New lab supports new Anderson University biochemistry program

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ANDERSON - Anderson University has stepped up its research profile with a new lab, developed to support the school’s new bachelor’s degree program in biochemistry.

The new facilities will expose the school’s students to equipment they would be expected to use as researchers for drug companies or in postgraduate work, but that has been unavailable to them as undergraduates at the school — advanced microscopes, centrifuges, carbon dioxide incubators and more.

“They will have a 96-well plat reader for immunoassays of molecular markers for normal and abnormal cells. ... Even if you don’t know what that is, it just sounds like something worth seeing,” joked Wayne Cox, dean of the college of arts and sciences, on Saturday.

The ribbon cutting for the nearly 1,200-foot space, which is in the Watkins Teaching Center at the school, happened Saturday afternoon. Faculty showed off all the new equipment to dozens of students, administrators and university supporters. They say the lab will enhance the school’s research profile and better prepare its students for postgraduate work and/or careers in the medical and biochemistry fields.

Andy Norris, a professor of biology and chemistry, explained how the plat reader worked — in essence, the reader can divide up to 96 cells of a particular tissue (such as a cancerous tumor) and test different treatments and dosages in each cell in slightly less than 10 seconds, eliminating the time-consuming practice of doing them one at a time.

“I did not get to use something like this until I was in my Ph.D. program,” Norris said. “In an era of increasingly personal medicine, it’s possible to imagine understanding how to get a cure for not just for a particular form of lung cancer, but a cure specific to a patient.”
He said the university already does a good job of attracting students interested medical school and research-related fields. University President Evans Whitaker said the school admits more South Carolina merit scholarship recipients than any other private university in the state.

Norris said thinks the new lab will draw an increasing number of talented young people to the campus. The new program is not related to Anderson University Center for Cancer Research, a three-year-old program to foster cancer research efforts by biology students. But the cancer and biochemistry efforts could very well increase the university’s research reputation across the state, officials said.

“We have an excellent student-to-teacher ratio, with faculty that’s been trained around the world,” Norris said. “We want students to come away from this (biochemistry) program empowered to study biology or medicine.”

Associate biology and chemistry professor Carrie Koenigstein can’t wait to put students to work in the new lab.

“We’ve been sending students off to medical schools for years, but now they’re going to have even more opportunities to go to med school or into research,” Koenigstein said. “The (biochemistry) programs start this semester, and the lab will be ready to go for the start of classes Wednesday.”

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