

USTAR project seeks to expand U research, economic growth

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The Utah State Legislature is currently considering a multi-million dollar initiative dedicated to promoting research at state institutions of higher education.

The Utah Science And Technology Research Initiative (USTAR) is being touted as a way to keep Utah competitive in high-tech industries. The bill proposing the project passed the state Senate by a margin of 28 to 0. USTAR awaits the approval of the State House of Representatives and the signature of the governor to become a reality.

For the U, the USTAR initiative means an allocation of \$11 million for recruiting some of the nation's most accomplished research scientists. It also involves a \$100 million bond from the Legislature for constructing new research laboratories. The U is required to raise \$30 million on its own to contribute to the funding of the building projects.

"The university is supporting USTAR," said Kim Wirthlin, vice president for government relations. "The primary reason is that we recognize our role as a powerful economic engine in the state. Important research and development is done at research universities, and it's our role to accelerate that."

A coalition of business interests is pushing for USTAR. One key advocate of the initiative is the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce.

"We are behind this because we've been concerned," said Natalie Gochnour, vice president of policy and communications for the Chamber of Commerce. "Our focus has been on the need for high-paying jobs in the state. We've been losing ground in our average wages relative to the nation."

In order for initiatives like USTAR to be effective, there needs to be a mechanism for helping the business community benefit from university research. That's where the Office of Technology Venture Development at the U comes into play.



Media Credit: Josh Lee
Biology researcher Ken Norman works with microscopic worms to study genes. USTAR would keep Utah competitive in high-tech industries.

The office solicits private sector funding of university research and works out licensing agreements so local businesses are given the right to use the discoveries gained from such research in their products.

"Both scientists themselves and outsiders are starting companies based upon university research," said Ted McAleer, director of contract research for the Office of Technology Venture Development.

According to the Bureau of Economic and Business Research projections listed on the USTAR Web site, the initiative could result in the creation of 422 new companies and 123,406 new jobs over the next 30 years in Utah.

"The publicity around legislative dollars being earmarked for recruiting better researching talent for the university will benefit us. Companies will want to tap into some of the inventions being developed at the university," McAleer said.

U students could also indirectly benefit from the initiative.

"It will provide more opportunities for students in research labs to participate in really compelling and interesting research," Wirthlin said.

USTAR funding will also go to Utah State University because it is also public research university. An Oversight Committee appointed by the governor and the Legislature will direct the initiative, making sure funds are efficiently distributed and legislative intentions are followed.

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