

State council awards \$1.5 million in grants

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The Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council is distributing \$1.5 million in grants this fiscal year to bolster research at local companies and universities.

The publicly financed program began last year, when the advisory council gave out nearly \$1.5 million in eight grants.

The first Research Alliance and Collaborative Research Awards went to 32 researchers from 15 academic and corporate institutions. They included the University of Rhode Island, where scientists worked with Jamestown-based SubChem Systems Inc. to improve the company's robotic underwater vehicles.

Unlike the investments by the Slater Technology Fund, a taxpayer-backed source of venture capital, the advisory council does not take equity shares in the companies it supports.

But advocates say the program benefits taxpayers by promoting useful discoveries that can be marketed commercially, helping to build new companies and create jobs.

The state support also enhances the opportunities for university researchers and companies to attract federal research grants, advocates say. Last month, for example, researchers from Brown University and RIC who had received an advisory council grant were given \$1.4 million from the National Institutes of Health to finance research into improved treatments for testicular cancer.

"The results of the Research Alliance's first year have been very exciting," Clyde L. Briant, vice president for research at Brown University and a co-chairman of the council, said in a statement yesterday. "We now have proof that strategic investment in this endeavor will create tangible benefits for Rhode Islanders."

Preliminary applications for this year's grants are due Sept. 24. The awards will be announced in January.

Proposals require a collaboration between institutions or companies, according to Andrew S. Cutler, a spokesman for the state Economic Development Corporation, which manages the advisory council.

"The point is to get Rhode Island's research community speaking to one another more," Cutler said.

Last year, the advisory council -- a coalition of business, corporate and academic leaders -- received 45 requests for grants. Researchers at 8 local universities, 6 hospitals and 17 companies applied for support.

Some of the companies that received money have also attracted investments from the Slater fund.

In its first year, the average council grant was \$187,500, a small sum given the cost of research. Although the Slater investments have decreased in number and grown in size over the past year, the advisory council has not announced plans to increase the size of its awards.

"It's a drop in the bucket," Donald Stanford, the former chief technology officer at GTECH Holdings Corp., said in an interview yesterday. "We're not anywhere close to what other states are doing in this regard."

But many researchers that have received grants have other sources of financing, he said. Even if just 1 in 10 creates a successful company, the program would be worthwhile, he said.

"These grants are a real engine primer. All of these ideas have commercial applications," said Stanford, who joined GTECH in 1979, the year after it was created. "A lot of ideas die on the kitchen table. There's no funding, no interest, no start-up capital to get them going."

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