

Man on a mission

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LITTLE ROCK — Jerry Adams is a man on a mission. Having retired in October of 2007 following a career of almost 34 years at Acxiom Corp., Adams is now busier than ever in his role as president of the Arkansas Research Alliance.

Over lunch at Little Rock's Capital Hotel, Adams excitedly explains the alliance. He hands over reports and spells out his vision for the state, going long periods without even touching his meal. His enthusiasm is contagious.

Blessed with a large surplus at the start of the 2007 legislative session, the Arkansas Legislature wisely appropriated money from the state's general improvement fund to create the nonprofit alliance. The fledgling organization also had the strong support of Gov. Mike Beebe.

"Research is a cornerstone on which we can build Arkansas' future in the knowledge-driven economy of the 21st Century," Beebe said at the time the alliance was formed.

Here's the rub: Every other state is seeking those same high-tech jobs. It's not as if Arkansas is the only state aboard the knowledge-based bandwagon. That's why the state is fortunate to have a man with Adams' passion and credentials.

"One of the great things about Arkansas is that it's a manageable size, and you can meet and get to know the decision-makers in your state," Adams says. "Over a short period of time, you can make a difference. We need to be unrelenting in our efforts to get this knowledge-based framework completed and then aggressively use it to move Arkansas forward." The alliance focuses on university-based research. In February of 2007, just weeks after his inauguration as governor, Beebe hosted a meeting with university chancellors, presidents and research leaders to explore the formation of such an alliance. The act that provided funding was approved the following month. The alliance opened for business in April of 2008.

In July of 2008, the alliance funded a report by the noted research organization Battelle. Released in April of 2009, the report assessed the state's core research competencies and then identified strategic focus areas.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, Arkansas' business and government leaders consistently and fairly successfully worked to move the state from an agricultural to an industrial base. In essence, we said to businesses: "The unions are weak here. Your cost of doing business will be much less, and you'll find that our people work hard."

The past three decades, though, have seen Arkansas lose ground. A state that's next-to-last in the number of adults with college degrees (only West Virginia ranks behind us) finds itself ill-suited to compete in the knowledge-based economy.

"Raising the per capita income is not a new challenge for Arkansas," Adams wrote in the preface to the report. "In the 1950s, Arkansas confronted a particularly low per capita income of less than 60 percent of the national average. Arkansas took a proactive approach to competing in an industrial economy by formalizing an economic development program to recruit manufacturing industries. The result was not only a growing base of jobs for Arkansas but a significant rise in per capita income to a peak of 79 percent in 1978.

"Since the late 1970s, Arkansas has not been able to gain new ground in our per capita income because the terms of competition changed. No longer do state and regional economies compete on the basis of costs alone, which underpinned Arkansas' prior successful economic development focus. Today, the driving factors in economic competition are the knowledge and skills of a state and region's workforce and the breadth and quality of its technology base."

Adams is convinced that a critical ingredient in moving the state forward is a robust university research effort. Arkansas receives only about \$1 out of every \$5,000 the federal government spends on research.

In January of 2010, the alliance launched the ARA Scholars Program, an effort to recruit those with research credentials and entrepreneurial records. Dr. Daohong Zhou was recruited to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences at Little Rock from the Medical University of South Carolina. Dr. Ranil Wickramasinghe was recruited to the University of Arkansas' College of Engineering at Fayetteville from Colorado State University.

"Our inaugural ARA Scholars have set a high standard for this program," Adams says. "With superior research credentials, the scholars understand what it takes to create economic value."

The two scholars were introduced to Arkansans during a July 7, 2010, news conference at the state Capitol. The ARA Scholars program, based on an initiative by the Georgia Research Alliance, is the Arkansas Research Alliance's largest investment. Adams constantly is on the lookout for funds that will allow expansion of the program. He wants experts who not only will conduct research but also will find ways to convert that research into economic growth in the focus areas defined by the Battelle study.

The alliance is hosting a series of research conferences at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute atop Petit Jean Mountain that will allow researchers from across the state to meet each other and hopefully increase collaboration. The end result, Adams hopes, will be commercialization of research and increased federal funding for Arkansas.

There's no doubt that Arkansas is behind the curve nationally. Thanks to Adams and those he has recruited, at least the state is now in the ballgame.