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O'Malley seeks to boost technology transfer

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By **Associated Press**

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ANNAPOLIS — Gov. Martin O'Malley will call for more than \$6 million to spin research conducted at university labs into new companies, aides said Tuesday.

The proposal seeks to address the gulf between the state's strong track record in attracting research dollars and relative lack of success in turning that funding into commercial ventures, an issue that commands the attention of academics and business leaders alike.

The new state allotment would be used to fund promising technologies and fund research of others.

"The gap we're trying to fill is getting that idea, that concept from research bench to venture capital stage," said Patrick J. Hogan, associate vice chancellor for government relations at the University System of Maryland. "The idea is to throw 20 darts at the wall — 20 small darts — and hope you get four or five winners."



A bill submitted by the governor on Monday, S.B. 239, seeks \$250,000 each from five research universities to buy into the program every year.

Those schools are the Johns Hopkins University; Morgan State University; the University of Maryland, Baltimore; the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; and the University of Maryland, College Park.

Bryan D. Sivak, the governor's chief innovation officer, said Hopkins, UMB and UMCP have committed already. The bill also includes a provision that would allow federal labs to participate.

O'Malley will propose another \$5 million in state funds in a supplemental budget later in the General Assembly session, Sivak said.

"There's a big gap [in commercialization] the governor has recognized, and really everybody has recognized," he said. "We need to fix this."

The "Maryland Innovation Initiative" effort proposed by O'Malley would be housed in the Maryland Technology Development Corp., the state's technology commercialization, or "tech transfer" arm.

"Part of it is cultural. Part of it is funding," said Robert A. Rosenbaum, TEDCO's president and executive director. "And part of it is just a mentality around researchers that needs to say 'We need to more than just invent something in the lab. We need to do something that is marketable.'"

Sivak said the initiative will employ "miners" who search for discoveries and technologies developed in university labs that are ripe for commercialization. They would also look for researchers in different disciplines and different institutions who are doing complementary work.

“One of the challenges around commercializing technology is silos of activity,” said Rosenbaum. “The more that you can cross-pollinate and break those silos down, the greater the chance of success.”

Johns Hopkins spokesman Dennis O’Shea said the university is backing the governor’s proposal.

“The governor understands that Maryland’s research institutions can do more to drive innovation by working together than they can by working separately,” he said.

The funds sought under O’Malley’s effort could pay for startup costs, marketing, business development, patent and intellectual property costs, and other expenses.

Sivak said the state’s goal is to grow 40 technologies into businesses every year.

The innovation initiative is designed to create businesses that could qualify for other TEDCO programs, spark interest from angel investors and, later, win funding from larger state investment programs and venture capitalists.

“We’ve filled in a gap in that investment conveyor belt to get these innovations from the lab bench to the real world,” Sivak said.

The legislation is part of a larger effort by the state and its universities to focus more on commercializing the work of their researchers.

Hogan said schools in the university system are moving money in their budgets to put more tech transfer experts on board.

Patent processes are being simplified and schools are being encouraged to work commercialization of research into tenure tracks, said Sivak.

“Culture is a big, big deal,” he said. “This isn’t a problem you can solve solely by throwing money at it.”