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CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AWARDS PROGRAM

IEP CATEGORY - INNOVATION

# University of Alabama at Birmingham

## The HIIE: Building a Local Economic Ecosystem through UAB Innovation

2023  
CASE  
STUDY

## ABOUT UAB'S BILL I. HARBERT INSTITUTE FOR INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB's) investment in building a foundation for sustained commercial capacity is resulting in a flourishing innovation ecosystem in Birmingham, Alabama as more start-ups, especially in biotechnology and life sciences, call the city home. The University's technology transfer office, the Bill L. Harbert Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (HIIE), is at the epicenter of this ecosystem based on UAB innovations and is seizing the moment by capitalizing on opportunities to drive the University's innovative capacity to new heights.



*Student's meeting in the UAB's HIIE, discuss the role that technology transfer and commercialization efforts play at a major research university*

## UAB'S ECONOMIC IMPACT IN NUMBERS

UAB's strategic plan, Forging the Future, sets research, innovation and economic development as one of the University's mission pillars. A recent study reported UAB's annual economic impact statewide at more than \$12.1 billion. UAB is also the state's single largest employer with almost 47,000 full-time and part-time personnel. In FY22 the collective strength of UAB's research enterprise generated more than \$715 million in total research grants and extramural awards.

While UAB's economic impact is measurable, the hope is that research and innovation activities will bring benefits beyond the employment impacts generated by typical university operations. As such, UAB is focused on economic development created through the commercialization of its research. In 2014, UAB launched the HIIE, which oversees both the commercialization of University inventions and start-up opportunities and is driving the region's capacity for innovation and economic prosperity.



## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The HIIE has taken a lead role in overcoming institutional challenges that have impeded research translation by implementing or supporting the following measures:

- Two University committees were established to efficiently move forward with commercial opportunities while managing state ethics concerns. The first is the UAB Entrepreneurial Development Committee (EDC), which is comprised of senior administration officials representing a range of institutional perspectives on risk and new venture opportunities. The EDC meets monthly to move new ventures through the pipeline. The committee reviews company development plans to work through potential issues and develop management plans as necessary. The second committee is the UAB Entrepreneurial Oversight Committee (EOC) comprised of executive senior leadership, including the Provost and vice presidents. The EOC receives recommendations regarding the launch of new ventures from the EDC. The two committees work in conjunction with the HIIE to ensure that commercial activities are in compliance with UAB policies. The EDC, EOC and HIIE also work together on policies and procedures that benefit the commercialization of UAB research.
- In 2023 the HIIE launched the Blazer Bridge Fund to fund proof-of-concept development of UAB faculty and staff technologies with commercial potential. The fund was formed from the increase in revenue generated by the HIIE over the past five years. The HIIE is one of the few technology transfer offices in the country that operates in the black and is proudly reinvesting its net gain into new UAB innovations.
- UAB is currently establishing a campus location dedicated to accelerating technology development and prototyping prior to start-up launch. The space will be within the Center for Biomedical Sciences and Engineering (CBSE) building and will include dry and wet lab space. The facility will be widely available to translational researchers on campus.
- Furthermore, UAB partner Southern Research (SR), a non-profit research institution specializing in drug and vaccine discovery and development, is launching a biotechnology incubator to provide wet laboratory and office space, shared services, and startup programming at competitive rates for biotechnology start-ups. The facility is under construction and will open in December 2023. The incubator will give priority to UAB spin-out companies focused on biotechnology.
- Promotion and tenure guidelines were revised in 2022 to include “such achievements as creation and disclosure of intellectual property, innovation, entrepreneurship and the like” for consideration as proof of effectiveness in scholarly activities.



- Also, in 2022, the HIIE established a UAB chapter of the National Academy of Inventors to honor distinguished campus innovators who hold U.S. patents. In this way, the HIIE is working to feed a culture of pride in campus innovations.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The HIIE is also working with community partners to strengthen its capacity to commercialize research.

- In 2021, the HIIE supported local investors in launching First Avenue Ventures (FAV), a private business incubator and fund. The fund raised \$6 million to focus on research developed in the region, particularly at UAB and SR. The partnership between UAB and FAV aims to spur economic development in Birmingham and advance research across the state.
- The HIIE also supports the newly-formed Prosper Birmingham, a non-profit committed to creating a more vibrant, racially- and gender-inclusive economy. Prosper Birmingham and gener8tor have partnered to fund a new Prosper Health Tech Accelerator in Birmingham.
- HIIE leadership also works to promote economic growth as a statewide priority. The Alabama Innovation Corporation (AIC) was established in 2021 by elected officials to promote a robust state economy through initiatives such as supplementary funding for non-dilutive grants. The HIIE worked with the AIC to establish a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) supplemental funding program. In September 2022, the AIC announced its first 31 awards, totaling \$4.5 million. Eight of the winners were UAB spinouts.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Finally, the HIIE is also partnering with SR to address workforce development in the biotechnology arena. The cornerstone feature of the partnership is a Ph.D. program in biotechnology wherein doctoral candidates develop a technology with commercial potential as part of their dissertation research with support from the HIIE and SR. Each of these institutions offers the resources and expertise to integrate academic theory with practical applications. Ph.D. students will be invited to join SR's new biotechnology incubator program to complete studies in business strategy and commercialization, leading to the opportunity to launch a company.

The HIIE has significantly increased its capacity for commercializing UAB research while strengthening and diversifying the institution's innovative ecosystem for sustainable economic and societal impact.



## ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

## ABOUT THE IEP PROGRAM

APLU and its [Commission on Economic and Community Engagement \(CECE\)](#) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP Designation Program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP Awards Program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- Talent and workforce development
- Innovation, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- Place development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: [www.APLU.org/IEP](http://www.APLU.org/IEP)

