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U-M incubator sets out to fast-track ideas

Facility helps defray overhead costs for auto, tech startups

Jaclyn Trop / The Detroit News

Ann Arbor— The University of Michigan unveiled Tuesday an incubator to help university researchers and fledgling [companies](#) put their inventions on the fast track to the marketplace.

The Tech Transfer Venture Accelerator, led by the U-M Technology Transfer Office, provides space at minimal cost to startup companies headed by faculty entrepreneurs and others in [Pfizer's](#) former two-million-square-foot facility in Ann Arbor. There are five initial startup firms.

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Entrepreneurs, investors and businesses can collaborate on research and technology that can be spun off to companies such as Ford Motor Co. or [Dow Chemical Co.](#), or form the basis for a separate company, said Ken Nisbet, executive director of the U-M Tech Transfer Office.

Automotive applications will be a major focus with the addition of the AutoHarvest Foundation, a non-profit marketplace for automotive intellectual property located in the incubator.

"The whole concept of collaboration is really becoming a more fashionable thing to do," said David Cole, chairman and co-founder of the AutoHarvest Foundation.



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Despite the university's location near Detroit, many companies with cutting-edge technology don't know how to catch the automakers' attention, said Cole, who is also chairman emeritus of the Center for Automotive Research.

U-M President Mary Sue Coleman said she hopes the incubator will develop projects that will rival technology created on the coasts.

"We are eager to collaborate with companies to drive innovative research that can change the world," Coleman said.

Many businesses chose to locate here because of the laboratory space left from the property's days with Pfizer, the pharmaceutical giant.

"It's a cost-effective, low-overhead way to do work here instead of contracting it out to the East or West coast," said Thomas Collet, president and chief executive officer of Phrixus Pharmaceuticals, a firm started in 2006 to create a drug called Carmeseal for treating heart failure.

The company has two workers but plans to expand fivefold when the project receives full funding from investors. It has set a launch date of 2015.

Five-employee company Life Magnetics could expand to as many as 50 to 80 workers in five years as it develops a device to measure the bacterial response to antibiotics in people within eight hours of getting a sample. This would help doctors target treatments more effectively for patients.

The project is already keeping talent here in Michigan, said Brandon McNaughton, chief technology officer.

"The primary reason I stayed was to see what this could be," said McNaughton, who graduated from U-M with a doctorate in applied physics in 2007.

The U-M Accelerator aims to speed up getting research breakthroughs to the market.

"Quick is the vital word," said Stephen Forrest, U-M vice president of research, "and Michigan is not always known for being quick."



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