CHARLESTON — Eastern Illinois University officials and Charleston community members dipped their shovels into the muddy ground Friday morning at the site of what will become a renewable energy research facility — Center for Clean Energy Research and Education (CENCERE).

Peter Ping Liu, professor of technology, has been at the forefront of the university's renewable energy ventures and will lead the charge with a new graduate program, master of science in sustainable energy. The program is the culmination of 10 campus departments working together to form the new opportunity for Eastern students with the new hands-on lab, Liu said at the ceremony Friday.
He said with the donations from Charleston Area Charitable Foundation, EIU has been “afforded the exciting opportunities in renewable energy research and the ability to integrate that into the university’s academics.”

The university received grants for its research using equipment funded by Charleston Area Charitable Foundation, which is now donating funds for the lab, as well.

“The equipment enabled us to explore with biomass resources,” he added. “I thank you all ‘CENCEREly.’”

The 5,000 square-foot $1 million facility will include an “idea incubator,” a room where students will be able to connect with businesses and community members to secure ideas for future projects, he said. The lab will research biofuels to examine which products are most effective, according to the school’s website.

Board of Trustees Chairman Roger Kratochvil says the opportunity to integrate learning into the call for energy on campus is something the board couldn’t pass on for the school.

“We saw this as a fantastic opportunity for our students,” he said.

President Bill Perry noted that with facilities like the energy center and the new lab EIU grads will be in the forefront for career opportunities.

“We also saw this as an opportunity to provide area farmers with new markets for products and bi-products they can grow locally,” Kratochvil said.

“This was a win-win-win situation.”

Liu said the faculty members hope to develop — with the research in the lab — alternate biomass fuels for the Renewable Energy Center.

“With the help from Charleston Charities, EIU has emerged as a leader in biomass research in higher education,” Liu added.

About 100 people gathered north of the energy center as windchills dropped to about 19 degrees, according to local weather readings from Coles County Memorial Airport.

“Now let’s get the shovels in the ground,” Perry concluded.