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## 'This is our showpiece:' Take a first look inside U of M's new \$40M STEM building

**John Klyce** Memphis Commercial Appeal

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In 2022, when Okenwa Okoli was considering pursuing the open deanship at the University of Memphis Herff College of Engineering, he was drawn to a new project it had in the works: a \$40 million, 65,000-square-foot, three-floor STEM building that would boast state-of-the-art labs and spacious classrooms.

In his position at the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering in Florida, he had access to similar, high-caliber research facilities. And he understood the boon they could provide for an academic program.

“Seeing that this was coming, that helped,” Okoli told members of the media on Wednesday.

### 'As big as any other school'

Okoli ultimately took the job and started as the new dean at Herff in January 2023, and now, he's using the new STEM building – which is tentatively slated to be completed in April and open in August – as a faculty recruitment tool. But he knows it has the potential to do more than this: It could help lure in students, too, and bring the college a new level of prestige.

Over the years, Herff has grown significantly. The school's spring 2020 publication noted that undergraduate enrollment had risen by 37% from 2013 to 2018, and according to its website, its research expenditures have grown by 91% over the last five years.

These days, there are currently about 1,300 total students. And the college now wants to raise this number to somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500, just as it wants to continue to buoy U of M's research push – which is key to the university retaining its top research status from the from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

The new building, Okoli believes, can help with both efforts.

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“For me, this is our showpiece,” he said. “And I want to utilize this, really, to show people that we are ready and that we are as big as any other school.”

## **Flexible spaces for decades to come**

But what are the features of the new building that will do this? The Commercial Appeal, along with other members of the media, took a hard hat tour on Wednesday to find out.

The name of the new facility is the STEM Classroom and Research Building, and it's poised to provide a new home for STEM research, classroom instruction, and competitions and exhibitions. When it came to the design, flexibility was the name of the game. This building is expected to be used by U of M for decades to come, and much of its space can be adjusted, if it needs to. Let's say the focus of some of the labs shifts 50 years down the line. They can be adapted.

That's not to say the students and faculty members of the immediate future shouldn't be excited about the space. A \$40 million budget can get you a top-notch building, and the new STEM facility is chockful of features that will no doubt be heavily promoted by the engineering college.

There is a large, glass façade facing Central Avenue, a lobby with a hardwood ceiling and a staircase dubbed the “monument stairs.” There is a breezeway guiding people to the original engineering building. There are seven labs on the first floor, and four of them are high-bay labs with 30-foot ceilings, around 2,400 square feet of space, and overlooks on the second floor, which give people a bird's eye view.

The building's labs are set to have a variety of uses. For example, it's expected to tout an advanced manufacturing lab, a biomaterials lab, an earthquake engineering lab, an agricultural-technology lab, a small-scale fabrication lab, a large-scale fabrication lab, and a cybersecurity lab.

And the labs aren't its only claim to fame. On the second floor, there is an office suite, numerous team rooms for collaboration, and two sprawling active learning classrooms, which contain about 2,400 square feet, and have partitions that can turn them into four classrooms. Each active learning space is equipped to hold seven smart TVs, which professors

will be able to use to display problems. Students will then be able to split up into groups and head to the various TVs to solve them.

The second floor also contains a large exhibition space with floor-to-ceiling windows, which is expected to be used not just for exhibitions, but other events, like career fairs. Again, we return to the theme of flexibility – it can be used for a variety of purposes.

The third floor, too, houses a variety of spaces. This is where the biomaterials lab is located, as well as classrooms for computer science, data science, and internet and information services, which have lab breakout spaces built into them. It has a workforce development space, too, and a rooftop terrace overlooking Zach Curlin Street and the Ned R. McWherter Library.

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Creating the building hasn't always been easy; Mark Pasino, the senior project engineer for Flintco Construction who led the media tour on Wednesday, said that the world is "in crisis" for electrical equipment, and this had temporarily set the project back. But things have run smoothly, no one has gotten injured, and now, the building is slated to be completed on schedule.

In a sense, it could also be the start of a new era for the engineering school.

"This is just the beginning," Okoli said. "Once we get this rolling, and we start showing the great output that we have, we're going to ask for more money for students, for faculty, for infrastructure in engineering."