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New Brown University endeavor will aid entrepreneurs

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Brendan McNally, left, director of the Rhode Island Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship at Brown University, and Clyde Briant, vice president of Research at Brown, in the facility.

The Providence Journal / Frieda Squires

PROVIDENCE — The state has spare cash and office space for technology start-ups. Local chambers of commerce help keep established businesses afloat.

But for entrepreneurs whose companies exist strictly in daydreams, there are few places to turn to for advice and resources, particularly in periods of economic distress.

Hoping to bridge the treacherous chasm between concept and commerce, Brown University on Tuesday is opening The Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

The facility, in a converted rubber plant in the city's Jewelry District, will offer a refuge for researchers and inventors taking their first steps away from their laptops, laboratories and garage workshops.

“It’s a niche that needs to be filled,” Clyde L. Briant, Brown’s vice president for research, said. “We know there are ideas out there that are outstanding.”

Brown has a self-serving motive for aiding would-be chief executive officers; many of the state’s most promising researchers spend their days in Brown buildings, and the university could profit handsomely if their discoveries were brought to market.

The center will also provide opportunities for Brown students to help coach entrepreneurs or learn how to convert their gadgets or Web sites into moneymaking enterprises.

But the center’s doors are open to all comers, from hospital and university researchers to teenage tinkerers. Seminars will focus on writing business plans, conducting market research and branding products.

For researchers unsure if they have cooked up anything worth selling, the center will assemble industry experts. For thinkers trolling for business partners, it will host networking activities. “Think of this as an entrepreneurial community center,” Briant said.

Organizers have discussed potential programs with administrators at the Rhode Island School of Design, University of Rhode Island, Johnson & Wales University and Lifespan, the hospital network. The state Economic Development Corporation has agreed to pitch in \$100,000 over the first two years.

The center joins a hodgepodge of agencies that provide varying levels of handholding to new business owners.

The Slater Technology Fund, a taxpayer-backed pool of seed capital, shepherds start-ups through their cash-starved, early days. The Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce helps companies recruit employees and survive downturns. The Rhode Island Small Business Development Center teaches how to estimate start-up costs and project cash flow.

Rather than compete, the center hopes to coordinate existing activities, publicizing relevant events on its Web site, www.ri-cie.org, and papering its walls with bulletins.

Initiatives such as the Brown Forum for Enterprise, which holds monthly meetings for entrepreneurs, will host gatherings at the center. Every Company Counts, the EDC’s small-business assistance campaign, has asked to use the facility. Betaspring, a new company that organizes 12-week “boot camps” for technology and design start-ups, has scheduled time in the center’s conference room this summer.

Potential social events will seek to replicate the Providence Geeks mixers that bring together the future stars of the state’s information-technology sector.

“This is going to be a very active place,” said Brendan C. McNally, the center’s full-time director, whose new office overlooks the Providence River and Point Street Bridge.

The center’s activities will be paid for in part by the Slater Technology Fund and the taxpayer-financed Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council, which recommends policies to grow the state’s knowledge economy. Eventually, the state’s largest businesses will be encouraged to contribute money and expertise.

Brown will staff the center. The university has also donated furniture and the 5,000-square-foot, newly painted and carpeted office space in a building it owns at 1 Davol Square, across from the Manchester Street power station.

Brown President Ruth J. Simmons will speak at the grand opening on Tuesday, as will a roster of top local and state officials.

The center has been discussed for several years, but its opening coincides with the worst recession Rhode Island has suffered in decades. The unemployment rate is 10.5 percent, and the swelling ranks of jobless residents are straining the state's social-service network.

The EDC, long criticized for the state's sluggish growth rate, is being dismantled and rebuilt after a review panel described it as ineffective and poorly led.

"Jobs, that's what it's all about right now," [Governor Carcieri](#), who appoints the EDC director and board, said last Tuesday in announcing the review panel's findings. "Jobs, jobs, jobs."

At least at first, the center is not expected to make a dent in the unemployment rate.

Organizers insist they not be judged on the number of businesses they midwife that end up populating the Jewelry District. Instead, they say they will measure success based on the number of participants at events, the quality of their workshops and seminars, and their success in discouraging university alumni from packing up their bright ideas at graduation and leaving the state.

"This doesn't happen in the first six months of coming in the door," Briant said. "The final product will be some years out in terms of businesses created."

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