

## Golden LEAF Foundation Gives Boost To State's Biotech Industry

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**GREENVILLE, N.C.** -- The idea that launched the Research Triangle Park is taking off on a larger scale across the state.

Thursday, the [Golden LEAF Foundation](#) approved up to \$60 million in grant money to train workers in the pharmaceutical and biotech fields. The money would fund programs at North Carolina State University, North Carolina Central and in community colleges.

The idea behind the Golden LEAF Foundation is to help communities hit hard by the struggling tobacco industry. The foundation awards the grants with the state's tobacco settlement money.

"This action by the Golden LEAF puts us on top of the wave of biotechnology," Gov. Mike Easley said Thursday. "It will place North Carolina in a prime position to corner the market on high-paying jobs.

"Their plan is designed to channel the training centers' expertise to those rural counties in transition, which fits with the biotechnology demand for a supply of agricultural products. This has the potential to translate into a real benefit, not only for tobacco dependent communities, but also for the entire state."

Easley said he looks forward to working with Golden LEAF, the universities and the community colleges "as they transform their research into real jobs."

While tobacco fades, the biotech business is booming. Companies have more than doubled in past couple years.

It's an evolution in which the past will help pay for North Carolina's future.

In Greenville, August meant the tobacco auction.

"You'd smell the warm sweet tobacco, and people were running," said Greenville resident Susan Nobles. "You'd hear the auctioneer and see the bankers very happy."

That was how August used to be. Now, tobacco warehouses in Greenville, like so many others across Eastern North Carolina, are closed.

Tobacco still will play a part in Pitt County's economy. Not in an auction warehouse, but a mile down the road in a classroom.

When you think of Greenville, you don't think of Biotech.

"Not yet," said Greg Smith, an instructor at Pitt Community College. "But you will."

Smith said the transformation will occur in places like an abandoned shirt factory he pointed out, noting that money from the tobacco settlement will help train people for new jobs.

Smith is a part-time instructor at Pitt Community College. Thanks to an earlier grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation, he is about to start teaching students to work in the biotech field.

"Actually," he said, "the people trained here will be a draw for companies to come to this area."

Smith should know. His full-time job is with a bio-tech company that makes medical devices.

And it is right next door in the same old closed-up shirt factory.

Pitt Community College received its Golden LEAF Grant back in February. The class is already full, with 20 students enrolled. That number could grow if the community college receives another grant.

[North Carolina Community College system](#) president Martin Lancaster was elated about Thursday's announcement.

"The North Carolina Community College System is pleased to have the opportunity to play an important role in the biotechnology future of North Carolina," Lancaster said. "The \$9.4 million awarded to the NCCCS by Golden Leaf will fund training for more than 65 percent of the future biotechnology workers of the state.

"Many of these people in mostly rural parts of North Carolina have depended on tobacco or the tobacco industry for their livelihood and are in critical need of new opportunities. This funding and the training community colleges will provide will give them that opportunity. We thank Golden LEAF for having the confidence in us to make an investment whose benefits will be felt all over North Carolina."