



To cultivate small biotechs, Md. to open \$60M center

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The University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute is set to open its newest building in just weeks, a 140,000-square-foot facility aimed at enhancing the region's biotechnology resources.

The \$60 million state-funded project is part of the expansion of UMBI's Center for Advanced Research in Biotechnology, or CARB, a basic biomolecular research organization that plans to nearly double the size of its workforce in the next five years.

The building, called CARB II and set to open officially Sept. 21 at the University of Maryland Shady Grove Campus, adds to the center's current 80,000 square feet of space.

It will include a Good Manufacturing Practices, or GMP, laboratory, a facility that complies with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's extensive regulations for the manufacture of drugs and other biotechnology products.

The lab will be available to small biotech firms to conduct the type of research and manufacturing that otherwise is cost-prohibitive for newer companies with limited resources, said CARB Director Edward Eisenstein.

"We want to help a lot of smaller biotech companies who want to bring their first product into clinical trials," Eisenstein explained. "What we hope is they will contract with us for production or training."

Building a GMP facility or contracting with a for-profit laboratory for production services "is a frightfully large expense for a newer company," he added.

But the CARB II facility will offer its services with flexible rates designed to suit start-ups, said UMBI President Jennie C. Hunter-Cevera.

And then there is the training element. CARB hopes to offer certificate or degree programs in its GMP facility as soon as next fall, Eisenstein said.

Community colleges have expressed interest in the lab as well, and UMBI is discussing with the university's adjacent Shady Grove Campus the possibility of offering a two-year associate's degree program, Hunter-Cevera added.

UMBI typically does not grant degrees.

An academic GMP laboratory is rare, Hunter-Cevera said — most are privately run by contract manufacturing organizations or contract research organizations. The CARB lab may be the only one of its kind on the East Coast, she added.

The program, Eisenstein said, is not designed to make money for CARB, but to build larger partnerships with companies that ordinarily would work solely with the center on small projects.

It is "a break-even operation," he said. "This will be a service we provide, an opportunity for [biotech firms] to get a foothold in relating to us on bigger research problems."

CARB began with its first facility in 1989 as a partnership between the university, the National Institutes for Standards and Technology and Montgomery County. A second facility was built in 1985.

The center's new building will help add not only space and additional employees — CARB currently employs 150 to 175, but that number is set to reach 300 in five years, Eisenstein said — but new programs as well.

A biosafety laboratory will allow the study of insects that carry disease-causing agents. A new greenhouse will facilitate research on transgenic or genetically altered plant life.

The facility will enhance CARB's ability to both draw grant money — \$8 million in external funding this year — and generate technology transfer opportunities for its faculty and the university, Eisenstein said.

"The investment made from the state was very wise," said Hunter-Cevera. "We're hoping to keep Maryland at the cutting edge of biotechnology."

"The state has focused on growing our biotechnology cluster for many, many years, and UMBI has been one of the point organizations in getting that cluster strength built up," said state Department of Business and Economic Development Secretary Aris Melissaratos.

"In our technological dominance strategy, this is another step along the way," he said of the CARB expansion