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UCI-designed research project won't reach orbit

By **GARY ROBBINS**

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A \$20 million instrument that UC Irvine developed for biomedical research aboard the International Space Station apparently will never be dispatched to the orbiting outpost because of shifting priorities at NASA.

UCI biochemist Alex McPherson, who led the project, says NASA told him it does not plan to transport the protein crystal incubator on the space shuttle, choosing to reserve cargo space for material needed to complete construction of the space station.

The instrument – known as Observable Protein Crystal Growth Apparatus, or OPCGA – was designed to cultivate and measure crystals that are larger than those grown on Earth. Such crystals can aid in the development of medical drugs.

"NASA is abandoning most of the science planned for the space station, which is disappointing," said McPherson, who flew cargo on previous shuttle flights. "What's the point of having a space station if you're not going to do science?"

The OPCGA was supposed to go aloft two years ago. But the situation changed in February 2003 when the shuttle Columbia exploded, killing seven astronauts. The shuttle fleet was subsequently grounded, and flights won't resume until May, at the earliest.

The incubator was being developed by a team of 18 employees in Huntsville, Ala. McPherson plans to travel there next week to oversee preparations to truck the OPCGA to UCI, where it will be stored indefinitely.

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