

JETRO & CIC: Insights Into Massachusetts' Startup Ecosystem
Issue #1
Featuring: LabCentral

Introduction by CIC Japan Desk

LabCentral and CIC have a long running relationship as Tim Rowe, CEO and founder of CIC, was also a founding partner of LabCentral. Tim, along with Johannes Fruehauf of Cambridge BioLabs and Peter Parker of BioInnovation LLC, “created LabCentral based on their own experiences as entrepreneurs and that of countless others who have spent precious time and resources searching for and equipping appropriate startup lab space.”¹ While I could talk more about all of these founders and how important each of them have been, and continue to be, leaders in the local startup ecosystem, let’s hear first hand from someone active within the company.

Celina Chang, as the Vice President and Science Operations and Strategy at LabCentral, has a complete view of the inner workings of the company. My interview with Celina showcases her long term dedication to LabCentral and gives a clear picture of how LabCentral operates. Please read along and join in my understanding of LabCentral’s place within Cambridge’s local biotechnology ecosystem.

¹ <https://labcentral.org/about/board-of-directors/>



Celina Chang
Vice President, Science Operations and Strategy at LabCentral

1. Hi Celina, could you please introduce yourself?

My name is Celina Chang and I'm the VP of Science Operations and Strategy at LabCentral. I've been with this organization since the very beginning. I started 2 weeks before we opened our doors, so I've been here through all of our expansion and change and I've helped design most of our builds with new facilities and partner facilities.

2. What has your journey in the MA biotechnology ecosystem encompassed so far?

I graduated with a bioengineering degree and I worked in process development for a viral vaccine company in New York for a few years, switching over to small biotech for another 5 after that. I decided I needed a change, so I moved to Massachusetts and that's when I got my first look at the ecosystem here. My first job in MA was with Stryker BioTech in the quality control department. I was trying it out and seeing if I liked it as a potential career path. It was a good growing opportunity but I realized it wasn't for me. Afterwards, I reentered research and development at a small startup company called Pervasis Therapeutics, which was eventually acquired by Shire. It was exciting seeing products go from first generation to second generation, moving on to clinical trials even further on. I really got the experience of working through all the different departments. Afterwards, I worked at Invivo Therapeutics for a few years, then LabCentral. From then on, it was a shift from mainly bench science to operations, which was a huge change.

3. For you, what was the biggest change going from benchwork to operations?

I went from a position that had me working alone at a bench with cells to a position where I'm around people all the time, keeping myself open to all of our clients in order to keep

everyone happy. I learned a bit about operations and build outs during my time in those startups and those little steps helped prepare me for LabCentral. Here, all the systems are built from the ground up, and I enjoyed that as someone who likes to fix things. For operations, you have your hand in everything that's going on, including directly assisting clients.

4. Could you tell us more about LabCentral and its mission? What services does your company offer?

LabCentral is a 501c3 non-profit organization that was initially funded in part by the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center. We are here to accelerate science by taking away all the operational burden from our small companies, allowing them to concentrate on their science. We provide space, lab equipment, and a large variety of services and operational assistance. We also provide umbrella permits so that these companies can work within our space, other EH&S services, centralized procurement with discounted rates, and accounting services that help simplify their bills down to just rent and monthly consolidated lab supplies through our procurement system. LabCentral provides operational support, facility and lab management, events, and curated programming in order to educate our entrepreneurs and get them connected within the local community.

5. What role does LabCentral play in the local Biotechnology ecosystem?

I think that LabCentral is a pretty big part of the local ecosystem. We're trying to make the process of developing novel therapeutics and technologies better, faster and cheaper. Normally, startup companies have to raise enough money to procure and outfit a space, hire a full team, and purchase all their equipment, before they are able to focus on, starting their science. At LabCentral, we've seen companies enter and start testing within 2 weeks of moving in. It really inverts the entire way that science can be done in our spaces and contracts the timeline of therapeutic innovation.

6. As you stated earlier, you've been at LabCentral since the beginning. How has the company grown and shifted over that time?

