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Meeting Place

With new 'Red C,' related fields no longer apart



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By ROBB FREDERICK
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Outside, on polite white chairs, the deans and trustees watched the sun glint off the glass front of the \$30 million Research and Economic Development Center, the big new academic building at Penn State Behrend.

At Penn State Erie, The Behrend College, the new Research and Economic Development Center was dedicated Monday, October 9, 2006. The building is part of a new philosophy to help merge majors and help students be more readily employable. (Greg Wohlford / Erie Times-News)

They applauded former Gov. Tom Ridge, who boosted the project with state aid in 2000, and who returned Monday to snip the blue ribbon.

"We shape our buildings," he said, quoting Churchill. "Thereafter, they shape us."

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That's the plan at the REDC -- the "Red C," to use campus shorthand. The building adds 160,000 square feet of classrooms and labs, giving Behrend the largest academic plastics center in the nation. The complex also houses a wind tunnel, a radio-signal lab, a center for consumer credit studies and a cafe stocked with \$3.99 caramel lattes.

The key is who's using them. The new building links the college's business and engineering schools, bridging the distance between disciplines and more directly connecting the campus to Knowledge Park, a tech hub with 11 business tenants.

Ridge said that was a necessary step for the region, and the country, to remain competitive.

"We cannot underestimate the importance of creating a knowledge-based economy," he said. "And this institution can help shape that future."

It's already started in Room 104, where Jana Goodrich team-teaches a senior-level seminar in which students design, research, market and attempt to patent their own projects. One group in her Monday class plans to make a beer tap system that will allow bartenders to draw drafts off consecutive kegs.

That might not be exactly what Penn State President Graham Spanier had in mind when he suggested the next advances in science would come "from the boundaries of individual disciplines."

Then again, it just might work.

What matters to Goodrich is that two groups are using the same room.

"Engineers see things in black and white," she said. "Business students see many shades of gray.

"They learn differently," she said. "They study differently. They approach and understand things in different ways. But in this building, they see each other. They work with each other. They get comfortable with that other language."

They begin to fathom the habits in specialty labs, with their sensor wires, frequency meters and dual-screen PCs.

"I never really understood what the engineers did before," said Meredith Straub, a senior business student and president of the Behrend Student Government Association.

Other students see an immediate practical advantage at the REDC: By stacking their classes in one building, they limit winter trips across campus.

"We used to have to walk a lot," said Aaron Shreve, a senior in Goodrich's product-realization course. He had dressed for a day without weather, selecting a black "Booty Hunter" T-shirt

"I had classes in Hammermill, which is all the way across campus," he said. "And some days I had 10 minutes to get there.

"This is a lot more convenient."

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NUMBERS

The REDC was built with:

- 201,000 bricks
- 6,950 cubic yards of concrete
- 35,000 square feet of glass facing
- 1.42 miles of caulking
- 2,400 gallons of paint
- 6,346 receptacles and switches
- 2,246 miles of cable

Fast fact: Think your home heating bill is high? The monthly budget for the REDC is \$40,000.

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