Take Five

Oregon State’s Ron Adams woos industry

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When Oregon State University wanted to boost its ties with industry, it was natural for the university to tap its engineering dean, Ron Adams.

Dean since 1998, Adams already had experience forging relations with the high-tech sector. Starting Oct. 15, he’ll take that a step further, reaching out to other private sectors as well. He fills a newly created position, designed largely to bolster the amount of research funding that OSU receives, which this year topped $260 million.

Increasing ties with industry could also boost the involvement of graduate and undergraduate students in research, as well as could create jobs — for students and others.

The Business Journal asked Adams about his new job and what he hopes to accomplish.

1. Why did OSU create this position?

Partnerships between universities and industry are an essential pathway toward high-value economic impact in Oregon, the nation and the world. OSU aspires to be a national leader in this regard.

Over the past decade, corporations have increasingly turned to universities as a place for investments in research and development, and universities are
becoming more engaged in such partnerships to both increase their economic impact and to compensate for dwindling federal R&D funding.

At Oregon State, we have set a goal to quadruple the industry R&D fraction of our total research. This position was created to bring the needed focus on expanding industry partnerships and on achieving these goals.

2. What outcomes do you wish to achieve?

Ultimately, we want to help create a more prosperous Oregon economy.

Our engagement with industry will both help drive innovation and develop the talent that industry needs in order to have a viable workforce. We want to engage in more R&D collaborations that fit immediate and emerging industry strategies and goals. And we want Oregon State’s research discoveries to move through commercialization to become marketplace products and services that will help serve society and grow the economy.

To realize this impact, we need industry partners, both existing companies and newly formed ventures that see the market opportunity and want to commercialize our jointly developed research results.

3. In what ways have you forged stronger ties with Oregon’s tech industry?

Our engagement with the Engineering & Technology Industry Council has resulted in public and private investment directed toward increasing the quality and number of engineering graduates across the Oregon University System. This growth has included both undergraduate and graduate enrollment, especially at the doctorate level.

We have transformed the culture here so that faculty in science and engineering are more interested and actively engaged in research collaborations with Oregon’s tech industry and beyond. And we helped create and continue to be involved in Oregon’s first signature research center, the Oregon Nanoscience and Microtechnologies Institute. ONAMI has been a spawning ground for new tech companies and has helped others advance their product lines. ONAMI’s board recently targeted industrial partnerships as a top priority. This will help all of ONAMI’s partners including OSU, UO, PSU and PNNL.

4. What other industries will you target?
We will take a strategic approach that aligns our strengths across multiple disciplines with industry market trends.

OSU’s strong capabilities in natural resources, physical sciences, engineering, pharmacy and public health provide great opportunities for deeper engagement with multiple industry sectors beyond the tech industry. These include energy, food production and security, pharmaceuticals, and health and wellness.

OSU’s development of Clearfield wheat varieties and formaldehyde-free adhesives are examples of how we currently address technology needs in other sectors.

5. How will your efforts benefit OSU graduate students?

Strong industry partnerships create opportunities for our students to engage in highly relevant R&D.

Knowing the potential industry and marketplace applications for their work motivates students to achieve better results. Industry executives also see research that they invest in as a training ground for prospective employees who become knowledgeable in the technological underpinnings of their businesses. This leads to more focused workforce development and better employment opportunities for our students.

The transparent transistor collaboration with Hewlett-Packard Co. is a great example of this type of engagement. Graduate students conducted research partially funded by HP; Oregon State became the first entity in the world to demonstrate a transparent integrated circuit; and students were hired by HP. The collaboration continued and now the jointly developed intellectual property covering this high-performance electronics technology is being licensed by flat screen display manufacturers.

Those graduate students can be proud of their accomplishments and relish the opportunities created for them.

The Adams file:

**Old title: Dean of OSU’s College of Engineering**

**New title: Executive associate vice president for research**

Education:
- B.S. and Ph.D from Oregon State University
- Master’s from Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Experience:

- Vice president of R&D and senior Tektronix fellow for the Color Printing and Imaging Division of Tektronix.
- Assistant and associate professor of mechanical engineering at Oregon State.
- Research staff member at MIT Lincoln Laboratories.
- Lieutenant and R&D program manager at the U.S. Air Force Space and Missile Systems Organization.

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