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Kansas scores huge victory with National Cancer Institute designation

Premium content from Kansas City Business Journal by Fred Logan, Contributing Writer

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The July 12 announcement that the **University of Kansas Cancer Center** had won designation as a **National Cancer Institute** Cancer Center was a huge victory for the state of Kansas.

To be sure, KU's NCI designation also was a regional triumph. Civic leaders, philanthropic organizations and businesses throughout the greater Kansas City area provided crucial support during the decade-long campaign to win the coveted designation.

Of course, KU itself deserves kudos. Its leaders made one smart move after another, not the least of which was the decision in 2004 to hire Dr. Roy Jensen as the KU Cancer Center's first director. The performance of this respected scientist as relentless scrounger, cheerleader, weepy celebrant of milestones and mastermind of the effort was nothing less than brilliant.

But this point must be noted: KU's NCI designation proves that the Sunflower State is a force to be reckoned with in the life sciences arena.

When you consider that Kansas is on the verge of scoring a second major life sciences victory with the construction of the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility in Manhattan, you have to ask yourself how a relatively small state could be having such outsized success.

One reason is that policymakers have resisted the temptation to launch new initiatives to chase the life sciences flavor of the day. Instead, they've strategically leveraged areas of life sciences excellence in the state's higher-education institutions.

So KU's NCI application was built on the university's world-class reputation in drug discovery and innovation. The state's campaign to win NBAF relied heavily on **Kansas State University's** excellence in animal health and food safety programs and its existing research capacity.

Kansas' build-on-our-assets approach generated broad political support. Former Gov. Kathleen Sebelius championed life sciences initiatives. Her ideological opposite, Gov. Sam Brownback, has done so as well.

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts worked with then-U.S. Sen. Brownback in 2009 to win a federal appropriation for cancer research equipment at KU. U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran quickly became an important advocate for **National Institutes of Health** funding as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

In 2004, former State Sen. Nick Jordan teamed up with former State Rep. Kenny Wilk to promote passage of the Kansas Economic Growth Act. The legislation, which won bipartisan support, established the **Kansas Bioscience Authority**. The KBA has played a significant role in the NCI and NBAF efforts.

Let's be careful not to overstate the importance of politics in Kansas' life sciences efforts. Elected officials deserve credit for recognizing and building on KU's strengths. But the university never would have won NCI designation if it didn't have world-class cancer researchers.

Every state craves a win during tough times. Kansas got a big one with KU's NCI designation.

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