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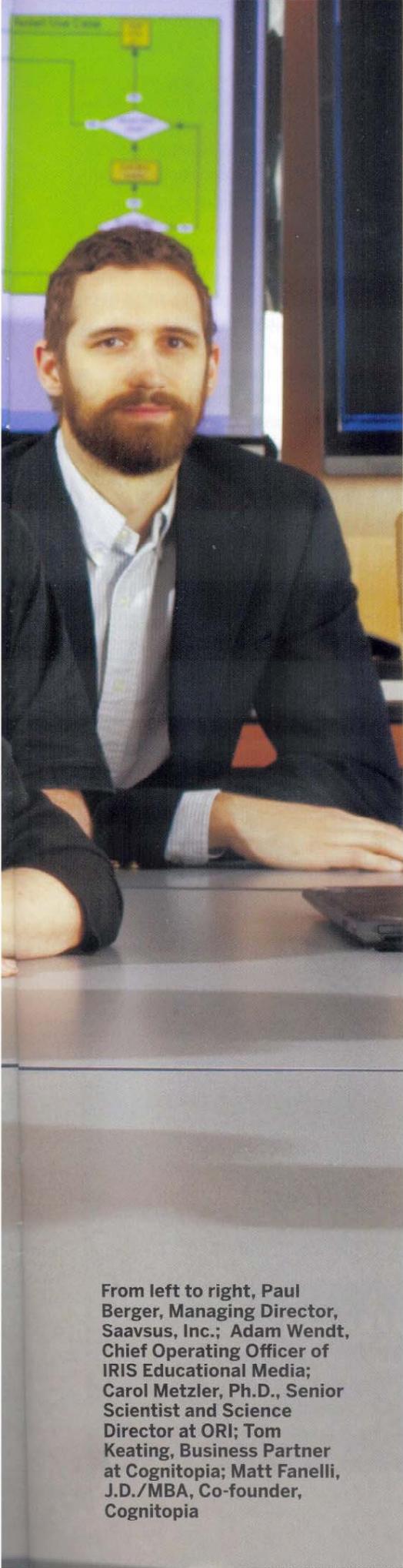


EdTech Evolution

*How combining education and technology
can create a new cluster for innovation*

THE EUGENE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: CELEBRATING...PROMOTING...INFORMING BUSINESS





From left to right, Paul Berger, Managing Director, Saavsus, Inc.; Adam Wendt, Chief Operating Officer of IRIS Educational Media; Carol Metzler, Ph.D., Senior Scientist and Science Director at ORI; Tom Keating, Business Partner at Cognitopia; Matt Fanelli, J.D./MBA, Co-founder, Cognitopia

COVER STORY

EdTech evolution

Industry leaders are championing an education/technology cluster in Eugene to drive entrepreneurship and innovation

BY MATT HOLLANDER
PHOTO BY DAVID LOVEALL

If the conceived Eugene EdTech cluster were a painting, it would undoubtedly be a stipple. Thousands of individuals representing dozens of organizations are currently striving to find the most effective uses for technology in learning settings. But as a single dot on the canvas, it can be hard to see the picture for what it is: a landscape of infinite opportunity.

For some time, Eugene has been widely regarded as a hub of higher learning and groundbreaking research. Pillar organizations including the University of Oregon, Oregon Research Institute (ORI) and Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC) have attracted industry-leading talent and procured upwards of \$150 million in federal grants in 2014.

In recent years, Eugene has also developed a reputation as a nerve center for entrepreneurship and innovation. The startup-friendly environment has stimulated growth of emerging technology and media industries. According to the Technology Association of Oregon, the Eugene area is home to more than 200 tech or tech-enabled companies.

Given the amount of resources, including investment and professional leadership in technology and research, it's no wonder industry leaders are championing the concept of a Eugene EdTech cluster, which would accelerate the pace of innovation in learning science and technologies by bringing together education, research and commercial partners. With greater collaboration between existing

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organizations, and branding of their success, many feel that a consortium could become greater than the sum of its parts.

“All the pieces are right here in this community,” said Adam Wendt, Chief Operating Officer of IRIS Educational Media, which produces personal and professional development courses for parents and educators. “One of the unique things Eugene has to offer is the opportunity for organizations who approach the same problem from different angles to come together and produce a product that’s better suited for the marketplace.”

A brief history of the cluster

The origins of today’s landscape can be traced back to the 1960s, when a group of clinical psychologists from the University of Oregon formed ORI to study child development and parent training methods.

Two decades later, scientists Jerry Paterson and John Reid used work started at ORI as the foundation for a new organization, OSLC, whose work centered on solving antisocial behavior in children.

ORI subsequently had to morph into a smaller organization.

However, temporary pains led to long-term gains. The institutions developed niches independent of each other and experienced significant growth. Combined, ORI and OSLC now provide 400 local positions, including 61 research scientists.

Between 2011 and 2012, both organizations underwent leadership changes: Rick Varnum became the chief operation officer of OSLC, and Byron Glidden and Carol Metzler, Ph.D., were promoted to lead ORI. Varnum said while they still compete for a lot of the same talent and support, they regularly share results of their work and insights on the funding climate.

It was also around this time that Paul Berger launched the Education and Research Cluster through the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce, which promotes dissemination and commercialization of regionally developed, research-based programs.

Berger, who has worked in high-tech and knowledge-based businesses for 25 years, said

that strong business models became critical when the amount of federal support shrank during the Great Recession.

Fortunately by that point, there was a wealth of media and technology companies, such as IRIS, that were motivated to help translate research that would otherwise sit on shelves into every-day products.

