

Our Voice: Synergy and hope at University of California, Riverside Graduate Center

*Written by | The Desert Sun Editorial Board
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The \$16 million UCR Graduate Center in Palm Desert has been underused for far too long.

A major setback came in November 2010, when the budget was slashed by 40 percent and six staff members were laid off, including Executive Director Carolyn Stark. She was an articulate spokeswoman for the graduate center and helped create the Coachella Valley Economic Blueprint.

At last, with the opening of the UCR School of Medicine, there are glimmers of hope. Seeds are being planted to help it grow into the vortex of the campaign to improve the health of Coachella Valley residents:

- The Coachella Valley offices of the Clinton Health Matters Initiative and the Alliance for a Healthy Generation have both moved to the campus.
- The Health Assessment Resource Center, which will release its third triennial valleywide survey in January, also moved in.
- Starting in September, Dr. Ashaunta Tumblin, a pediatrician, will begin research on children's health across the Inland Empire and the Coachella Valley as part of the medical center. She'll be based in Riverside, but will use the Palm Desert campus in her research on the valley.

Tricia Gehrlein, regional director for the Health Matters Initiative, describes this as "a nice synergy." That certainly appears to be the case.

There's also hope with new leadership at the main campus in Riverside. Kim A. Wilcox, a former top official at Michigan State University, became the ninth chancellor of UCR after Timothy White left to become chancellor of the California State University system. Wilcox began the job this month and, at last report, hadn't yet visited the Palm Desert campus.

Wilcox took time off earlier this year to serve in Washington, D.C., with the Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa, a nonprofit organization focused on contributing to a more sustainable agricultural future for African countries. Perhaps he can bring some expertise to the valley's campaign to fight poverty and hunger.

The Palm Desert City Council recently approved the transfer of 11.5 acres to the medical school to make room for a health center, a community clinic, a surgery center and a geriatric activity center. The School of Medicine now has 50 medical students and some will train here on the way to becoming doctors.

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Also, the campus is next door to the Palm Desert satellite of California State University, San Bernardino, which operates nursing programs and a health sciences center. That could add to the synergy.

Tamara Hedges, the center's chief operating officer, represents UCR on a Coachella Valley Economic Partnership committee that has developed a college and career readiness plan. The Economic Blueprint identified the graduate center as a key factor in diversifying the economy. It's good to see they're at the table. Health care is one of the four pillars of the blueprint, and perhaps the most promising. In 2012, the sector accounted for more than 12,000 jobs in the valley, according to CVEP.

The Desert Sun hopes to see the UCR Graduate Center become the busy place it was envisioned to be in 2005, when Rancho Mirage resident Richard Heckmann contributed \$6 million to help it open. It's important to Palm Desert and the entire Coachella Valley economy.

And it could be the linchpin in making our valley a healthier place to live.