



Health Professions Education Building home to Kentucky's only college of optometry

More than 650 people gathered on the University of Pikeville campus on Oct. 27 for the ribbon cutting and dedication of the institution's newest facility, the Health Professions Education Building (HPEB). The ceremony commemorated a significant milestone for the university, Central Appalachia and all of Kentucky, as the HPEB is home to the only college of optometry in the Commonwealth and the 22nd in the nation – the Kentucky College of Optometry (KYCO).

The HPEB is 107,000 square feet of state-of-the-art classrooms, clinical education laboratories, basic science laboratories, primary care operatories and space that houses both KYCO and UPIKE's growing nursing program.

"Our nursing students are enjoying their new space in the HPEB," said Karen Damron, PhD, dean of the Elliott School of Nursing. "They utilize study areas that were not available prior to moving in the facility. In addition, the faculty offices are highly professional and conducive to meeting with current and prospective students. This new building will be key in the continued expansion of our nursing program."

In his keynote address, US Congressman Harold "Hal" Rogers (KY-05) highlighted how UPIKE is helping close the gap on health disparities in Central Appalachia.

"Today Central Appalachia has the highest rates of preventable blindness in the nation," said Rogers. "So what does UPIKE do? They build a state-of-the-art facility with the very best equipment, cutting-edge technology and a first-class team."

UPIKE President Burton J. Webb, PhD, said, "The HPEB will serve the needs of the people of the Commonwealth of Kentucky for decades to come. We deeply appreciate the support of the community and the region as we continue to build the University of Pikeville."

Funding for the \$72 million educational facility included grants from the US Economic Development Administration (EDA) and Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), as well as a low-interest stimulus loan from the US Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Administration.

Federal Co-Chair of ARC Earl F. Gohl said, "It's a beautiful day in Appalachia because this building and school are going to help support and move forward the culture of health in Appalachia."

In addition to expanding vision care in the region, KYCO is projected to provide an estimated regional economic impact of \$26.8 million over four years.

Vickie Yates Brown Glisson, secretary for the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, said, "This facility is a reflection of the university's foresight and strategic efforts to increase educational opportunities for students, to stimulate economic development and to improve comprehensive health care needs that are here in Central Appalachia."

"Preparing the future health care workforce is a major component in addressing Kentucky's health challenges and our growing state's economy. Again, this university is leading the charge," Glisson said.

KYCO is currently preparing its inaugural class of 2020 and the class of 2021 for a broad scope of practice. Kentucky is one of only three states in the nation in which optometrists have the ability to perform laser and minor surgical procedures.

William T. Reynolds, OD, secretary/treasurer of the American Optometric Association, noted that KYCO is developing a national model for access to vision care in rural communities.

"This school and these students represent the future of our profession," said Reynolds. "The Kentucky College of Optometry is in a unique place in time where they will be the drivers of optometric education for years to come. This school will be showing the entire nation how to properly educate and train students in this new frontier of our profession."

Through the emphasis of specialization in rural optometry, more than 30 percent of graduates are expected to practice in medically underserved areas of Appalachia. KYCO is now operating rural clinics that will serve an estimated 18,000 unique patients annually.

Andrew Buzzelli, OD., KYCO founding dean, said, "What I am most proud of is that our faculty have already performed hundreds of eye exams, there is a pediatric eye clinic in Pikeville Medical Center that wasn't there and we are in three Federally Qualified Health Centers that are in numerous clinics. Eye care that wasn't there is now there."

Rogers addressed KYCO faculty in acknowledgement of their national and international accolades.

“You’re not only teaching future leaders,” he said, “you’re writing the book on medical eye care in the nation.”

To view a video of the ceremony, visit <https://livestream.com/piketvlive/events/7873353>.