ITHACA, N.Y. -- Nearly half the New Yorkers polled by Cornell University researchers said they would support stem-cell research and would approve establishment of a state-funded institute dedicated to that purpose. But the figure is far below the national average reported in other polls and suggests New York _ typically regarded as one of the nation’s more progressive states and a leader in scientific and medical research _ will lag behind in any future development of stem-cell research, said Lou Jean Fleron, director of Economic Development Initiatives for Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. “It is curious, and unfortunate,” Fleron said. “It means New York will be in the back of the pack as this technology _ and the jobs that will go with it _ flourish elsewhere.” In a statewide poll of 800 people, Cornell’s Survey Research Institute found 45 percent would support a ballot measure to create a stem-cell research institute in New York _ similar to the $3 billion initiative overwhelmingly approved last fall by California voters. However, 26 percent of the respondents said it was unlikely they would support such a proposition. The remaining 27 percent said they were undecided or needed more information. The poll had a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points. Nationally, other polls have shown between two-thirds and three-quarters of Americans support embryonic stem-cell research and a majority say they would like to see fewer restrictions on taxpayer funding for those studies. The survey findings surprised Karin Duncker, executive director of the New York Biotechnology Association, a not-for-profit trade group.
representing 260 biotechnology companies and institutions in New York, which ranked second nationally in 2004 with nearly $1.5 billion in federal scientific grants awarded and has developed a number of Centers for Excellence statewide to further develop advanced technologies. “The only reason I can think of is that stem-cell research isn’t yet at the top level of New Yorkers’ priorities and there hasn’t really been a big push for it yet,” Duncker said. Medical researchers say stem cells hold the promise of serving as replacements to cells damaged by diseases like Alzheimer’s or in traumatic injuries. More than 100 million Americans suffer from cancer, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, heart disease, Lou Gehrig’s disease and other conditions that some scientists think could be alleviated by advances in stem-cell research. Despite the technology’s promise, President George Bush has opposed embryonic stem-cell research, although he has been receptive to other theoretical approaches that do not require destroying embryos. The president has limited federal funding for stem-cell research. As a result the funding vacuum created by Bush’s actions, states like California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Wisconsin have taken it upon themselves to finance further research and development. In New York, the state Assembly has twice passed legislation to fund stem-cell research only to have it die in the Republican-controlled Senate. According to the poll, support for stem-cell research was similar in all regions of the state. The key demographic differences in support were based on political and religious affiliation, income, education and race. Of those respondents opposed to stem-cell research, one-third said it was unethical or immoral, while only one-fifth cited the financial costs. Approximately half of registered Democrats (53 percent) and Independents (46 percent) supported stem-cell research compared to just 32 percent of the Republicans polled. Two-thirds of self-described atheists and agnostics supported stem-cell research, compared to 38 percent of Protestant respondents and 42 percent of Catholics. Poll respondents from households with incomes of $75,000 and above were almost twice as likely to support state funding for stem-cell research than those from households with incomes of $35,000 or less (59 percent versus 34 percent). Respondents with some sort of graduate education were twice as likely (60 percent versus 30 percent) to say they would vote in support of state-funded stem-cell research than those with a high school education or less. White respondents were also more likely to support state-funded stem-cell research than nonwhite respondents (50 percent versus 35 percent).