now at half that size, and operating with a budget of about \$40 million. Adjusting the model used by economists by 50 percent, given the current class size, would mean the medical school is generating an economic impact of as much as \$60 million for the city.

The medical school has created 130 much-needed jobs. Camden finished last year with an unemployment rate of about 10 percent, twice the state average, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The agency's data also show the average household income in Camden — where an estimated 39 percent of the residents live below the poverty line — is \$26,201, less than half the state average of \$53,462.

The contributions the students are making to Camden, by design, goes beyond dollar figures, Katz said.

One requirement for graduation, he said, is students must commit to a project or projects involving at least 40 hours per year of community service. "It has to be a project where they have to get something out of it as well as give something back," Katz said. "You can pick up litter in a vacant lot and that benefits the community, but you don't really get anything out of that."

While doing some research for his commencement address, Katz calculated students have provided more than 7,000 hours of community service, unrelated to health care, to Camden.

The projects have ranged from hosting daily tutoring sessions for school students in the medical school's library, to coaching a soccer team, to helping create and maintain neighborhood gardens to improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables for city residents.

Camden pride

"It's amazing to see how much pride our students have in Camden," Katz said, "and how defensive they get when people throw stones at the city."

Camden Mayor Dana Redd said the Cooper Medical School of Rowan University is "exceeding expectations," and had a significant impact on the city.

"It's helped anchor the community and act as a catalyst for the city's ongoing redevelopment," Redd said. "I commend the administrators for encouraging community engagement and thank the student body for dedicating their time to tutoring and mentoring the city's youth, coaching sports, teaching English to Spanish speaking adults, or serving those in need. They have set quite a high standard for all those who follow."

After last week's commencement ceremony, N.J. Gov. Chris Christie praised the achievement of the new doctors, calling them the "first tangible evidence of

Camden's future" and the city's ongoing revitalization efforts.

One continuing economic development project the medical school spawned is Cooper Village, a \$17 million apartment complex on Broadway across the street from where future doctors are being taught. Iron Stone Strategic Capital Partners, a Philadelphia-based developer, received \$6.2 million in tax credits from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority for the 59-unit apartment project, which was previously occupying some historic buildings, which have been renovated, and other vacant and dilapidated structures that are being replaced. Rowan agreed to guarantee the leases, which the developer needed to get financing for the project. Iron Stone also committed to hold the property for 30 years.

Matthew Canno, a partner with Iron Stone, said the first phase of the project — the renovation of historic buildings into apartments — was completed last summer. The second phase, the new construction, is expected to be completed next month.

“Everything is going well,” Canno said. “I expect when everything is completed in June will be fully leased or nearly fully leased.”

Canno said while the majority of their tenants are now medical students or people affiliated with the medical school, the apartments were not built exclusively for the medical school and are available to anyone from the community.

Cooper Medical School’s inaugural class of 50 students was selected from nearly 3,000 applicants. From that group of 50, 43 graduated this year and the remaining seven are still enrolled at the school but did not finish in four years for a variety of reasons.

Not all the graduates will be leaving the city.

Eight of the 43 graduates will be staying in Camden serving in residency programs at Cooper University Hospital in specialties such as emergency medicine, vascular surgery and internal medicine. Another eight students are heading across the Delaware River for residency programs at Philadelphia hospitals.

A CLOSER LOOK

Seven things you may not know about the charter class at Camden's Cooper Medical School:

The medical school selected an inaugural class of 50 students, from among 2,882 applicants.

The class had 28 women and 22 men, which was slightly above the national average split for medical schools of roughly 50-50.

The class included 37 students who were New Jersey residents.

12 are from groups, primarily African-American and Hispanic, categorized as underrepresented in medicine. Cooper's percentage of underrepresented students was twice the national average.

The students ranged in age from 21 to 46.

24 speak a language in addition to English.

Among the 43 students from the first class that graduated this year, 16 will be residents at area hospitals with eight going to Cooper University Hospital and another eight headed to hospitals in southeastern Pennsylvania. The seven students who did not meet graduation requirements this year are still enrolled at the school.

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