When we first started, we had the first floor at our 700 Main Street location, our flagship facility and it was about 28,000sq/ft., housing between 20-25 companies at a time. We started with just four employees and together we covered these 20,000+ sq/ft, and it was nothing if not exciting. We were able to supply all the basic equipment that you would need for a biology based lab; cold storage with centrifuges, plate readers, image readers, etc. We were focused on providing the basics required for research and development and the companies in our space really were at that beginning stage of getting their feet wet. Since then, because of our vast network of sponsors and partners within the local biotech ecosystem, we've been able to provide

much more advanced analytical equipment. We have a fantastic triple-quad mass spectrometer, which is something that you would never normally have in a shared lab space. With the help of our sponsors and the growth of our team to include scientists, we've been able to set proper guidelines and training for us and our clients in order to use these wonderful and complex pieces of equipment. It's a huge change from where we were a decade ago, allowing our clients to stay on-site to use this equipment which is necessary for their research.

7. What is LabCentral's connection with MIT?

MIT was our first landlord, which is a pretty typical relationship for most places around here. We have a great relationship with them though, partnering with them for their development initiatives. For example, the renovation of the historical clocktower at 238 Main Street, along with the new glass-clad tower that's filled with labs behind it. We occupy 100,000 sq/ft. there. In order to bring an innovation space into those buildings, we partnered with MITIMCo. That space is a bit further from our main mission of working with small startup biotechs, most of the companies in that space are moving towards process development, moving very quickly towards clinical trials and filings. This space allows them to go from small scale bench experiments up to bioreactors and get them to a place where they hit manufacturing scale. We think very deeply about the life cycle of a small company. The 700 Main Street location functions as a place for Seed to Series A sized companies, we have space for our more graduated companies in our 610 and 238 Main Street locations, and we have two spaces for fresh-from-academia spinoffs in cooperation with Harvard. One is sitting on the Harvard Business School campus, the Pagliuca Harvard Life Lab, and the Blavatnik Harvard Life Lab Longwood opened last year on their medical school campus. We have that whole pipeline within our community of start-up companies now.

8. How does LabCentral interact with the international community here in Cambridge? What's your focus on global operations/international companies?

We do have companies that have come from overseas who were attracted to the Boston/Cambridge area for its renown in the global biotech sphere. LabCentral has many companies where their founders are still linked to, or are mainly based in another lab in their home country, including some from Japan. We have a new program called Resident Success that has been running for the past 3 years. We use this program to focus on the leadership of these companies and bring them together in cohorts for things such as roundtables, bringing in experts to talk to our resident companies and help bring answers to questions they might have. Our team has brought in people to walk them through hiring, sending packages to the FDA, and in general, bringing in those that can give them relevant information and topical advice. Resident Success

also sets up “Mastermind Classes” cohort, mini business school like courses, these are the types of things we are putting together for our startups.

Through our LabCentral Ignite program, we also give out Golden Tickets to some of our founders, for example; founders of color, women founders, and others. With these tickets, founders can come in and get mentorship to help fight the battle against the challenges of company creation and growth.

As we are a Massachusetts-based non-profit organization, our primary focus is to develop the innovation economy within the commonwealth, though our LabCentral Ignite program does have plans to reach outside of Massachusetts, to attract talent and resources to the area. All of our programs for underrepresented communities is something that we’re trying to stretch across the country.

Final Thoughts

I can confidently say, if I need lab space at some point in my future, I know where I’m going to look first. Celina Chang painted an amazing picture of all the services that LabCentral offers and the ease of mind that they bring to their clients. Their structure also brings to mind how difficult it can be for anyone starting from the ground up here in Cambridge. We’re here in one of the global capitals for biotech, so it’s no easy feat trying to make it on your own here, not to mention the astronomical financial cost of it all. LabCentral really does provide a haven for these smaller biotech startups to relax and focus on what matters to them most, rather than worry about real-estate, extra fundraising for equipment, and more.

I mentioned in the forward about CIC and LabCentral being connected by founders, but we also have the good luck of being right across the street from each other. Their newer space in the two buildings at 238 Main Street are right across from both of our Cambridge offices, so it’s a lovely feature of our skyline. Paired with CIC, Kendall Square really does become a “one stop shop” for biotech startups.