



prologue.

The welcome mat is out at the University, sometimes in the most unlikely places.

It is a great time to be a tour guide at the University of Oklahoma. Business is brisk. Undoubtedly keeping the campus map up to date is a challenge, with new and restored buildings opening with dizzying regularity—but there is just a lot to see.

Museums, the library and athletic facilities are easy sells. If pressed for time, however, it could be tempting to skip the new Stephenson Life Sciences Research Center, home to the research, administration and outreach activities of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. That would be a mistake.

It helps if the tour guide for this south research campus installation is the department chair, George Richter-Addo, a dynamic salesman for his discipline who has no trouble sparking interest in even the most unscientific of visitors. His pitch is simple. Expensive to build and maintain, this facility is a taxpayer investment, and he wants the public to know what OU chemists are doing there.

The building has some fascinating features. An interactive periodic table covers one first floor wall, each element illustrated by a concrete sample, while a touch screen enables the viewer to combine random elements and observe the often-startling results. A second-floor lounge offers a glass-walled laboratory where actual research is underway. Eventually web cams will follow the actions of the graduate researcher to allow prospective students from all parts of the globe to see what pursuing this field of study would be like.

The glass walls, found throughout the building, are not just an architectural device; they are designed to promote transparency and openness, figuratively and literally, among faculty

and students. The student influence in the facility's planning process was evident from the beginning. Students were the first to be asked what sort of environment they envisioned and the first to tour as construction began to spot anything they might have overlooked.

Richter-Addo is quick to credit them with many of the best design ideas. They insisted on special accommodations far in excess of ADA requirements, recognizing both the needs of the disabled and that students come in different sizes. They wanted faculty offices spread throughout the building, adjacent to relevant laboratories. The glass-fronted faculty offices are nearly double the size of the national average, and with a conference table and four chairs can become a small classroom in seconds.

The traditional, individual closed labs have been replaced with a series of open research stations, enabling faculty mentors to directly oversee the work of one or more students, adding safety where potentially dangerous materials are in play. The resulting comfort factor has led a number of undergraduates to request bringing their research projects south.

When moving chemistry and biochemistry's graduate research arm and administration to the south campus was first suggested a decade ago, considerable controversy ensued. Some faculty members felt that distance from the main campus was too great, especially for undergraduates. But adequate expansion of the old Chemistry Building on Parrington Oval, one of OU's oldest, was deemed impractical, and the campus bus system has made the distance problem manageable. For the foreseeable future, however, the undergraduate classrooms and teaching labs remain in

the old building until a phase two of the Stephenson building is possible.

The new building is designed for the future; without any further expansion, the department can increase its research population by 50 percent. Room also is available for retired and emeritus faculty to maintain an office in the place where they have spent their professional lives, contributing continuity and knowledge to current students outside the classroom and laboratory.

The Stephenson Life Sciences Research Center is a designated University "core facility." Other OU departments, regional universities and small businesses are invited to use the highly specialized equipment that they find too expensive to purchase separately, such as the recently acquired "flagship" mass spectrometer, the x-ray lab, the glass and electronics shops.

Richter-Addo has the welcome mat out as well for outside conferences and symposiums, whether academic or commercial. He wants to see the available meeting rooms, which come in several sizes, constantly occupied, both for the efficiency of use and to publicize what his researchers are doing. "We haven't done a very good job of advertising," he says, while giving credit to TV programs like "CSI," "House" and "Law and Order" for raising public interest in science.

He also wants his students to appreciate the past of their craft as well as the present and the prospects for the future. He is assembling displays of antique laboratory instruments and photographs for the hallway cases illustrating how far science has come.

"We are always looking for ways to solve problems," he says. "Science is never static. We should not be limited by what we think we know." —CJB