

Posted and published in the Opinion section of the Wichita Eagle on Thursday, Jan. 08, 2009.

GARY L. MILLER: WSU AND KU HAVE DIFFERENT APPROACHES

BY GARY L. MILLER

There is great promise for Kansas in the development of a vigorous biotechnology business.

Wichita State University and the University of Kansas are poised to take leading roles in the effort nationally, just as Kansas State University has in research to combat bioterrorism.

As noted in The Eagle editorial "Biased? Claim about KBA not substantiated" (Jan. 7 Opinion), the discussions among WSU, KU and the Kansas Bioscience Authority have progressed more slowly than any of us would have liked. That's not because of a lack of good will, but because of fundamental differences in approach.

WSU and its principal partner, Via Christi Orthopaedic Research Institute, have adopted a research and development model that involves working side by side with customers -- especially medical device manufacturers -- to move from identifying needs to developing solutions that will be quickly adopted by health care professionals. The possibilities for innovation under discussion range from medical instruments to operating tables, battlefield stretchers, and replacement bones and joints.

This approach builds heavily on our experience with the National Institute for Aviation Research. NIAR works closely with the aviation industry to meet the industry's identified needs and anticipate future needs. NIAR's research moves in a straight line from its labs to the factory floor, translating into jobs for Kansas.

We want to repeat that success with medical devices.

Our discussions with dozens of manufacturers over the past year suggest that there is a rich opportunity for immediate product development in the application of composite materials technology to medical devices. Such a manufacturing sector in Wichita could buffer economic downturns in aviation manufacturing by redeploying the existing manufacturing sector to other areas.

KU offers a very different and equally essential approach, based on its strengths in moving basic scientific discoveries to commercialization. This is the traditional academic research approach in which KU is an international leader. This approach is the backbone of technology-based economic development and the generator of new companies and industries. It sometimes takes longer than the WSU approach, but the results can be substantial.

These approaches require different operating models. What WSU, Via Christi and KU have been doing for more than a year is working with great vigor to build a plan that nurtures both of these research approaches. The work has not been easy -- collaboration to develop novel approaches never is. But there has never been doubt that success will mean real economic development for Kansas. And it is our intention to continue this important work with our industry and university partners.

Expectations are high that the ongoing collaboration among WSU, Via Christi Orthopaedic Research Institute and KU will result in a new and exciting biomaterials initiative in Kansas.

They should be.

KBA president Tom Thornton's vision to make Kansas a "game changer" in biotechnology is well within reach. We are committed to making that vision come true.

Gary L. Miller is provost and vice president for academic affairs and research at Wichita State University.