NU gets $3 million grant to study brain disorders

Falk Center to treat malignant tumors; university to receive facility’s resources.

BY BEN FIGA
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Northwestern has received a $3 million grant from the Falk Foundation to form a new research center to study brain disorders.

The Falk Center for Molecular Therapeutics will be based in NU's Illinois Technology Enterprise Corporation building, 1801 Maple Ave., and will be affiliated with the McCormick School of Engineering.

"The research is based on the development and testing of molecules that have specific activities that are useful for treating neurological diseases," said Joseph Walsh, McCormick's associate dean for graduate studies and research.

"However, it is not going to be limited to solely neurological activities."

The Falk Center plans to use Nyaxis Neurotherapies Inc., a biotech start-up company, to bring its technologies into the private sector.

The company was founded by biomedical engineering Prof. Joseph Moskal and Jan Leestma, a former professor of neurology and pathology. The intellectual property generated from the center will belong to NU, but the company plans to have a technology transfer agreement when appropriate.

"Moskal has had a long affiliation with Northwestern," Walsh said. "This is a good way for him to strengthen ties with the university and a good way for the university to strengthen ties with his research program."

The company currently is developing two therapeutic models. One involves a gene-based therapy for the treatment of malignant brain tumors in children and adults. The other is based on a family of molecules called glykins, discovered by Moskal, that appears to be involved in memory and learning.

These molecules may have implications for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease, damage caused by strokes and neuropathic pain.

"The research is mostly related to brain diseases," said Robert Linsenmeier, a biomedical engineering professor. "Gene discovery for the basis of brain tumors might give us some therapeutic techniques, and we can take advantage of genes within the tumor cell."

The research also could expand from its initial focus, Linsenmeier said.

"My lab is beginning to collaborate on a signaling pathway in the brain," Linsenmeier said. "We're interested in the retina and retinal disease."

The university will not be starting from scratch when it establishes the new center. The Falk Foundation plans to bring all of its employees and equipment.

The $3 million gift will be given during a period of three years. By merging with NU, the center will be able to pursue research grants and will collaborate with university researchers.

"This has been a mutual agreement," Walsh said. "We sought (Moskal) out, and he sought us out. You have to have the structure or you can't get science."

The Falk Center's potential research is generating excitement among scientists.

"We fully expect the Falk Center to thrive and evolve given the outstanding caliber of Northwestern's students, faculty and university resources," Moskal said. "The Falk vision combined with such academic excellence is pretty heady stuff, and we are convinced that this will unfold into something truly excellent."