



Business

R.I. gaining ground with innovation, technology

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PROVIDENCE — Following decades of stagnation, Rhode Island is starting to build an economy based on entrepreneurship, innovation and new technologies, according to a study by a Washington research group.

The study, by The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, ranked Rhode Island 15th in the country in transitioning to a so-called new economy, up 8 places since the last report was compiled, in 2002.

Rhode Island, however, was still ranked below several other New England states, including New Hampshire (13) and Connecticut (6). Massachusetts ranked number one on the national list.

Regarded as an innovator during the industrial revolution, Rhode Island has struggled to regain its footing following steep and steady declines in manufacturing.

Job and income growth, especially through the first quarter of this year, has been relatively sluggish. Attempts to duplicate the high-tech corridor around Boston have borne little fruit.

But the new study, presented yesterday to the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council, highlighted several areas of progress since state officials began trumpeting technological innovation as a path out of post-industrial malaise.

The state ranked second in research and development, and fifth in the number of scientists and engineers as a percentage of the total work force.

Immigrants to Rhode Island were found to be more educated than those moving to all but two other states. Only five other states have more managerial, professional and technical jobs as a percentage of total employment, the study said.

“Things take a bit of time,” Jeffrey R. Seemann, dean of the University of Rhode Island’s College of Environment and Life Sciences and a co-chairman of the science and technology council, said in an interview. “But the state is being successful.”

The findings were presented at a State House meeting attended by Governor Carcieri, Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts, House Majority Leader Gordon D. Fox and state Sen. William A. Walaska.

In discussing the results, Robert D. Atkinson, president of the research foundation, urged state officials to continue investing in public universities and supporting innovative companies.

State economic development officials have held up pharmaceutical giant Amgen as a symbol of the so-called knowledge-based economy. But Atkinson said the state's economy cannot depend on recruiting established companies to create jobs in Rhode Island.

"It's going to be hard to attract these big firms," said Atkinson, a former Rhode Island resident who served as the first executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council. "Our advantage in the United States is all about innovation."

Seemann said the new study should bolster efforts by the science and technology council to improve the research infrastructure at URI, expand public financing for private research and encourage collaborations between universities and industry.

Preliminary efforts, including the creation of the science and technology council two years ago, have "paid off," Atkinson said.

But the study also highlighted areas in which Rhode Island is significantly behind most states.

Rhode Island, for example, ranked 44th in the number of companies on the North American Technology Fast 500 list, by Deloitte & Touche, and Inc. magazine's Inc. 500.

The state also ranked 44th in the number and value of initial public stock offerings, down 10 places since 2002. In the ability of Rhode Island companies to export their products, the state finished last in the country.

"There's opportunity there," Atkinson said. "There's only one direction you can go."

"Things take a bit of time, but the state is being successful"

Jeffrey R. Seemann

Co-chairman of the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council

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