

Chris Mondics and Jonathan Lai,
Inquirer Staff Writers

Posted: Sunday, August 3, 2014,
1:08 AM

Agency will coordinate Rowan, Rutgers health programs

"In an effort to spur economic growth in Camden and surrounding areas, leaders of a new agency established to coordinate health education at Rutgers-Camden and Rowan University say they expect to develop degree programs in a handful of health professions likely to see explosive growth in the next decade.

The three-month-old joint board of the two universities is targeting occupations including dental hygienist and physical and occupational therapist as part of a strategy to match South Jersey residents with future jobs. Board members say the plan is expected to play a key role in efforts to revive Camden.

"What it is going to be and what is going to take shape is a subject of discussion," said Kris Kolluri, a former New Jersey transportation commissioner who is the board's chief executive officer. "The way we will know in five years whether we have succeeded is whether we have trained enough people through our programs to get the jobs that are in demand." The Legislature created the board two years ago after efforts to force the merger of Rowan and Rutgers-Camden collapsed, and it reflects the view of many South Jersey political leaders that the universities should more closely tailor degree programs to needs of the region.

"The south [South Jersey] still has to join its forces together, and here is a possible way to do it," said former Assembly Speaker Jack Collins, who is chairman of the board. "Why not work together here?" For decades, health care has been a strong source of employment for inner cities, and board officials say its impact on Camden, and the rest of South Jersey, can be greatly enhanced by closely targeting educational programs.

"Both universities have strategic initiatives and plans that suggest growth in Camden," said the board's vice chairman, Lou Bezich. "So now the question becomes, how do they go about that growth?"

Kolluri, hired as the board CEO one month ago at a salary of \$275,000, has been given much of the responsibility for the project. A lawyer by training, Kolluri has long navigated the tricky shoals of politics and government in New Jersey and Washington. He began his career as a legislative aide to former U.S Rep. Robert E. Andrew, the Camden County Democrat, and later worked for the House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt before returning to New Jersey to work for former Gov. Job S. Corzine, eventually becoming Corzine's transportation commissioner.

After Corzine's election loss in 2009, Kolluri set up his own lobbying firm, and practiced law as well. He reported lobbying income of \$330,000 for 2013 from clients including Cooper University Hospital, various transportation-industry interests, and others. He dissolved that business June 30, one day before starting his new job.

Underlying the joint board's strategy are projections showing that dozens of so-called allied health professions such as physical and occupational therapy, which bolster and sometimes replace more costly treatment provided by physicians and inpatient facilities, are likely to experience rapid growth. Both the aging population and the intensifying focus on the part of health-care providers on cost-cutting strategies are helping to drive the employment boom.

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics says that the projected growth nationwide from 2012 through 2022 in employment for physical therapists alone will reach 36 percent, or an additional 73,000 jobs; employment for physical-therapy assistants, which requires less training, will reach 41 percent and nurse practitioners, 34 percent, among other related jobs. According to state government projections, similar increases are expected in New Jersey.

Both Rutgers and Rowan are required to provide \$5 million in funding each year for the board's operations. No details have been made public, but the board is expected to adopt its first budget soon.

The legislation gives the board wide authority: Both Rowan and Rutgers-Camden must first seek the board's approval before launching new programs in "health sciences," a broadly defined set of disciplines including nursing, medicine, biochemistry, genetics, and bioengineering.

Kolluri and others at the agency say they read that to mean the board will steer both institutions toward collaborative degree-granting programs in a way that leverages scarce resources. The board also has power of eminent domain and expects to build a multimillion-dollar life science building to house Rutgers and Rowan programs it will oversee.

"I am not going to sit here and say there won't be any dissonance," Kolluri said during a two-hour interview during the board's offices near the Camden water front. "But I think on the whole what you are going to see is a recognition that this board is a logical extension of what the universities are trying to do."

While forging ahead with plans to expand degree-granting programs in rapidly growing health professions might be a smart play, the initiative could face headwinds. Competition for students likely will be fierce, with institutions in Philadelphia such as Drexel University, Thomas Jefferson University, and Temple University all offering programs of their own.

Moreover, many health-related degree programs, such as those for physical therapists, are finding it increasingly difficult to find faculty and place students in clinical training programs.

Such programs are key to training not only physical therapists but physicians and many other health professionals. The problem is institutions ranging from hospitals to individual clinics and practices have been reluctant to take on students because of the cost, said Sue Smith, associate dean for health professions at Drexel University.

"Clinical placements are very hard to find," Smith said. "The competition for the sites is huge."

Faculty for such programs also is hard to come by, Smith said, in part because it is simpler and more lucrative to practice than it is to teach.

Leaders at Rutgers-Camden and Rowan have said they expect to grow enrollments; Ali A Houshmand, the president of Rowan, has set a goal of doubling enrollment by 2025, fueled in large part by growth in health sciences education.

In essence, the joint board's role will be to oversee the growth the two universities were expecting anyway, Kolluri said, not forcing new programs onto the schools.

"We are trying to be thoughtful and play the true role of facilitator," Kolluri said, "and I think that is the most constructive role we can play at the moment."