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Philly's Peirce College and Scranton's Lackawanna College will merge into one school

If approved, the institution would become one of Pennsylvania's largest open-enrollment, private colleges.



By [Stephen Williams](#) · August 14, 2024

Philadelphia's Peirce College and Scranton's Lackawanna College, two institutions that specialize in serving the needs of working adults, plan to merge.

The merger to create a reenvisioned Lackawanna College, announced on Wednesday morning, is expected to be complete by July 1, 2026, pending approvals by internal, government and accrediting bodies.

The combined institution will serve about 3,000 undergraduate students and 8,000 graduate students in addition to those taking continuing education courses or seeking professional certificates. The institution will become one of the state's largest open-enrollment, private colleges.

Mary Ellen Caro, president and CEO of Peirce, told WHYY News she will stay on through the transition and pursue other opportunities after the merger is complete. The merged Lackawanna College will be led by Jill Murray, the current president of Lackawanna College.

"It's a merger about innovation and growth," Murray said. "This is a real coming together of like-minded institutions to be better together to serve larger populations of students across the Commonwealth. It's incredibly exciting for both of us."

Caro agreed.

"It comes right down to be bigger, to be better and to be stronger together," Caro said. "We see primarily the benefit of complementary programs."

Lackawanna College is known for its School of Petroleum and Natural Gas, which offers degrees and certificates for a number of careers in the industry. According to Lackawanna, more than 90% of its graduates are hired into the industry. In 2022, Pennsylvania was the second largest producer of natural gas, after Texas, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Lackawanna College also has two police academies for those seeking positions in local, state or federal law enforcement agencies, Murray said.

At Peirce, students can earn a bachelor's degree that leads to a Juris Doctor degree at Rutgers Law School and a master's degree in health care administration. It also offers degree and certificate programs for students seeking careers in osteopathic medicine, law enforcement, emergency management services and medical billing/coding.

Both leaders said they hope to avoid layoffs and seek to retain as much talent as possible, but would also look for efficiencies and cost savings in purchasing and other areas.

Lackawanna is the larger of the schools, with 212 members of faculty and staff; Peirce has 80 such employees.

Ivanhoe Smith, managing partner of Coral Island Investments in Philadelphia, said the geographic distance of the schools probably precludes many layoffs. It also means that they will likely rely on online education.

"It's a great opportunity to merge two great colleges into an even greater college for the future," Smith said.

According to a 2017 report by TIAA Institute, mergers of colleges and universities have been considered by institutions seeking greater efficiencies and have included sharing services, campuses, partnerships and co-branding efforts.

TIAA is a nonprofit educational research group that examines financial, workforce and leadership trends in higher education.

The report stated that mergers can create greater size and scale, bring cost savings from efficiencies and engage and re-energize stakeholders.

The report points out that many universities have either participated or are the product of at least one merger at some point in their history.

Lackawanna was founded in 1894 and offers eight bachelor's degrees and 25 associate degrees. In addition to its Scranton campus, the college has six other locations in Covington Township, Hazelton, Sunbury, Towanda and Tunkhannock.

Formed in 1865, Peirce exclusively serves adult students, offering associate, bachelor's and master's degrees, and is considered a pioneer in online education.

Both institutions have received recognition for affordability, innovation and growth by education industry publications.

According to Murray, the idea for the merger emerged during forums for private colleges, where she began to have discussions with Caro.

"The best and most successful partnerships come from relationships," Murray said.