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Vision Underway for NSU, Connors Campus Collaboration

Muskogee--The vision of a joint education venture between Northeastern State University and Connors State College at NSU's Muskogee campus moved a step closer to reality Friday when the two colleges held groundbreaking ceremonies for a new classroom building.

Dr. Don Betz, NSU president, and Connors State President Dr. Donnie Nero were joined by civic and education leaders in ceremonies that will lead to construction of a 10,000 square foot building, the key component in combining the 23 academic programs now offered to regional residents.

The two higher education institutions have agreed to co-locate on the NSU campus and are already collaborating through an educational program to serve Muskogee's health care industry cluster, one of the largest and fastest growing in Oklahoma.

"We're talking here about the development of a continuing epicenter of education and promise," Betz noted. "This building that we are breaking ground for today represents a mindset that says we can, in a collaborative way, create our future. We know that together we can create a set of variables that make it possible for the children of this region to prosper."

The project has been a dream of Nero's since the idea was proposed nearly three years ago. He and Betz, along with leaders from both institutions, have been meeting to discuss the potential for such a partnership since Betz returned to NSU as president in July 2008.

"We're both very excited about what this vision will mean to our colleges and the community we both serve. It's a great vision, a great plan, and a great opportunity for students," Nero said.

Betz was equally enthusiastic about the opportunities that result from collaboration.

"I share Dr. Nero's excitement that our colleges are able to come together and share a vision of the future of education in Muskogee," Betz said. "Talk about excitement for creating a future, we're creating a set of values that are going to give students an opportunity to be more successful. You can't advance without a vision, and this is such a vision."

The new Student Services facility will house a campus bookstore, library, Child Development Program, classrooms and administration offices. The estimated cost for the project is \$2.2 million, which is being funded through Oklahoma Capital Improvement Authority bonds allocated to Connors.

Oakridge Builders, Inc., of Tulsa is the construction project manager. Tentative plans call for construction to start in February with a completion date set for early 2011.

"We're hoping to be able to start occupying the new facility at the start of the spring semester in January 2011," Nero said. "The contractors believe that with good weather that is a very strong possibility."

The current site of the Connors downtown Muskogee campus on Court Street, which houses 1,100 students, will close and revert to the city of Muskogee, which provided the facility to the college.



Dr. Donnie Nero, Connors State College president and Dr. Don Betz, Northeastern State University pose with artists renditions of the future Connors building to be located on the NSU-Muskogee campus.



Officials from Connors State and Northeastern State University are joined by members from Regional University System of Oklahoma and community leaders to turn the dirt Dec. 18 for Connors new 10,000 square foot campus building to be housed on the NSU-Muskogee campus.

NSU-Muskogee features two academic buildings, constructed in 1993 and 2001, with 70,000 square feet of classroom and laboratory space. NSU offers degree programs including the MBA, master of education, bachelor of science in nursing, and bachelor of science in education, as well as course offerings in business administration, social sciences and education at its Muskogee campus. About 600 students take classes there each year.

Nero said the Connors' nursing program will move to NSU in January.

"One of the major components of our combined efforts is to strengthen the health care education opportunities for both colleges," Nero said. "We realize that health care is a major concern in our nation and that jobs are going to be needed in the industry. It's our combined mission to train students for those jobs, that's why our nursing program is moving at this time."

Connors' career ladder nursing program produces graduates who earn licensed practical nursing or registered nursing degrees. Many of those graduates continue on at NSU to earn their bachelor of science in nursing degrees.

According to Dr. Martin Venneman, dean of NSU's College of Science and Health Professions, both the master's degree in nursing education and the master's degree in occupational therapy are being planned for the Muskogee campus, which will offer additional educational choices for Connors' graduates.

Oklahoma has been described as nearing the verge of a health care crisis with a projected shortage of more than 4,500 practitioners by 2012 in a score of professional areas.

"This co-location of our two educational institutions will strengthen our ability to systematically address how Connors and NSU can partner together and with others to reduce the threat that our region's residents will face if we do not act in concert," Venneman said.

Sue Harris, executive director of the Muskogee Area Chamber of Commerce, and Tyler Hammons, Muskogee's mayor, spoke of the positive economic impact and economic development the new facility and venture will have on the area.

"This project will allow students growing up in our community to stay right here in Muskogee for all of their education needs," Harris said. "This venture sends a strong signal that we mean business in developing our community assets."

Hammons, an economics major at NSU, said, "Every dollar spent in our community is an investment in our community and an investment in the future. Education is our future. We offer classes from pre-school to a master's degree right here in Muskogee. Students never have to leave Muskogee for an education."

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