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CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES  
AWARDS PROGRAM

CASE  
STUDY  
2021

IEP CATEGORY – CONNECTION

# Ohio University: Pivot of the Innovation Center

## ABOUT THE INNOVATION CENTER PIVOTING TO A SECTOR-SPECIALIZED INCUBATOR

In 2020, the Innovation Center won a \$1.2 million dollar grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) as well as a \$100 thousand grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and a \$250 thousand grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). All of this funding is to enable the expansion of business support, laboratory spaces, and specialized equipment provided to technology startups in the science industry sectors.

The Innovation Center provides valuable business incubation resources to fuel the economy in Athens, Ohio, and surrounding regions. Created in 1983, the Ohio University Innovation Center was the first university-based business incubator in the State of Ohio and just the 12th in the United States. The 36,000 square foot facility that currently houses the Innovation Center opened in 2003.

In 2019, Innovation Center leadership embarked upon exhaustive market research to help drive its strategic direction. The resulting data clearly identified a market gap – in biotechnology laboratory availability, sector expertise, and laboratory equipment offerings within a small business incubator. Armed with this knowledge, the Innovation Center applied for and won a series of grants that have enabled its renovation and pivot toward a world-class incubator which is uniquely positioned to support life science and biotechnology ventures. The mission of the Innovation Center remains that same – to provide business services, resources, and flexible facilities, fostering entrepreneurship resulting in wildly successful companies and a dynamic prosperous region. But, with these additional financial resources, the Innovation Center is poised to become an international leader in the support of science-based startups.

Such a pivot to an intentional economic development strategy in the science sectors builds upon OHIO's historical successes. OHIO boasts the Edison Biotechnology Institute, established in 1984, which is both an interdisciplinary biomedical research institute of OHIO and an economic development organization dedicated to assisting



*Room in Ohio University's newly built Innovation Center before moving in*

bioscience companies and entrepreneurs in southeastern Ohio. The technology upon which the institute was founded— the microinjection of exogenous genes into laboratory mice, resulting in the production of transgenic animals—was pioneered in the early 1980s by an Ohio University research team led by Thomas Wagner. This team made worldwide headlines in 1981 by successfully producing the first ever animal expressing a transgene.

An even more compelling reason for the Innovation Center's pivot is the employment data which justifies the shift to a sector-focused incubator. Upon researching and reviewing decades of employment data, including average compensation, Innovation Center leadership determined that a market-driven sector focus would not only ensure the center's financial sustainability but also enable the incubator to have greater economic impact given that jobs in the science sector pay an average wage more than twice that of the county. The Innovation Center's location within Appalachian Ohio necessitates economic development from organizations like the Innovation Center that take seriously their role in creating economic vitality in an impoverished region.

Further spurred by the Coronavirus pandemic, the Innovation Center accelerated its transition to a more strategic focus. The Innovation Center sought investments to ensure capacity to readily provide general and sector-specific technical business development as well as regulatory oversight guidance and assistance; access to needed spaces and equipment; funding to ensure proper regular testing and maintenance of existing equipment; and the purchase of laboratory consumables.

This investment, now secured, allows the Innovation Center to rapidly support the movement of novel research into the market and support the transition toward a region and nation that can more nimbly respond to this and future pandemics. This is a natural next step to layer-over and supplement the Innovation Center's current work.

The renovation is adding to the number of Biosafety Level 2 (BSL-2) laboratories capable of meeting federal and state regulatory oversight and standards for licensing with minimal modifications. The labs with such capacity and capability within the Innovation Center are among an extremely limited number of BSL-2 labs across both the State of Ohio and the entire Appalachian Region. Innovation Center leadership is represented on the board of BioOhio, the state's trade association for biotechnology and life science. BioOhio conducts an annual review of the sectors and their economic

impact on the state and has long been a proponent of additional laboratory buildout in Ohio.

The demand for such labs and the accompanying equipment, expertise, and lab modification capacity has only been further validated during this pandemic. As just two examples since the outbreak began, a current OUIIC client has identified novel research in support of a treatment and a new prospective OUIIC client has already received federal funding to negate the United States' need to purchase raw pharmaceutical materials from China. The Innovation Center is now poised to diversify the regional economy and produce businesses and jobs paying an average salary twice the county's average thereby benefitting a region that continues to struggle with pervasive poverty and unemployment.

The EDA- and ARC-funded renovation includes the creation of three new biotechnology laboratories completely outfitted with high-end equipment including biosafety cabinets and fume hoods as well as upgrades to access control, information technology, flooring, heating, signage, and additional equipment. The projected activities enabled through this funding include:

- The rapid support for movement of novel research into the market and the transition toward a region and nation that can more nimbly respond to this and future pandemics.
- The provision of regulatory oversight guidance and assistance to ensure rapidity and the validity of technology advances.
- The ability to quickly modify laboratory and light manufacturing spaces, and funding to purchase new equipment and ensure regular testing and maintenance of equipment.

The projected outcomes expected as a result of this funding include:

- Companies that reach market faster.
- Companies that are competitively advantaged as compared to their peers.
- Companies that experience faster growth than their competitors.
- Companies that celebrate increased revenues.
- Companies that experience decreased product recalls/regulatory sanctions.
- Companies that create more jobs which benefit the regional economy.
- The development of new technologies may also result in life-saving products or developments which aid humanity, at large.

## LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

### Articles:

- [OHIO Innovation Center receives \\$1.15 million federal grant for facility upgrades](#)

### Videos:

- [Innovation Center – Building Businesses, Changing Lives](#)
- [Take a look inside the Innovation Center](#)

## ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to: expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

## ABOUT THE IEP UNIVERSITIES PROGRAM

APLU and its **Commission on Economic and Community Engagement (CECE)** established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Universities Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP designation program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP awards program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- **Talent** and workforce development
- **Innovation**, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- **Place** development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: [www.APLU.org/IEP](http://www.APLU.org/IEP)

