

on the educational grapevine

Region's Universities Raise Their Tech IQ

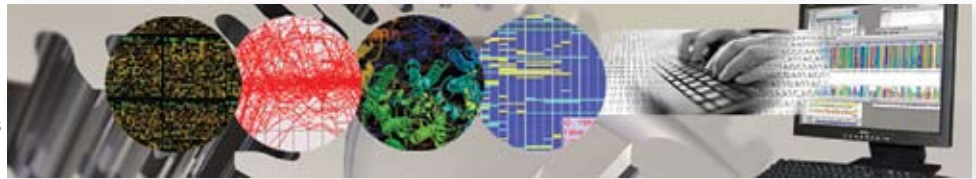
—by Steven Pearlstein

The greatest untold story of the Washington region is the under-performance of the technology sector. Given all the federal research institutions and universities in the region, the educated workforce, and the existing base of government technology contractors, this ought to be one of the hot technology clusters of the United States, if not the world. That it's not is largely a result of the absence of an entrepreneurial culture and the lack of a world-class research university, along with the fact that we've done pretty well without it. There are, however, some things in the works that could unlock Washington's tech potential.

Just this month, five leading universities announced the creation of the Chesapeake Crescent Innovation Alliance, with the idea that by collaborating and sharing resources, they might be able to attract funding or engage in research that no one institution could do on its own. Participating in the alliance are Johns Hopkins University, George Washington University, University of Maryland, Virginia Tech, and George Mason University. It remains to be seen whether they'll get the financial and political support they need from the business community and government leaders. But, several of these universities are also pushing ahead with a number of other initiatives that hold the promise of significant economic spinoff.

The University of Maryland has snagged an important anchor tenant for its new research campus at College Park: IARPA, which will do for intelligence research what DARPA did for basic research in the defense arena and which should attract dozens of private contractors into its orbit.

Virginia Tech will build a new research center in Arlington, in collaboration with the National Science Foundation, where it will conduct



Virginia Tech hosts the Virginia Bioinformatics Institute
[www.vtnews.vt.edu]



Founded in 1876, Johns Hopkins University is home to leading medical research [www.healthyheartnj.org/johns_hopkins.html]



University of Maryland has excellent math, geography, and economics programs [www.news8.net]

cutting-edge research in bioinformatics, biomedicine, and management of the national energy grid. Virginia Tech already offers more than a dozen graduate programs at campuses in Alexandria and Falls Church, but the new research center represents a conscious strategy on the part of its president to increase the university's footprint in the Washington area.

Even more ambitious is a plan being put together by Hopkins, along with the University of Maryland and Shady Grove Adventist Hospital, to create a 600-acre "life sciences city" at Shady Grove. It would be home to an expanded hospital complex, government and academic research labs, biotech companies and incubators, and a range of academic programs. But it would also include housing, retail and restaurants, parks, and public transportation infrastructure to transform what is now a collection of office parks into something more like an urban academic community. At the center of the effort are 108 acres of cattle farmland, known as the Belward Farm, that Hopkins purchased nearly 20 years ago for \$5 million. As part of a new master plan for the area, the state and county have agreed to make changes in plans for a new highway and transit line to accommodate the new complex. When completed, the project would generate hundreds of millions of dollars in new private investment, create space for tens of thousands of new workers and students, and be home to thousands of new residents.

The theory behind the Shady Grove "life sciences city" is that the most vibrant tech clusters are those in which students, teachers, researchers, entrepreneurs and government officials can easily and informally rub shoulders, exchange ideas, and hatch bold, ambitious plans. That's what makes places like Cambridge and Palo Alto so successful and so attractive, and what's largely been missing from the local tech scene.