Oklahoma seeks its pot of gold

Universities have a number of projects under way to pump up Oklahoma's economy.

By Ashley Gibson
Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — California has its Silicon Valley, North Carolina has its Research Triangle, and if a university administrator has his way, Oklahoma will have an entrepreneurial village where students, faculty members and professional entrepreneurs would live, work, form business ventures and create companies.

The Oklahoma Entrepreneurial Village is one of many efforts under way at universities across the state to inject new life into Oklahoma's economy. The surge of projects coming from the institutions will lead to more jobs, more intellectual opportunities and more money flowing into Oklahoma, said Skip Porter, author of the village proposal and vice president of OU's Office of Technology Development.

"We have to invest in our own talent and technology and find ways to create wealth here in Oklahoma," Porter said. "We need to find for Oklahoma what silicon was for California."

The village would include office space, an incubator for university spinoff companies, the Office of Technology Development's headquarters and housing for student interns, faculty members and entrepreneurs-in-residence.

It would draw funding from the private sector, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, federal grants and OU, according to the proposal.

Details such as when the village would open and its location are still being worked out, but the main focus is getting the public to support the proposal and think big when it comes to the state's economic future.

"We have to learn to take risks in Oklahoma," Porter said. "Let's lose one in the World Series rather than win another sandlot game. Let's get in the big leagues.

"The fear of failure is the Achilles' heel of Oklahoma. But we can change the culture by changing the economy — not the other way around."

OU's Office of Technology Development has invested in single-walled carbon nanotubes, a scientific development that Porter thinks will bring great wealth to Oklahoma.

Ron Starks, director of milking operations at Langston University's E (Kika) de la Garza Institute for Goat Research, prepares goats for milking in Langston in this April photo.

Associated Press

Nanotubes are tube-shaped pieces of carbon, measuring about one ten-thousandth of the thickness of a human hair. They have the ability to absorb and emit energy, behaving as metals or semiconductors.

They also have the potential to replace several metals because they weigh less and, in many cases, are just as efficient, Porter said.

Through the Office of Technology Development, a company in Norman has been established to research, develop and sell single-walled carbon nanotubes. SouthWest Nano Technologies represents the vast possibilities of high-tech companies operating and prospering in Oklahoma, Porter said.

In Stillwater, home of Oklahoma State University, about 30 technology companies have set up shop to be a part of the research and development associated with the school, said Steven Price, assistant vice president for technology development and director of the Office of Intellectual Property Management.

The recent creation of the "Gon-Topper" at OSU proves that Oklahoma has a promising economic future through the work of its universities, Price said.

The wireless, remote-controlled machine developed for Muskogee-based Klutts Equipment Inc. is used to load and unload railroad ties, gravel and other railroad maintenance supplies from gondola cars.

"I'm just certain the Gon-Topper is going to have a national and international impact," Price said. "And any company wanting to buy one would be making a sizable purchase."

ConocoPhillips recently donated a 70,000-square-foot research lab in Ponca City to OSU for developing bacterial, biomedical, environmental and optical sensors. Some sensors developed in the lab will be used for homeland security and defense purposes.

The OSU University Multispectral Laboratory eventually will employ about 80 people. It could have an economic impact of $120 million during the next 10 years and lead to other technological jobs in the area.

"We're interested in creating an atmosphere that will enable our students and faculty to become entrepreneurs," Price said. "And we're extremely interested in keeping our graduates here in Oklahoma rather than educating them and training them to go help develop other states."

Other promising endeavors at OSU include DNA sequence research that could determine whether particular types of genes cause cancer and a study on plant varieties that could improve the turf on golf courses and football fields, Price said.

In Langston, students and faculty members have found ways to have an impact on Oklahoma's economy — and those of other countries — through goat research, said Marvin Burns, dean of Langston University's School of Agriculture and Applied Sciences.

University scientists and researchers travel to countries such as Armenia, Israel and South Africa to show residents how to raise goats and produce quality milk, cheese and soap. They host similar seminars at Langston for Oklahomans and farmers across the region.

The sessions are giving people an opportunity to become self-reliant and depend less on the government, Burns said.

Langston's goat research institute recently was asked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to formulate the nutrient requirement for the animal. It will be published in several languages and used by scientists in more than 25 countries, Burns said.

"We will continue to see large growth in the goat industry," he said. "And now, farmers all over the world can find out how to get into goat production as we continue to develop our Web-based technology."

Whether the research involves goats or nanotubes, the one constant is that opportunities will be plentiful for those who embrace the future, Porter said.

"Oklahomans just have to start loving Oklahoma, invest in its future, nurture it and take care of it," he said. "Because if we don't, somebody else will."

Sooner projects

Examples of products or planned products that have benefited from university investment and research in Oklahoma:

Nanotubes: These tube-shaped pieces of carbon measure about one-ten-thousandth of the thickness of a human hair. They can absorb and emit energy, behaving as metals or semiconductors.

Loader: The "Gon-Topper," a wireless, remote-controlled machine that loads and unloads railroad ties, gravel and other railroad maintenance supplies from gondola cars.

Sensors: An Oklahoma State University research lab in Ponca City is for developing bacterial, biomedical, environmental and optical sensors. Some sensors developed in the lab are to be used for homeland security and defense purposes.