With its cluster of farming, industry leaders such as DuPont Pioneer and John Deere, and a large land-grant university, central Iowa is already a hub of economic activity centered on agriculture and bioscience. But state, local, business and university leaders believe the region still has much untapped potential.

Their response: Join together on a new Cultivation Corridor initiative, which creates new partnerships among regional leaders in economic development, education and bioscience and aims to market central Iowa as the home of “science that feeds the world.”

If successful, the initiative will also help grow the entire Iowa economy by drawing new investments to the state and attracting and retaining talent and business.

The Cultivation Corridor is one of several examples in the Midwest where communities, public universities and states are trying to capitalize on and better market traditional strengths in agriculture.

“Look at your strengths and find out what your region or state has a natural advantage in,” George Goodno, communications director for the Biotechnology Industry Organization, says about effective development strategies. “For example, in the Plains states, it might have something to do with wheat or animal research.”

Bioscience is not only a natural fit for the Midwest, it’s an economic sector that has been faring better than many others in recent years.

“Certainly the bioscience industry as a whole weathered the recession much better [than other sectors],” Goodno says. “We typically say that the industry took less of a hit in terms of jobs than the overall economy, and it bounced back faster. The companies that did lay off workers tended to rehire faster.”

In central Iowa, the region’s long, prosperous history of agricultural production complements more recent areas of economic strength — for example, advances in bioscience, agbiosciences and biorenewables.

One goal of the Cultivation Corridor is to better link the business and research activity already going on in the region, placing Iowa State University at its center, says Goodno, noting that the agricultural-focused research institutions such as central Iowa schools have become very engaged in early-stage R&D.

Goodno says state legislators can play a pivotal role in forging better ties between industry and the research community, by providing access to capital (such as through R&D tax credits and angel-investment funds); aiding commercialization and transfer of research to the private sector for development of new products; investing in research facilities and infrastructure development; and formulating initiatives to develop and retain workforce talent related to biosciences.

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