Wendt said that one of the keys to melding research and technology is finding a common language, and that Berger has been instrumental in facilitating these conversations through the cluster’s monthly meetings.

Branding the sector

Recently, IRIS worked with ORI to design, produce and test Two Families Now, a parenting class delivered online. The central aim of the project was to create a low-cost, parent-training program uniquely tailored to meet the needs of parents going through divorce transitions.

Wendt said that IRIS has always been fast on the heels of innovation, whether that was the transition from VHS to DVD, or from



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DVD to online platforms. However, early experiences taught him that accessibility is the most important factor, and it's often some time before education and research catches up with the technology.

"We know that our ability to keep up with technology is essential for continued success," said Metzler, Senior Scientist and Science Director at ORI, "especially for those of us who are interested in using technology to deliver interventions or collect data. The challenge is that research, by its nature, can be very methodical."

Metzler, who has spent the past 25 years with ORI, is currently working on a project to test whether online delivery of parenting intervention is as effective as staff-delivered versions.

When working within the local community, as she will for this study, Metzler said she can feel the support for research and willingness to participate. She said that is an underlying strength of conducting research in the Eugene area.

"Behavioral science has been a part of the local identity for a long time," she said.

"We know that our ability to keep up with technology is essential for continued success, especially for those of us who are interested in using technology to deliver interventions or collect data."

— **Carol Metzler, Ph.D.**
Science Director at ORI

"We've often thought of ourselves as a cottage industry, but recently we've been absorbed into the larger EdTech cluster; and it's really exciting to think about the possibilities for research that come with having a critical mass of local resources."

The Education Research Cluster is currently on hiatus from its meetings. Although

they served their original purpose of getting people to talk to one another, Berger said that defining the sector and its focus was a challenge. The leadership team is in the process setting a new course, and Berger said that one goal is to improve the movement of resources from the University to local businesses. To that end, he said the monthly meetings could turn into a more formal space for industry people to connect with researchers on projects and new grant opportunities.

"What will move this sector forward is successful commercialization," said Berger, Managing Director of Saavvus, Inc., a publisher of research and evidence-based programs from the Oregon region. "As more and more examples of that occur, success will attract success. There is a huge need to build a brand around Eugene as a place for publishing and producing products."

Introducing an entrepreneurial edge

If research institutions and media companies represent the first and second waves of Eugene's EdTech cluster, then companies like Cognitopia are part of a third generation.

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“You’re not creating value in the marketplace if you’re just convincing three people on a grant committee that your idea is worth something. It’s hard but, ultimately, much more valuable to do that with a few thousand customers in the actual market.”

— **Matt Fanelli, J.D./MBA**
Cognitopia, Co-founder

tools to assist individuals with cognitive disabilities, operating on a hybrid of grant funding and business modeling.

Co-founder Matt Fanelli, J.D./MBA, explained that Cognitopia, which was first established by Tom Keating, Ph.D., in 2003, evolved from the traditional research and development model in response to the financial market crash. When the company went without funding for a couple years, Keating recognized the need for a model that was less affected by fluctuations in federal support.

“I think that companies that do really well are going to be the those who are using grants and research as a means to an end, rather than an end unto itself,” said Fanelli. “People don’t get into this line of work for a quick buck; they want to affect positive change, and it isn’t easy to do that in the grant world because you don’t have much control of distributing the research to market.”

Cognitopia is currently developing two products: Goal Guide, an application designed to help those with cognitive disabilities become more empowered by creating and tracking personal, academic and vocational goals; and ScanDo!, an app that teaches through video modeling opportunities by scanning an assigned bar or QR code.

Fanelli said that testing these products with actual prospective customers makes it more likely that they will eventually reach the market.

Eugene-area EdTech Players

Avant Assessment
www.avantassessment.com

CBT Nuggets
www.cbtnuggets.com

Cognitopia
www.cognitopia.com

Concentric Sky
www.concentricsky.com

Deschutes Research
www.deschutesresearch.com

Double S Instructional Systems
www.doublesinstructional.com

Educational Community Supports

Emberex
www.emberex.com

EPIC
www.epiconline.org

Eugene Health and Performance Foundation
www.healthandperformance.org

InSilico
www.insilicodesigns.com

Intervision
www.intervisionmedia.com

IRIS Educational Media
www.irised.com

ISTE
www.iste.org

National Institute for Direct Instruction
www.nifdi.org

Northwest Media
www.northwestmedia.com

NoteWorthy Learning
www.noteworthylearning.com

ORBIS
www.orbiscascade.org

Oregon Career Information System
www.oregoncis.uoregon.edu

Oregon Research Institute
www.ori.org

Oregon Social Learning Center
www.oslc.org

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Saavsus, Inc
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“You’re not creating value in the marketplace if you’re just convincing three people on a grant committee that your idea is worth something. It’s hard but, ultimately, much more valuable to do that with a few thousand customers in the actual market,” he said.

Fanelli, who is a participant in the Regional Accelerator Innovation Network, a government-funded accelerator program, added that the growing entrepreneurial community offers numerous examples of how to do this.

“We’re starting to examine EdTech from a business perspective. Grant funding may be a piece to the business, or part of your competitive advantage, but it’s not an ongoing business; you’re not serving customers,” he

said. “And those who want improve the lives of people have to change how they’re doing it.”

Taking it all in

Stepping back from the canvas of Eugene’s EdTech cluster, one can’t help but admire the potential, for it features researchers, teachers, developers and content creators. And best of all, they are starting glean that perspective for themselves.

“It’s still pretty new to think of us as a cluster,” said Metzler. “I feel like we’re just now getting a sense of our landscape as a set of organizations and how we support and connect with each other. I think it would behoove us to continue to develop those relationships.” ♦