For Malak Kotb, Litsa Kranias and Shuk-mei Ho, getting into the laboratory can be just what the doctor ordered.

"It's very therapeutic," says Kotb, a native Egyptian who became chairwoman last month of the Molecular Genetics, Biochemistry and Microbiology department at the University of Cincinnati's College of Medicine. "I'd love to do more of it."

Kotb came from the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis after being recruited by David Stern, dean of the College of Medicine.

For Kotb and her new colleagues, their mission at UC is about much more than their own research. They're on the front lines of UC's movement to drive its medical and research operations to national prominence, bringing in more students, more researchers and more money.

They each earn about $260,000 a year in salary, but combined they bring more than $10 million in research money a year through their own labs, each operating with a dozen or more researchers.

But the bulk of their time is spent raising money, writing new grant proposals, recruiting new faculty and traveling around the world to pitch UC as a place for cutting-edge research.

"We work 24-7. The moment we wake up, all the time," says Ho, a Hong Kong native and chairwoman of the Environmental Health Department since 2005. "It's a different set of skills. You need to make sure the infrastructure of the whole department is operating effectively."

Their success holds consequences far beyond the university's east campus where they work.

UC's medical and health-care operations combine for more than $500 million in revenue, about half of the university's total budget. With about 3,800 employees and with hundreds of millions of dollars in sponsored research, it's also one of the biggest economic engines in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.

UC is investing heavily in the expansion.

It is spending $400 million in a decade to build a new laboratory building that will open this summer and renovating the massive Medical Sciences Building. The project will add more than $100 million in new debt that UC will have to pay back, even after state capital funds.

Kotb will move her offices and labs into the new building and says it was a key factor in her recruitment.

Stern is raising hundreds of millions of dollars to fund four Centers of Excellence that will lead the unit's growth.

He says when he recruits a new department head, he's looking for a return on that investment within five years in new grants and outside research funding.

"The most important thing for me now is to invest in people," he says. "If I pick the wrong chairs, I haven't done my job."
Kranias is the veteran of the trio, having spent 30 years at UC.

After being asked several times, she became chairwoman of Pharmacology and Cell Biophysics in April. She oversees a department of 14 faculty members and about 15 graduate students. Her lab includes up to 20 researchers.

"I love research," she says. "But now I feel I'm at the level that enough maturity has been reached in our lab."

That leaves department heads to raise money and recruit faculty.

Working in UC's strained budget, one that has prompted cuts all across campus, their challenge is to bring in as much money as they spend.

Ho says her department has brought in $9 million in new grants in the fiscal year that ends June 30. With a budget of more than $20 million, it's approaching break-even.

"This is the first year since I've been here that we've really increased funding," she says. "Every single minute we are supposed to be revenue neutral."