

The Rest of the Story: Oregon Bioscience Association's 2016-'17 Annual Report

OREGON'S BIO TALENT POOL BOOSTED BY INNOVATIVE GRANT

If there's a common challenge shared by all Oregon bioscience companies, Lisa Hale of Grace Bio-Labs efficiently sums it up from her company's perspective and location in Bend. "Our success depends on attracting and retaining talent in Central Oregon," says Hale, vice president of the fast-growing Central Oregon biotech company.

The vital, statewide goal of expanding the world-class talent pool of highly trained workers for Oregon's bio companies recently received an unprecedented boost. In the 2015-17 legislative biennium, the state's Oregon Talent Council awarded Oregon Bio a historic \$750,000 grant for advanced workforce training.

As the largest grant award in Oregon Bio's 26 years, this state funding is earmarked to implement, grow and accelerate workers' knowledge, skill sets and experience as part of regional workforce development for un- and under-employed Oregonians. This wave of intensified, regional training targets workers in the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon.

Says Denise McCarty, executive director of Oregon Bio, "With this forward-thinking grant, our association's exceptional training continues to thrive, and it gives our companies confidence in Oregon's promise of a trained workforce and talented workforce pipeline they can count on."

The grant framework builds on the powerful success of Oregon Bio's workplace training curriculum BioPro and its parallel training program, BioCatalyst. BioPro's training curriculum raises the knowledge and efficiency of the state's bioscience workforce to improve Oregon's industry competitiveness. BioCatalyst Advanced Training enhances the skills of un- and under-employed management professionals, engineers and project managers in the state seeking career transitions and qualifying them for the advanced job requirements of Oregon's companies.

Julie Black, the director of Oregon Bio's member services and business development and an architect of Oregon Bio's training programs, said the Oregon Talent Council grant amplifies BioPro's and BioCatalyst's current goals of increasing the state's industry competitiveness and enhancing Oregon companies' access to local training opportunities on behalf of their employees. Black said with the Oregon Talent Council grant, Oregon Bio has been able to take its high-profile, successful training program in Portland and stretch it throughout Oregon.

"With this grant, we've been able to serve the Central Oregon region with training in Bend, and the Willamette Valley region with training in Eugene," said Black. "The grant has also allowed Oregon Bio to add an even more robust curriculum to our existing training."

Black added that to be good stewards of the Oregon Talent Council grant funds and meet the position requirements of the state's companies, Oregon Bio worked diligently with its statewide steering committee of bio industry members to ensure that the training curriculum fill the needs.

Scott Zellmer, vice president and director of operations at Wilsonville's RedMedx and head of Oregon Bio's steering committee, emphasized the significance of the grant for the industry.

"Funding by the Oregon Talent Council is vital to our company and to building a vibrant biotechnology and bioscience community in Oregon," says Zellmer. "As an emerging company in the Portland area, our access to top-notch workforce training is vital to building a competitive and profitable organization. This would not be possible without the Oregon Bioscience Association, BioPro and BioCatalyst programs, and the Oregon Talent Council funding."

The Oregon Talent Council was established to grow industry-guided training programs that enhance and further Oregon's STEM, CTE and education investments toward developing talent for growth industries in the state.

Melissa Leoni, executive director of the Oregon Talent Council says the grant for Oregon Bio's training curriculum is consistent with Oregon Talent Council's need to support the expansion of successful "professional development models." We look for such models that improve both the employability skills of emerging or current workers together with the professional or technical skills required by industry so workers are better prepared and become faster contributors.

"The BioPro and BioCatalyst programs met both of those goals," says Leoni. "The programs represent an industry-based professional skills development model that we could support to share, promote and deploy with industry and other education and training partners across the state.

"By investing in this work, the Council can also explicitly learn from Oregon Bio's experience to help build the template for this type of model, not just invest in the program. Ultimately, we believe that these industry proven models and methodologies will be adopted and embedded into the traditional higher education and training systems, further scaling and expanding the impact beyond bioscience."

In improving the working relationship of education and industry – an important priority for Oregon Bio – Leoni also says the Oregon Talent Council is supportive of growing internships. She says the internships "help meet our mutual goals by better connecting industry and education partners to provide emerging workers with better experiential learning and work exposure."

"We are excited to also learn from Oregon Bio's efforts to increase meaningful internships for both students and industry," adds Leoni. "This work will complement internship research being done at Oregon State University to catalog academic-based internship programs, and we hope will lead to additional public and private commitments to building successful internship programs across the state."

McCarty says given Oregon Bio's close partnership with private industry, the association is a natural to partner with OSU to help move the ball forward with internships. She said the association, having worked with OSU, absolutely knew there needed to be dollars in the grant to address internships.

"There's been an overwhelming requirement for internships," McCarty says. "We have companies who need interns, and OSU has students who need internships. The Oregon Talent Council grant helps us create a place for both to connect."

That connection is at the heart of Teri Hockett’s work as she helps facilitate the BioPro and BioCatalyst training in Central Oregon. Hockett, who is shared between Oregon Bio and the Technology Association of Oregon, makes it her mission to reach out to OSU-Cascade in Bend and others to identify individuals in need of training. She said students and the bio industry of the region embrace the quality curriculum.

“We want to ensure the ongoing training needs of Central Oregon bioscience are met,” says Hockett. “We seek to do that through our outreach to the companies and to OSU-Cascade in order to fill each class and provide full support to each class in order to enhance the learning experience.”

With 30 bio firms employing more than 900 workers in the area, Roger Lee, executive director of the agency EDCO (Economic Development for Central Oregon), says the grant is very well-timed. EDCO is the lead sponsor and partner of Oregon Bio in the grant process.

“Bioscience is an important industry in our region both with pharmaceuticals and medical devices, which saw a 12 percent growth rate in jobs and companies over the past year,” said Lee.

It’s the kind of growth Bend bio executives like Hale at Grace realize can be commonplace in Central Oregon and beyond with an effective approach to training and developing a talented bio workforce.

“We’re looking forward to working with our industry partners across the state to create growth and development opportunities for our most valued bio industry assets – our people,” says Hale.

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