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## College campus opens in Cumming

Leaders celebrate completion of longtime goal

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A milestone of higher education was marked in Cumming on Thursday.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially welcome the new University Center | GA 400 campus drew more than 200 people.

The 38,000-square-foot, \$7 million facility on Pilgrim Mill Road near Ga. 400 Exit 16 is a joint venture between North Georgia College & State University and Gainesville State College.

The two colleges are scheduled to merge and become the University of North Georgia after Board of Regents approval in January.

Philip Wilheit, a university system regent from Gainesville, called the opening of the Cumming facility "a wonderful collaboration."

"It's a prelude to what's going to happen in four months ... we don't call it a merger, we call it a blending of two fine institutions ... [that] will form a college of 15,000 students.

"That's exciting and this [Cumming campus] is going to be an amazing part of that."

Bonita Jacobs, president of North Georgia College & State University and set to be president of the consolidated institution, echoed those sentiments.

"University Center | GA 400 has been a tremendous example of collaboration as we rolled up our sleeves and answered so many questions and made so many decisions," she said.

Sherman Day, executive director of the center, said the facility is impacting students.

"Today is the ribbon cutting, but I want to let you know we have some 280 Gainesville State students who have been here all week kind of helping us debug the facility," he said. "And next week, we'll be joined by over 200 North Georgia students, making a total of about 500 students."

Day said those enrollment numbers have "exceeded his wildest dreams."

"Just a number of months ago ... we talked about a goal of 200, so we're delighted."

Cumming Mayor H. Ford Gravitt, whom Day called "the driving force" behind the project, described the opening as "an exciting time."

"This facility is going to pay this community great, great dividends for many, many years to come," Gravitt said.

He also noted the beauty of the campus.

"I don't think it could have been a more beautiful location, because when you go upstairs and you're looking west, you see the beautiful rolling Sawnee Mountain," he said. "And if you look back to the east, you see Ga. 400 and whenever our Lake Lanier is full, you'll be able to see the lake."

Jacobs honored Gravitt for his dedication to the project and for recently establishing two scholarships for students at the campus.

"At North Georgia College & State University we have a tradition for our heroes and we present them with a boar's head coin," she told Gravitt.

Mary Helen McGruder, trustee of the NGCSU Foundation, noted that the campus was a long time in the making.

She read from notes she took during various meetings that focused on bringing the campus to Cumming over the course of a 15-year period.

"Now you all know that since July 25, 1997, we have been on a mission to bring higher education to Forsyth County and today that mission is complete," she said.

"Many, too numerous to mention, have worked on this over the years, but everyone has been striving for one thing, to bring a college campus to our community. And today ... we are opening this wonderful facility atop a hill overlooking the beauty of Sawnee Mountain, the vitality of Lake Lanier, a beautiful vital campus here on Pilgrim Mill Road in Cumming, Ga."

The two-story campus boasts eight classrooms on its first floor, all of which will be used for core education classes.

There are also several others on the second floor, which will be used primarily for the campus' associate of nursing degree and master of business administration programs, as well as continuing education courses.

Acting Gainesville State President Randy Pierce said the facility makes good use of

its space, which also includes a large library, an area where ready-to-eat items are sold and multipurpose rooms that can be used for instruction or by the community.

"This facility is not only beautiful, but it's designed to be a functional facility to teach students," he said, noting the center will be valuable to the area for many years.

"This is a huge step forward for Cumming and Forsyth County and will be a tremendous economic development tool for this region."

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