Drexel, Tower Health to open medical school branch near Reading Hospital

BY HAROLD BRUBAKER
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Drexel University and Tower Health plan to open a four-year branch campus for Drexel’s College of Medicine, already one of the nation’s largest by enrollment, near Reading Hospital in West Reading, the two nonprofits announced Monday. The inaugural class of first-year students is expected to start in the 2020-21 school year, pending accreditation.

The medical school deal follows Tower’s dramatic expansion through the $418 million acquisition of five community hospitals in Chester, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties, a move designed in part to draw patients to Reading Hospital, which is among Pennsylvania’s largest, for high-end, complex care.

“They clearly have an aspiration to be an academic medical center. That’s where Tower Health wants to go, and they need an academic partner to do so,” Drexel president John Fry said. “Second, we both agree that there is a huge challenge in the increased demand for physicians.”

Fry said that for Drexel, adding a campus in Berks County will help the University institution expand its influence in the region and give it needed capacity for training more doctors.

For the current academic year, Drexel University College of Medicine received 13,833 applications, accepted 707 of them, of which 260 enrolled.

“I’d love to get 30 or 40 more kids into every class, because God knows they are there, and they’re qualified, but we just don't have capacity for them,” Fry said.

In adding a branch campus, Drexel joins Temple University’s medical school, which has a branch at St. Luke’s in Bethlehem.

The Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine has had a branch campus near Atlanta, since 2005 and it plans to open a third location, in southwestern Georgia next year.

Nationwide, there are 115 regional medical school campuses, the latest survey by the American Association of Medical Colleges found, said John Prescott, that organization’s chief academic officer.

That number includes four-year branches, plus places where students spend just their first two years or their second two years of medical school.