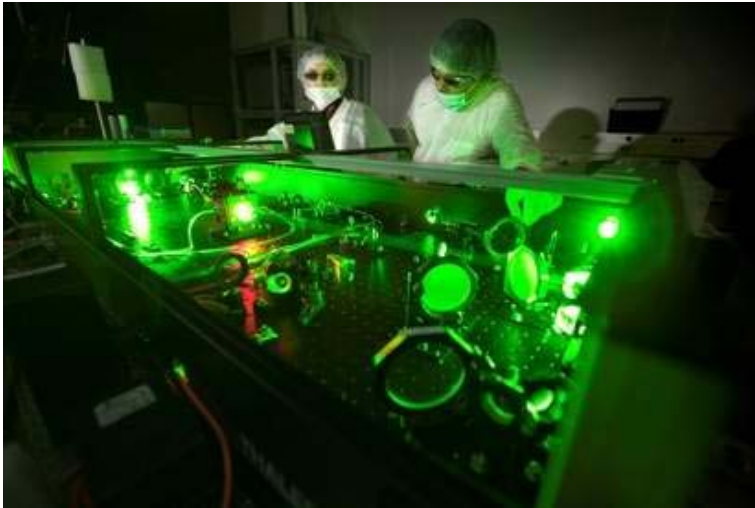


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Military contract could make NU a national player

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The Diocles Extreme Light Laboratory at UNL.

University of Nebraska leaders have signed a contract to do research for the U.S. military, an agreement that could be worth as much as \$84 million and turbocharge efforts to make NU a national player in scientific and medical research.

NU President J.B. Milliken and Gen. Robert Kehler, commander of the Bellevue-based United States Strategic Command, appeared together at a Thursday morning press conference to announce the agreement, known as a University Affiliated Research Center, or UARC.

Milliken and other top university officials believe the agreement could last for decades, becoming a steady source of funding as Nebraska's four campuses attempt to collectively edge their way into the top tier of research universities.

"We certainly hope that this will be a long, long term relationship," Milliken said.

The agreement comes with secrecy uncommon on a college campus.

For the first time, several University of Nebraska campuses will house classified military documents, a designation meaning that a part of UNL's Behlen Laboratory will be remodeled and may be sealed off from students.

But university leaders have decided such trade-offs are worth the trouble. The UARC, awarded to NU by StratCom, will bring between \$30 million and \$84 million in research funding to the university's four campuses in the next five years, university leaders said. Those campuses could haul in exponentially more money for related and spin-off research in the decades to come.

And the agreement promises prestige, too: Only 13 other universities in the country have a UARC, a list that includes heavyweights like Johns Hopkins University, the University of Texas and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, known as MIT.

"This allows us to knock on doors we couldn't knock on in the past," said Mario Scalora, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln psychology professor who will likely get research funding as part of the agreement. "And this is just the beginning."

University officials say NU is about to embark on a long and lucrative friendship with StratCom, which is headquartered at Offutt Air Force Base and oversees the nation's nuclear weapons.

At UNL, professor Donald Umstadter and his Diocles Laser -- one of the most powerful lasers in the world will research and develop better ways to detect nuclear material. That research is seemingly crucial as Iran toys with building its own nuclear weapon.

"Physicists let the genie out of the bottle," Umstadter said, speaking of the development of the atomic bomb. "I'd like to help to put it back."

Professors associated with the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Peter Kiewit Institute will help run a research project that likely simulates things like floods and terrorist attacks and then uses those computer simulations to improve the military's response to natural and man-made disasters.

A team of NU Medical Center researchers, including Dr. Steve Hinrichs, director of NU's Center for Biosecurity, will work on vaccines and other defenses to protect American troops if they are attacked with biological or chemical weapons.

And professors in the University of Nebraska's space law program -- one of the few law school programs of its type in the country will do research on legal issues tied to the military's involvement in space and cyberspace.

"We're trying to solve some of the toughest problems they have," said retired Lt. Gen. Bob Hinson, once a deputy commander at StratCom and now the director of NU's National Strategic Research Institute, which will oversee all military-related research.

The agreement is the latest in a long string of research success for the University of Nebraska, said Sen. Ben Nelson.

Nelson, the outgoing Democrat who sits on the powerful Armed Services Committee, said earmarks and other federal grants had helped NU build new research buildings and lure top professors so it could start to compete with traditional research powers like Stanford, Michigan and California-Berkeley.

"Even though some people may doubt the validity of earmark procedures, it would be very difficult for them to conclude that university would get this (UARC) without that backbone," Nelson said.

The University of Nebraska beat out several other universities for the UARC, Nelson said, though he said he didn't know which other universities were finalists for the research center.

Prem Paul, UNL's vice chancellor for research, said the importance of the UARC goes far beyond the initial five-year contract.

This year, the University of Nebraska's four campuses receive about \$35 million in research funding from the Department of Defense. That figure will jump significantly in 2013 as NU's research center starts to function.

Each NU campus should be able to build up the research areas being funded by the agreement, either by attracting other federal grants or partnering with other universities who already have a UARC, Paul said.

Currently, the Army and the Navy each fund research centers at five universities apiece. The National Security Agency has two such agreements with universities, and NASA and the Missile Defense Agency each have one. Penn State University is the only other Big 10 school with a UARC.

If history is a guide, the five-year agreement between the University of Nebraska and StratCom will last decades or longer.

Johns Hopkins, for example, has worked with the Navy under a similar agreement since the end of World War II.

Paul stressed that university professors uncomfortable doing military research won't have to. Those who do get involved, he said, will be working on defending troops and U.S. national security, not on offensive weapons.

"It's an opportunity for the university and the faculty to contribute to national security," Paul said. "It makes you feel good."

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