In a twist on a higher-education mystery, anonymous donors once again have bestowed riches on Kalamazoo, Mich.

The city's Western Michigan University said Tuesday that it received $100 million from anonymous donors to establish a medical school. WMU ranked it the seventh-largest cash gift ever to a public university.

The announcement comes about six years after anonymous donors gained national attention for creating Kalamazoo Promise, an organization that covers tuition costs at state colleges and universities for graduates of Kalamazoo public high schools. Five years after Kalamazoo Promise began writing tuition checks—the total thus far exceeds $20 million—the donors’ identities haven't been disclosed.

That will also be the case with the new medical school, said WMU president John M. Dunn, saying only that the $100 million comes from individuals “passionate and affectionate” about Kalamazoo, the university and the state of Michigan.

The medical school will open in the fall of 2013 or 2014 with a debut class of about 50 students. Its opening is part of a slow increase in the number of U.S. medical schools, a trend that many regard as vital to addressing an anticipated severe shortage of physicians. The American Association of Medical Colleges said it foresees a shortage of 90,000 physicians within 10 years.

WMU's Dr. Dunn said the need for a medical school is reflected in the high percentage of high-caliber applicants failing to win a slot each year in a U.S. medical school. He said medical schools are turning away hundreds upon hundreds of candidates “who meet all the standards, who are scoring in the 90th percentile” on the medical-school entrance exam.

Kalamazoo is less dependent on the auto industry than much of Michigan. The city has long been a center of health-related research, having given rise decades ago to medical-device maker Stryker Corp. and pharmaceuticals maker Upjohn, now part of Pfizer Inc.

Locals say the Stryker and Upjohn fortunes remain heavily—and secretly—influential in Kalamazoo philanthropy.

Janice M. Brown, executive director of the Kalamazoo Promise, said, "Here's my story and I'm sticking to it: I'm sworn to confidentiality about the identity of our donors."

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