

Region Best Served by Preserving Rutgers

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The faculty of Rutgers-Camden overwhelmingly oppose the takeover of their campus by Rowan university in what is euphemistically described as a merger between Rowan and Rutgers. Our opposition has been dismissed as “emotional” by some merger supporters and op-ed writers, but it is based on a cold, hard fact. The proposed Rowan-Rutgers merger would not achieve the goal of providing a high-quality public research university to serve the citizens of South Jersey.

To understand why the plan would fail, you need to know something about the different types of higher education institutions. Universities, like hospitals, restaurants, and carpenters, have different specialties. Some universities, like Rowan, focus on teaching and hire and promote faculty who devote themselves primarily to teaching undergraduates. Other universities, like Rutgers, are research institutions that hire and promote based primarily on the ability to produce publication-quality original research.

Both teaching and research universities can deliver the standard undergraduate courses and degrees in a variety of fields. In addition, research universities provide something special: the opportunity for upper-level students to work in close collaboration with scholars on research projects and publications. This hands-on experience is essential to training the next generation of scholars and researchers, who will go on to conduct research at universities and in the private sector.

The difference between the two types of universities is reflected in the terms of employment of their faculty. Professors at Rowan are expected to teach nearly twice as many classes as faculty at Rutgers. On the other hand, Rutgers faculty are expected to publish academic books and articles. Tenure and promotion at Rutgers are dependent on the quantity and quality of a scholar’s research output. Achieving tenure at a leading research university is, as it should be, very difficult.

Productive scholars naturally want to be affiliated with universities with good reputations in the world of research. Those universities have the research labs and databases, the staff who know how to manage complex federal grants, and junior faculty and doctoral students who can be collaborators on research projects. The better the reputation of his or her university, the easier it is for a professor to get grants, be invited to conferences, and publish books and articles.

This leads us back to why the proposed merger would fail. A merger would make it much more difficult to recruit and retain faculty with research orientations. Promising young scholars, after spending five or more years writing a dissertation, will not want to go to a university that is not a recognized name in the research world. Several applicants for a joint position between the economics and public policy departments withdrew their applications after the proposal was announced. Other job candidates we

interviewed expressed concerns about the effect of a merger on their career prospects. Our best candidate for a position in public management turned us down and explicitly cited the merger as the reason.

It would also be much more difficult to recruit established scholars to come to Rowan as compared to Rutgers. My own case illustrates the point. I applied to Rutgers-Camden last year and was hired as a full professor and founding director of the Center on Urban Research and Education. I would not have applied for the position, nor accepted it, if the name on the job announcement had been Rowan University. Now that I am here, I had been hoping to recruit other urban researchers to come to Rutgers-Camden to join my Center. If the merger goes through, that would be far more difficult. Moreover, existing faculty may begin to leave, and those with the most active research and publishing records will have the most opportunities to do so. In short, the talk of the merger has already begun a downward spiral that will only accelerate if the merger continues.

As someone born and raised in South Jersey, I support the goal having a high-quality public research university to serve the region's students. But a Rowan-Rutgers merger would not achieve this goal. Instead, Rutgers-Camden should retain its identity and affiliation with Rutgers University, particularly in terms of the tenure and promotion process. The other objectives of the merger, including serving students at the new Rowan-Cooper medical school, can easily be achieved through joint programs and consortium agreements.

South Jersey already has a research university providing masters and doctoral training for promising students, and its name is Rutgers-Camden. The region is best served by preserving the strong foundation of Rutgers-Camden rather than embarking on a clumsy, expensive, and ultimately destructive merger.

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