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## For researchers in Weill Hall, collaboration between Ithaca and New York City is central

By Lauren Gold

With its open plan, shared facilities and top-of-the-line videoconferencing equipment, Weill Hall is designed for big-picture scientists: researchers who think beyond the confines of their field to tackle challenges in creative new ways.

This principle -- that some of the most innovative ideas come from scientists who work together across disciplinary boundaries -- has been a central Cornell strength for decades. So despite Weill Hall's newness, the faculty and students inhabiting it are already savvy to the rewards of cooperation.

"One of the main reasons I came to Cornell was that it was such a collaborative environment -- much more so than other institutions of similar caliber across the nation," said Chris Schaffer, assistant professor of biomedical engineering.

Schaffer has several ongoing collaborative projects with colleagues on campus in Ithaca and at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City, including a study of the role of small strokes in initiating or exacerbating Alzheimer's disease. Another research project is to develop a laser-based therapy for epilepsy.



*Jason Koski/University Photography*

**Chris Schaffer, assistant professor of biomedical engineering, has several ongoing collaborative projects with colleagues in Ithaca and at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City.**

"A lot of the projects I'm on, we're collaborating not because I have something the other faculty needs and they have something I need, but because it would be a project that would be fun to do together," said Schaffer. "That's something very unique about Cornell as compared to other top-tier universities. At some places I've been in the past, collaboration was viewed as a sign of weakness. [But] here at Cornell it's actively encouraged.

Collaboration is vital for biomedical engineers, said Michael Shuler, the Samuel B. Eckert Professor of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering and the James and Marsha McCormick Chair of Biomedical Engineering.

"We look at ourselves as an intellectual bridge between engineering and medicine, so for us to be as competitive and successful as we can be, the interaction with the medical school has to be good," said Shuler.

Every tenure-track faculty member in the biomedical engineering department is involved in at least one collaborative research project, he added, with some working on as many as five. The department, whose

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### Cornell Chronicle:

Lauren Gold  
(607) 255-9736  
[LG34@cornell.edu](mailto:LG34@cornell.edu)

### Media Contact:

Press Relations Office  
(607) 255-6074  
[pressoffice@cornell.edu](mailto:pressoffice@cornell.edu)

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far-flung units have been pulled together for the first time in Weill Hall, is also linked to the medical school through interdisciplinary courses, annual retreats and conferences.

Said Schaffer: "I've been [at Cornell] about three years and until this year, the biomedical engineering department was spread throughout 12 buildings. Now we have a home. We have a place where we all go and where we bump into each other for coffee and to talk. The building has made an enormous difference."

Collaboration is also encouraged for researchers at the Weill Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology, an interdisciplinary research center focusing on cell signaling and molecular dynamics, which occupies parts of three floors of Weill Hall.

"The most productive collaborative efforts are being developed from interactions at yearly symposia and joint topical meetings being held together with our colleagues at the medical school," said Scott Emr, the institute's Frank H.T. Rhodes Class of '56 Director. "Each year, scientists from the medical school who share common interests with faculty here in Ithaca visit with us for three days, or vice versa. Out of these meetings, important collaborative research projects have been initiated."

For Schaffer, the move into Weill Hall is also paying off by giving him and colleagues a greater sense of community and shared goals. "The research space is fantastic -- world-class space that I think is going to be a great environment for myself and members of my lab to work in."

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