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UNIVERSITIES



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE



CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AWARDS PROGRAM

IEP CATEGORY - PLACE

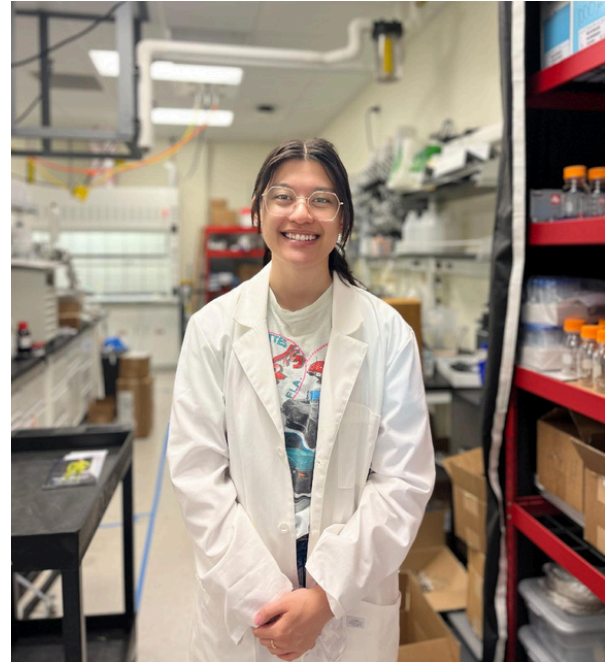
2025
CASE
STUDY

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Place-Based Innovation: Building a Vibrant Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

THE UNIQUE POSITION OF UTRP IN THE SOUTHEAST

The University of Tennessee Research Park (UTRP) at Cherokee Farm is located just across the Tennessee River from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and is dedicated to helping both established companies and entrepreneurs forge successful collaborations with the university. The 150-acre park currently features 4 buildings, 15 partners, and 800 employees, along with a 2.2-mile greenway that connects to downtown Knoxville. Plans for expansion include a hotel, conference center, and an outdoor recreation center in collaboration with the Tennessee RiverLine. This park is the only research and development park in the Southeast that combines the resources of a major research university and Oak Ridge National Laboratory, bringing together globally recognized researchers to support the park's tenants.



Rachel Alpert, a Spark Scholar hosted by the company Holocene in summer of 2023

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH UTK'S INNOVATION PRIORITIES

UTK's Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) plan, developed in 2020, emphasized the expansion of UTRP to empower public-private partnerships for research and to address an important gap to support early-stage innovation and entrepreneurship. Since that time, UTRP and UTK have strengthened their relationship and collaboration with UTK's Vice Chancellor for Research, Innovation, and Economic Development chairing the UTRP Board of Directors and elevating innovation and industry engagement as a priority by UTRP aligning their strategic growth with the university's five Innovation Gateway's: Advanced Materials and Manufacturing, Future Mobility, Energy and Environment, Artificial Intelligence, and Human Health and Wellness.

This strategic focus on collaboration and alignment spurred growth at the research park and provided opportunity for UTK to meet IEP goals to grow entrepreneurship and enhance visibility and access to resources for entrepreneurs.



THE SPARK INNOVATION CENTER

One way that UTK and UTRP are working toward growing the entrepreneurial ecosystem is through the establishment and growth of the Spark Innovation Center. The Spark Innovation Center (Spark), at the UT Research Park, is a strategic initiative to support, attract, and retain the nation's most promising technology startup companies by providing access to top-quality lab space, expert mentoring, programming and guidance, prototyping resources, and sources of early-stage capital. The Spark Innovation Center launched in 2020 to enable advanced tech entrepreneurs coming out of research institutions such as the University of Tennessee and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory to stay and grow in East Tennessee.

The Spark Innovation Center includes three main programs the Spark Incubator, the Spark Cleantech Accelerator, and Spark Scholars.

