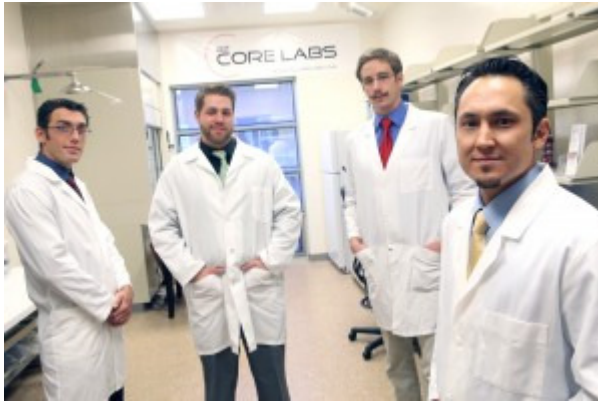


## Rent-a-tech: AZ Core Labs offers equipment, expertise



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Having a million-dollar idea and generous investors aren't always enough for start-ups working in cutting-edge technology fields.

The long road from a back-of-the-napkin sketch to a production-ready prototype is littered with expensive decisions that often require even the most well-funded companies to choose between various pieces of hardware that they may only use once and only for a few months.

AZ Core Labs, a division of the Northern Arizona Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology, has been created to give businesses another option: Rent the technology as well as the technicians.

The head of NACET, Russ Yelton, said failing to get even temporary access to key technology is a stumbling block for many fledgling companies.

"It is important for companies to have access to higher-end equipment that they may not be able to afford. A lot of our start-up companies can't afford to pay \$60,000 for a microscope," he said.

Most scientists, he said, have to either collaborate with other scientists who have access to the right equipment or pay to have their samples analyzed by out-of-state labs.

Yelton, who has been working inside business incubators for the last eight years, said sending out prototypes to be tested is also costly.

"The processing charges for shipping a sample out of town, or in many cases, out of state, makes it cost-prohibitive," Yelton said.

Standing in the middle of his decked-out lab at NACET, AZ Core Lab President Robert Kellar is offering access to some of the most expensive technology money can buy.

The "star" of the NACET-based lab is a Keyence VHX-1000 digital microscope.

The \$180,000 microscope offers a large depth-of-field with high-resolution imaging that is 20 times greater than that of conventional microscopes.

Only a handful of people know how to operate the microscope, Kellar said, but he believes there are dozens of companies that could benefit from renting it out.

Other equipment include a Molecular Devices VMax plate reader, a scanning electron

microscope, a 80 below refrigerator, a Zeiss compound microscope and a 3DHistech Pannoramic Midi Fluorescent slide scanner.

Their equipment at the NACET lab is primarily suited to biomedical applications, although Kellar has agreements to get access to equipment (and expertise) at labs across the state, including NAU, to be beneficial to other industries.

Kellar said he wants to make the company a one-stop shop for businesses across the state with a temporary, or at least infrequent, need for testing and analytical services.

"We are trying to provide a service where a technology-based company can come to us and say, 'Here is what our problem is,'" Kellar said.

The process is fairly straightforward: Clients send AZ Core Labs the samples that need to be reviewed on the equipment of choice. The samples are analyzed (with the option of watching via a Skype feed) and then are returned, along with a final report.

So far, AZ Core Labs has only had a half-dozen clients since opening their doors in May.

Kellar expects business to pick-up for the four-man lab as more learn about their bill-by-the-hour service.

The new lab was funded out of a million-dollar federal stimulus grant that Gov. Jan Brewer split between NACET and Northern Arizona University.

Kellar said the company has in a place a long-term strategy to become self-sufficient over the next few years.

On the top of his list are federally and state-backed grants for research.

"We've been looking at putting in for awards during competitive grant cycles," Kellar said.

Revenue from various contracts will also go to replace equipment over time.

The shelf life of his equipment varies -- a digital microscope might need to be replaced every few years as the technology improves, but the 80-below fridge could last for decades.

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