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FLYING CUPOLA TOPS NEW BUILDING

A MILESTONE FOR CNU'S SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING RESEARCH CENTER.

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | July 21, 2025

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The arrival of a crane seemingly powerful enough to move the moon was the first sign that something big was about to happen in the construction zone of the new [Science and Engineering Research Center \(SERC\)](#).

For much of the year, the cupola for the building had slowly taken shape on the ground in front of the actual structure. It was encased in a protective wrap with a strong steel substructure so that it can withstand winds from its eventual perch high atop the three-story building.

Lifting it to the top would not only be a milestone in the progress of the building, it would also be a project that had to be done with extreme care and under near-perfect weather conditions. After all, raising a 34-ton cupola at the end of a cable and delicately placing it in its precise location isn't an everyday task, even for Whiting-Turner Contracting and its subcontractors.

Adding to the stress, the big lift would be carried live on YouTube, thanks to the 24/7 camera feed aimed at the construction site.

Whiting-Turner targeted July 8 as THE day. The construction company and CNU officials kept an eye on the weather. Too much wind or thunderstorms, and the lift would be postponed. The day dawned mild with the gentlest of breezes.

The crane operator placed a giant eight-prong claw over the top of the cupola. At about 1:30 p.m., word went out that everything was ready. President William G. Kelly and Nicole Guajardo, Dean of the College of the Natural and

Behavioral Sciences, climbed to the cupola atop Christopher Newport Hall to capture a unique perspective. Members of the University's Policy Committee halted their deliberations to watch the live video on a big screen. On the ground, construction workers paused to stand back and observe.

Almost silently, the cupola smoothly lifted off. Past the first floor, then the second, and in only a matter of seconds it was flying above the top of the building ever so slowly. The crane operator lowered the precious cargo precisely into place. With that, the CNU skyline had a new look. Cupolas are a signature element in CNU architecture. In either bronze or gleaming white, they sit atop many of the University's major buildings. SERC will join those ranks when it opens in early January 2026. The building will be home to several STEM-related programs. It will feature state-of-the-art laboratories, classrooms, an advanced makerspace, and a two-story drone lab.

The technological showplace represents a commitment to accomplishing one of the priorities of the [University's Strategic Compass](#): "Students will realize strong, enduring value from a comprehensive liberal arts education anchored in excellence that prepares them to understand contemporary challenges, solve complex problems, think critically, adapt to changing professional demands and career opportunities, develop fully as individuals, and become engaged citizens. A student-focused experience prepares students to flourish for a lifetime, opening their minds to new ideas."