Spark Incubator

The **Spark Incubator** works with the most promising hard tech companies in the region to provide lab space and office space at the UT Research Park to growing companies working in cleantech, materials, and biotech. The Incubator also provides expert mentoring and programming. The 2-year program offers:

- high-quality lab space for research and development
- access to advanced equipment at the Institute for Advanced Materials and Manufacturing
- internships and access to top UTK talent and researchers for technology solutions
- business development support to refine strategies and scale operations
- investor introductions to secure early-stage funding
- connections to regional entrepreneurial service providers for additional support
- networking opportunities with established companies for collaboration

Spark Cleantech Accelerator

- The **Spark Cleantech Accelerator** is a 12-week program to accelerate early-stage cleantech businesses. This program provides \$15,000 stipends for traveling, living expenses, and business milestones. The program offers opportunities for expert mentorship, workshops and trainings in business, market strategy, IP, product design, and manufacturing, connections with strategic partners, investors, customers, and research institutions like the Tennessee Valley Authority



(TVA), UTK, the City of Knoxville, and members of the Tennessee Advanced Energy Business Council (TAEBC).

Spark Scholars

Spark Scholars is a collaboration between the Spark Innovation Center and the UTK Center for Materials Processing. It uniquely provides a talent pipeline for startups. This program offers unique opportunities to students who are interested in assisting advanced tech and climate-tech startups with materials processing-related research and product development support. This program provides:

- matching support for interns from the UTK Center for Materials Processing
- skilled students equipped with working engineering knowledge, familiarity with equipment
- access to select UTK facilities.

This program is an opportunity for UTK students to work with Spark startups and have a hands-on learning experience working with startups and developing new, cutting-edge technologies. Through the Spark Scholars program, over 30 students have been paired with Spark startups as interns, several of which have gone on to be hired as full-time employees.

The Spark Innovation Center has served 40 companies that have collectively achieved the following:

- 171 jobs created
- \$108 million raised
- 52 interns hosted

Thus far, 80% of startups served continue to have an active presence in East Tennessee.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS LINKING CAMPUS INNOVATION TO REGIONAL GROWTH

Knoxville was recently rated as the #16 cleantech hub in the country, according to Saardah Enterprise Partners, and Spark is a significant contributor to that effort. The Spark Innovation Center is highly collaborative and is currently supported by the University of Tennessee, U.S. Department of Energy, the City of Knoxville, Tennessee Valley Authority, Launch Tennessee, the Tennessee Advanced Energy Business Council, Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), and the Truist Foundation. The Spark Innovation Center works in close partnership with the region's



Innov865 Alliance, ORNL's Innovation Crossroads program, and the Heartland Climate Tech Partnership.

The Spark Innovation Center is positioned to bridge both inside and outside of the university and works closely with the UTK Office of Research, Innovation, and Economic Development (ORIED) as well as the UT Research Foundation (UTRF). By aligning Spark programming, such as the Spark Cleantech Accelerator and Incubator with university-based entrepreneurial programs such as the National Science Foundation Innovation Corps program (NSF I-Corps, Mid-South Hub), the Chancellor's Innovation Fund, and the UTRF Entrepreneurial Fellowship, these programs and funding mechanisms have positioned a pipeline of startup support from idea to proof of concept to scale.

BUILDING A REGIONAL FUTURE THROUGH UNIVERSITY-LED INNOVATION

Place-based innovation is at the forefront of priorities. UTRP and the Spark Innovation Center have laid a strong foundation for how the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, can continue to collaborate by leveraging its research strengths, industry partnerships, and community engagement to co-create a shared vision for place-based innovation that drives sustainable economic development, fosters entrepreneurial ecosystems, and enhances regional prosperity.



LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

Supporting Information:

- [Tennessee Research Park at Cherokee Farm](#)
- [Spark Innovation Center](#)
- [Spark Cleantech Accelerator](#)
- [Spark Incubator Program](#)
- [Spark Scholar](#)

Videos:

- [Spark Cleantech Accelerator at UT Research Park](#)
- [Spark Innovation Center Sizzle Reel](#)



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 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

