

Golisano gift stakes multipurpose Roberts Wesleyan center

By: Diana Louise Carter August 29, 2019



A rendering of the new building planned at Roberts Wesleyan College. (Provided)

A proposed building to house several community training institutes and a student center has earned Roberts Wesleyan College the largest donation in its history: a \$7.5 million gift from businessman and philanthropist B. Thomas Golisano.

An announcement was made Thursday morning about the \$13.5 million building to be known as the Golisano Community Engagement Center. The college plans to break ground in the fall of 2020 and open

the 25,000-square-foot center a year later.

"For Roberts, it's a transformational gift," said Roberts President Deana L. Porterfield.

"The four institutes that will be housed within the center will provide much-needed training and education to businesses, corporate and community partners and students," Golisano said. "Our region boasts several wonderful institutions of higher education, but few are located on the west side. The Community Engagement Center will create an opportunity for Roberts to expand its reach by sharing its professional and educational expertise with the broader community."

In preparing a strategic "map" for the school several years ago, Porterfield said, surveys of stakeholders revealed a predominant need for a space where students could gather outside of class. Students now use the library, but must make reservations for meeting space. And there's no dedicated space for Roberts' sizable cohort of commuting students.

With financial realities, though, the building couldn't just be for a single purpose.

In a parallel planning process, Porterfield and others at Roberts had been meeting with business people in the area about how Roberts could provide solutions for their educational and training needs.



Roberts President Deana L. Porterfield, left, joins philanthropist B. Thomas Golisano in answering media questions about his historic gift to the college. (RBJ Photo by Diana Louise Carter)

"The owners said, we're not looking for degrees, we're looking for training,' Porterfield recalled. Thus was born Roberts' four Community Institutes:

- The Business Solutions Institute
- The Justice and Security Institute
- The English Language Institute
- The Intellectual and Spiritual Humility Institute.

Monroe County Sheriff Todd Baxter spoke at the announcement to praise Roberts' Justice and Security Institute, saying it had spearheaded a community effort to assess and learn from threats. Kip Palmer,

CEO of Palmer Food Services and chairman of the Roberts board of trustees, said with the Business Solutions Institute, "Roberts has now become a valued partner to the Rochester business community."

Businesses have already expressed an interest in adopting curriculum from the brand-new Intellectual and Spiritual Humility Institute to help people in their workplaces have difficult discussions with others, Porterfield said.

"I want for our students more than just the ability to be civil," she said. "I want them to come into a conversation eager to understand and to listen."

Porterfield said many large companies conduct their own training at their places of business. Community colleges provide extensive job training programs, but primarily in technical fields. But Roberts would focus on small and medium businesses and on topics such as business leadership and ethics training.

Training at the institutes would be paid for by companies using the programs, creating a new revenue stream for the college, Porterfield noted.

The two-story Golisano center would house a large cafe with dining tables and couches on the first floor, a career services department, and a flexible training space that could be up to five small rooms and one big one with a capacity of 300. The second floor would include several existing departments, such as diversity and equity, international engagement and spiritual formation. It may also include a designated lounge for commuting students and a prayer chapel. There is none outside the seminary on the Roberts campus that is primarily used by the divinity program.

Until now, the college's largest gift in its 153-year history had also come from Golisano — \$5 million used to build the Golisano Library on campus. The current gift comes directly from the Paychex founder and billionaire, rather than from the foundation he established that focuses on giving to projects that help people with developmental disabilities.

Roberts also plans to launch a fundraising campaign beginning in September to cover the remaining costs of the building's construction and to support the center's operation after construction.

"We are so grateful to Tom Golisano for the overwhelming demonstration of support of the work we do," Porterfield said. "This gift not only opens the way for us to move forward with the plan for the construction of a unique campus building, but is also an encouraging endorsement of our mission to serve the educational needs of the Greater Rochester community and the students of Roberts Wesleyan College."

The new building would be located on the northwest edge of campus, across Westside Drive from Roberts' academic buildings and on the same side as most of its dormitories.

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