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# R.I. scientists gather to spur collaboration, business opportunities

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PROVIDENCE — The knowledge economy has been touted as one cornerstone of a recovery in recession-hit Rhode Island. If that's true, then events like one held Friday could be important steps on the way back to prosperity.

More than 250 researchers from hospitals and universities around the state met at the Rhode Island Convention Center for the second annual Rhode Island Research Alliance Symposium, an all-day gathering designed to spur collaboration among scientists, doctors and lab workers and lead to business opportunities in the life sciences and biotechnology.

The event was organized by the Science and Technology Advisory Council, a state board that tries to connect lab researchers with the marketplace. Ten local projprojresearchers gave oral presentations about their work on topics ranging from skeletal health to marine sciences to stem-cell biology. A further 70 teams displayed their work on posters for those in attendance.

"Today is a day focused on all the research being conducted in our state," Christine Smith, executive director of STAC, said in her introduction to the symposium.

The event comes at a time when Rhode Island is struggling to find a way out of a recession that has stretched on for two years and left the state with a 12.8 percent unemployment rate, the third-highest in the nation. State policymakers believe that so-called knowledge-based companies in the medical field and pharmaceuticals could stimulate growth in the economy — if they're given the right support.

So in April, Brown University opened the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, hoping that it will serve as a resource for researchers with dreams of turning their innovative ideas into money-making business ventures. The Slater Technology Fund, a venture capital initiative, and STAC contributed funding.

And earlier this week, U.S. Sen. [Jack Reed](#) announced that the National Institutes of Health had awarded Rhode Island medical researchers more than \$22 million in funding from the Obama administration's stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The symposium was created to bring people from diverse institutions together in one venue to discuss their research

and think of ways to work together.

In his opening address to the audience, Dr. James Padbury, pediatrician-in-chief at Women and Infants Hospital, described his work to more rapidly bring research advances from laboratories to hospitals, where patients can benefit. Speeding up that process requires partnerships between educational institutions, such as Brown University, and health-care companies such as Lifespan.

“We’ve got the parts,” Padbury said. “We have in Rhode Island the strength and talent to do this. And we have a long culture of working together.”

Elizabeth “Betsy” Stubblefield Loucks, STAC’s Research Alliance manager, said that one goal of her program is to help people benefit from cutting-edge research. Another hoped-for result is job creation.

“The ultimate goal is economic development,” she said. “But it’s also about social development.”

In a report issued in September, STAC promotes the transformation of Rhode Island into an “innovation ecosystem, where highly trained knowledge workers drive the economy, where world-class researchers flock and remain, and where a culture of creativity and entrepreneurship drives the state’s accomplishments and reputation.”

Loucks said the state can help facilitate cooperation even in such simple ways as connecting researchers with labs that have equipment they otherwise wouldn’t be able to access.

She pointed to the existence of a super-computer at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Newport. The expensive machine is the only one of its kind in Rhode Island and Navy officials say it’s underutilized.

“They’d be happy to let other researchers use it,” she said.

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