



Business

R.I. makes top 10 in tech index

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Student Zhijun Jiang works on a DNA project last month at Brown University. The school is making a big push into nanotechnology and molecular science, opening a number of large laboratories.

The Providence Journal / Sandor Bodo

Rhode Island has climbed into the top 10 among states that use science and technology to boost their economies, according to a report issued yesterday by an economic think tank.

Rhode Island, which placed 11th in the 2004 State Science and Technology Index by the California-based Milken Institute, moved up one notch to 10th in the latest version.

“It’s very exciting to see Rhode Island break into the Top 10,” said Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, a quasi-independent state agency.

“That’s spectacular,” echoed Jeffrey R. Seemann, a dean at the University of Rhode Island and co-

chairman of the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council. “We’re on the right path — even better than I could’ve imagined.”

The report’s authors credit Rhode Island’s strong showing in the study’s research and development composite index — Rhode Island ranked sixth nationally — for boosting the state into the top 10.

Research and development was one of five composite indexes Milken used to calculate the overall ranking. Each composite index comprised a variety of indicators for which each state was ranked from 1st to 50th. The top-ranked state for each indicator received 100 points, the second-ranked state 98 points, all the way down to two points for 50th. The average score for each indicator was used as the composite index score.

Rhode Island achieved a top 5 ranking in many of the research and development indicators, including placing first in the rate at which the state receives National Science Foundation competitive grants.

“The federal funding agencies have been investing in us so that we can invest in the great scientists in Rhode Island,” said Seemann. “We are validating the really high quality of our scientists.”

“We’ve put a high priority on strengthening research across the state,” said Kaplan, noting the formation of the science and technology council and a research alliance among the state’s higher education institutions. “We’re taking advantage of our state’s size to create a tight network across the entire research community.”

Seemann agreed. “What we have really added to lift our game is investing in collaborative research,” he said. “We are leveraging the strength of a real high density of higher education.”

Part of Rhode Island’s advantage, though, may be its neighbors.

Four of the top 10 states are in New England, with Massachusetts at the top of the list and Connecticut and New Hampshire ahead of Rhode Island.

“This is a strength of New England,” said Seemann. “This is regionality.”

Seemann and Kaplan each predicted that the state’s growing profile in science and technology will lead to more jobs that pay better.

“This is now central to how we create a stronger economy,” said Kaplan. “This is the way we’re going to get out of the current economic downturn.”

Seemann said that rising to the top of the science and technology economy is nothing new for Rhode Island, and is more a matter of returning to its roots.

“Rhode Island was once the center of technology and in the industrial forefront of the United States,” said Seemann, noting that Pawtucket’s Slater Mill is widely credited with touching off the Industrial Revolution in America.

“We have a tradition of being a technology leader. We just kind of lost it for awhile,” he said. “People are going to forget that gap between the Slater revolution and the 21st century biotechnology revolution.”

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