If there is a little engine that could in the world of academics, the MGH Institute of Health Professions just might be it.

The school opened in 1977, but in recent years it has seen a surge in applications — to 2,590 this year from 1,421 in 2008. And enrollment has jumped to 1,000 students today from 754 students four years ago.

The school’s operating revenue has increased to $24.8 million this year from $17.4 million in 2007, and its income has jumped to a $746,000 gain from a $562,000 loss over the same period.

In a city fiercely competitive in higher education, this blink-of-the-eye tucked away in the Charlestown Navy Yard is gaining steam.

The school offers master’s degrees in nursing and in speech language pathology, doctoral degrees in physical therapy and nursing, an accelerated bachelor’s degree in nursing for students interested in becoming registered nurses and an advanced certificate in medical imaging.

“It’s a hot place,” said James Samels, education consultant and CEO of The Education Alliance.

Why, after all these years, MGH Institute — which costs between $44,000 and $103,500 to complete a program, depending on the degree — has suddenly blossomed could be the
result of several factors, not least of which is the growing interest in health professions, especially in Boston where the health sector is one of the strongest.

“Our real emphasis is on trying to distinguish our graduates as those who are prepared to be competent practitioners but to be leaders and change agents in the health care system,” said Janis P. Bellack, president.

What makes the MGH Institute unique in Boston, aside from its founding by Massachusetts General Hospital 33 years ago, is its independence from a major university and its series of degrees that are mostly on the graduate level. Students who choose the MGH Institute know what they want to do, not in the “discovery phase,” as provost Alex Johnson puts it.

Susan Long, for one, was semiretired when she decided to go back to school. Her son, now 34, was seriously injured in 1996 during a special military mission in Africa and spent 15 months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Long became involved with — and interested in — her son’s care. “I said, ‘I don’t think I’ll be retiring,’” said Long, who has a master’s degree in education administration and plans to work in the Veterans Administration hospital system.

Long is due to graduate from the MGH Institute next May.

“I was lucky I got in (to MGH Institute). I was a little worried they wouldn’t take me,” she said.

Its accelerated Bachelor of Science in nursing program draws upwards of 600 applicants for 100 slots. The MGH Institute’s doctoral program in physical therapy and master’s degree in speech language pathology both draw about 350 applications for 50 slots. And its nurse practitioner program attracts 350 applicants for 75 slots.

Informally tracked, MGH Institute’s job placement was 100 percent until recently, said Johnson. A slowdown in hiring for entry-level nurses in the Boston area has made it more difficult for MGH Institute graduates in the registered nursing track who want to stay in Boston, though Bellack characterized the hiring slowdown in that niche as “temporary.”

Sherline Chery-Morisset, who graduated in 2006 and is working as a primary care nurse practitioner at Boston Medical Center, was among those who landed a job. Chery-Morisset credits the MGH Institute for developing her interest in women’s health, and she has launched a nonprofit organization in Haiti focused on women.

“It’s a small startup now, but we have real dreams for it,” she said. “Eventually I want it to become a homeless shelter for women, like Rosie’s Place with a health focus to it.”

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