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Report: State faces hurdles in life sciences Competition, training called critical issues

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By Todd Wallack, Globe Staff | February 25, 2008

Massachusetts faces several challenges if it's to remain home to one of the world's top life sciences clusters, including increased competition from around the globe, a shortage of trained workers, and a lack of coordination among key players, a new study concludes.

"Taking success for granted could be disastrous in the face of new competition," says the report by Mass Insight Corp., a Boston research firm, and the McKinsey & Co. consultancy.

"As one of our interviewees said: 'The days of a Massachusetts monopoly are over.' "

The report is noteworthy because it was prepared in concert with more than a dozen prominent industry and academic groups. The "steering committee" included representatives from the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, the Massachusetts High Technology Council, the Massachusetts Life Sciences Collaborative, the New England Healthcare Institute, the Massachusetts Medical Society, the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, and the [Novartis](#) Institutes for Biomedical Research.

"We brought together the leaders in life sciences in this region - both academic and industrial," said Jeffrey Elton, a senior vice president at Novartis. "The idea was to represent all parts of the industry."

One of the major points is that Massachusetts hosts an array of state agencies and groups that don't do enough to coordinate their efforts involving the life sciences cluster.

But one person consulted about the report, Glen Comiso of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, said his organization is forming a group to address the problem. He said the Massachusetts Life Sciences Collaborative, which had its first organizational meeting a little more than a year ago, will include key leaders from academia, business, and government. "I think it's being addressed," Comiso said.

Another concern was that there aren't enough trained workers to feed the growing demand from life sciences companies - both because of a lack of programs and lack of interest from students.

The report notes that Massachusetts spends less on public higher education than many other states. And too few students sign up for life sciences courses even when they are available.

In 2005, just 5.4 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded by the University of Massachusetts system related to life sciences majors, compared to 17 percent for the University of California system, the report says.

To help fix the problem, the study recommends more training for life sciences jobs, both at two- and four-year state colleges, and doing more to encourage systems to pursue life sciences careers. The report also recommends improving math and science education at the K-12 level and trying new ideas to increase students' interest in life sciences, such as setting up a "bio camp" and launching an unpaid internship program.

Some leaders have already been trying to tackle the training issue. The University of Massachusetts at Boston hosted a workshop this month to help brainstorm ways to expand the pool of workers. And today, the Massachusetts Biotechnology Education Foundation plans to hold a news conference to highlight its efforts to help schools teach biotechnology.

The report made several other suggestions, including:

- Build a \$200 million Translational Medicine Center, dedicated to helping to translate scientific discoveries into real-world therapies for patients.
- Make it easier to launch clinical trials in Massachusetts by streamlining the oversight.
- Create a virtual tissue bank with a catalogue of samples available at Massachusetts institutions.

Lawmakers are already considering Governor Deval Patrick's \$1 billion initiative to bolster the life sciences; it would include money for tax incentives, research centers, and worker training.

"The timing is quite important," Elton said.

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