Perdue says school a boon for state

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Political and higher education leaders hailed the new medical school in Athens as an economic asset and a step toward solving the state's health care crisis Monday as 40 students began their first day of classes on the new campus.

Gov. Sonny Perdue, left, and UGA President Michael Adams greet a group of students Monday during a ceremony marking the first day of classes at the new school. (David Tulis/Staff/david.tulis@onlineathens.com)

“It has been a true collaboration,” Gov. Sonny Perdue told about 350 people at a formal ribbon-cutting for the Medical College of Georgia-University of Georgia Medical Partnership, which will be housed in a pair of refurbished mill buildings along the North Oconee River for the students’ first couple of years of training.

“This partnership, I look forward to it growing. Georgians will be the beneficiary,” said Perdue, the headliner in a lineup of speakers that included UGA President Michael Adams, University System of Georgia Chancellor Erroll Davis and MCG President Ricardo Azziz.

The partnership is a good idea, considering the per capita number of physicians in the state, Perdue said.
Georgia has a low number of physicians per 100,000 people, and also ranks low on other medical measures such as obesity, said Dr. Douglas Miller, dean of MCG’s School of Medicine.

Counting the 40 students at the Athens campus, MCG’s freshman class this year is 230 students, the ninth-largest freshman class of any U.S. medical school, Miller said.

By 2020, the MCG freshman class size will be second-largest in the country, he said - plans call for a class of 300, with 240 at the Augusta campus and 60 in Athens.

By then, the Athens branch of the school will be across town at the Navy Supply Corps School campus in Normaltown. The UGA College of Public Health also will move to the Navy school property, along with the college’s 250 graduate students and 600 underclassmen.

Other speakers predicted the medical campus would help spur economic development in the state and the Athens area, generate research and teaching collaborations with UGA faculty and bring in research grants.

“This is one of the most important initiatives that the Medical College of Georgia has pursued in the last 20 years,” Azziz said at a news conference prior to the ribbon-cutting.

The 40 new medical students will have an advantage that students at many medical schools don't, said Barbara Schuster, dean of the MCG-UGA partnership campus in Athens.

Because of the small number, they will be able to work together in small groups, collaborating in much the same way they will collaborate when they begin practicing medicine in about 2017, Schuster said.

For many of the 40 students, all Georgia natives, the first day of classes was more than a historic occasion. It was a giant step toward fulfilling a dream.

“It feels amazing. I'm really happy to get started with school,” said Brett Kodish of Johns Creek, a UGA graduate who’s staying in Athens for medical training.

“I've been looking forward to this day for years,” said Breana Berry of Marietta, one of the 20 women in the class.

For Nitya Nair, beginning medical school is not only a big step toward fulfilling her lifelong dream of becoming a doctor, but a chance to spend a few more years in the town she’s grown to love.

Nair, who hails from Alpharetta, graduated from UGA this May with a double biology-psychology major, then took the summer off to spend with her family before buckling down again.
She decided on the Athens campus rather than going to Augusta or some other school partly because she liked Schuster and other faculty members she met, but also partly because of Athens, she said.

“I just fell in love with Athens. I didn’t want to leave,” Nair said.