New Food Science Building to Enhance Collaboration

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Background and Rationale

The current food science facilities are spread across three buildings, with the main structure dating back to the 1950s. Over the decades, various wings were added, but the fragmented layout and aging infrastructure have become barriers to efficient collaboration and innovation. This initiative is rooted in the need to modernize and consolidate existing infrastructure to better support food science innovation in human health, food safety, security, and quality.

The new building is envisioned to be located on the Milo J. Shult Agricultural Research & Extension Center, which is about two miles north of the University of Arkansas- Fayetteville campus. The initial cost of the building was $35M and soon increased to $50M.

Fundraising and Strategic Advocacy

I spearheaded a fundraising and advocacy campaign. Efforts included:

- Elevating the project to the top priority for capital projects within the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.
- Hosting legislative staff and aligning messaging with state priorities.
- Sharing faculty and student success stories to build public and political support.
- Developing white papers for justification for the new food science building to align with legislative priorities
- Interacting with philanthropic foundations and wealthy individuals.

These efforts led to significant internal funding commitments, covering two-thirds of the estimated $50 million cost. The remaining third is being pursued through external fundraising.

Project Timeline and Design

The project began in early 2024 with the selection of architectural and construction firms. Hiring the construction firm enables us to estimate the cost of designs accurately and adjust the design, if the costs are above the budget. Throughout the summer and fall, the design team engaged with faculty and staff to ensure the building meets current and future needs. The initial design considered a two-building layout, a two-story lab building, and a high-bay one-story industrial building for pilot plants, brewery, and winery.

Challenges and Solutions

The project has faced several obstacles, including rising construction costs and the complexity of securing external funding. The final cost came out to be $70M. With value engineering, the cost was reduced to $61M. As it was over the budget, two different design options were developed to reduce the cost. Option 1 involves reducing the size of the building to reduce the cost to $53M. Option 2 involved locating a smaller building closer to one of the existing buildings and sharing some lab spaces to reduce the cost to $50M. Option 2 will spread faculty and students across two adjacent buildings. Faculty preferred to have everyone in the same building, and therefore, Option 1 was selected. A two-page fundraising document was created to support donor outreach, and naming rights are being explored as an incentive for major contributions.

How FSLI helped me with this project:

The tour of the Plant Sciences building at North Carolina State University provided the idea for collaborative lab spaces. The fundraising and friend-raising session at the Ohio State University residential session was useful. Interaction with Dr. Rich Linton, President of Kansas State University, and learning about his experience with fundraising strategies for Plant Sciences Building at NC State and Global Center for Grain and Food Innovation at Kansas State was inspiring. Individual coaching sessions with Claudia Fernandez were transformative.

Conclusion

By addressing critical infrastructure needs, the new food science building will empower future generations of researchers and educators, fostering breakthroughs in food sciences. The initiative not only enhances the university's capabilities but also strengthens its role in addressing global food challenges.