

From Normal to Extraordinary: A History of Rowan University

Rowan University has evolved from its humble beginning in 1923 as a normal school, with a mission to train teachers for South Jersey classrooms, to a comprehensive university with a strong regional reputation. In the early 1900s, many New Jersey teachers lacked proper training because of a shortage of schools in the state that provided training. To counter the trend, the state decided to build a two-year training school for teachers, known then as a normal school, in Southern New Jersey.

The town of Glassboro was an early favorite because of its excellent rail system, harmonious blend of industry and agriculture, natural beauty and location in the heart of South Jersey. Several towns in South Jersey competed to be the site of the new normal school because of the economic benefit and prestige such an institution would bring. In 1917, to sway the decision in their favor, 107 residents of Glassboro raised more than \$7,000 to purchase 25 acres, which they offered to the state for free if they selected Glassboro as the site.

The land tract included the Whitney mansion and carriage house. Before the purchase, the entire property belonged to the Whitney family, prominent owners of the Whitney Glass Works during the 1800s. This show of support, along with the site's natural beauty, convinced the selection committee that Glassboro was the perfect location.

In September 1923, Glassboro Normal School opened with 236 young women arriving by train to convene in the school's first building, now called Bunce Hall. Dr. Jerohn Savitz, the University's first president, expanded the curriculum as the training of teachers became more sophisticated. Despite the rigors of the depression, the program was expanded to four years in 1934, and in 1937 the school changed its name to New Jersey State Teachers College at Glassboro.

The college gained a national reputation as a leader in the field of reading education and physical therapy when it opened a clinic for children with reading disabilities in 1935, and added physical therapy for the handicapped in 1944. The college was one of the first in the country to recognize these needs and was in the forefront of the special education movement.

Rowan's second president, Dr. Edgar Bunce, created a junior college program in 1946 to serve World War II veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill.

In the 1950s, Dr. Thomas Robinson, the University's third president, expanded the curriculum, increased enrollment and added several buildings to the campus. In 1958, the school's name was to Glassboro State College to better reflect its mission.

The University received worldwide attention when it hosted a historic summit conference between President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin. The conference was held in Hollybush, the former Whitney Mansion. The University was chosen because of its strategic location midway between Washington, D.C. and New York. The meetings between the two leaders on June 23-25, 1967 led to a thaw in the Cold War and eased world tensions.

The University's fourth president, Dr. Mark Chamberlain, guided the college through its next phase of growth as enrollment doubled and the college became a multi-purpose institution. As new majors and a Business Administration Division were added, the four divisions grew into schools and a board of trustees was formed. With a 1978 Division III National Championship in baseball—the first of 11 national championships—the athletic program established itself as one of the premiere athletic programs in the country.

The fifth president, Dr. Herman James, assumed the leadership of the college in 1984. Under his direction the Rowan expanded by establishing the first doctorate program among the state's public institutions and adding the colleges of engineering and communication.

Dr. James was also responsible for the construction of a new \$16.8 million library, an \$8.6 million student recreation center, and the \$30 million engineering school facility.

In July 1992, industrialist Henry Rowan and his wife, Betty, donated \$100 million to the institution, then the largest gift ever given to a public college or university in the history of higher education. Later that year, the school changed its name to Rowan College of New Jersey. The college achieved university status in 1997 and changed its name to Rowan University.

To lead Rowan University into the 21st century, the Board of Trustees named Dr. Donald J. Farish as the sixth president in July 1998.

Today, Rowan University is divided into a Graduate School and six academic colleges: Business, Communication, Education, Engineering, Fine & Performing Arts, and Liberal Arts & Sciences. Rowan's nearly 10,000 students can select from among 36 undergraduate majors, seven teacher certification programs, 26 master's degree programs and a doctoral program in educational leadership. The tree-lined campus contains 42 buildings, including eight residence halls, three apartment complexes, a Student Recreation Center and 23 computer labs.

Rowan is in the midst of an aggressive 10-year plan that will give the university a national reputation for excellence and innovation and will make it the public university of choice in the region. The plan calls for a greater campus-wide focus on academic and student support initiatives as well as more than \$536 million being spent on campus construction and renovation projects, including a \$45 million science building, which opened in 2003. New residence halls are being built to allow the University to become a traditional residential campus.

In 2001, the University received a \$6 million grant from the state Economic Development Authority to construct a South Jersey Technology Park, which will play a significant role in the economic development of the region.

Over the years Rowan has earned a reputation as a high-quality, moderate-price university. These efforts have caught the attention of national organizations that evaluate colleges and universities. *US News & World Report* ranks Rowan University in the "Top Tier" of Northern Regional Universities. Kaplan included the University in "The Unofficial, Biased Insider's Guide to the 320 Most Interesting Colleges." Also, *Kiplinger's* named Rowan University one of the "100 Best Buys in Public Colleges and Universities" and the *Princeton Review* included Rowan in the latest edition of "The Best Northeastern Colleges."

From the modest normal school begun more than 80 years ago, Rowan University has become an extraordinary comprehensive institution that has improved the quality of life for the citizens of New Jersey and the surrounding states.

(Revised 2/17/04)