

Frostburg State University
Fiscal Years 2026, 2027, & 2028 Operating Budget
Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis
Ways & Means Committee
Capital Budget
Delegate Joe Vogel
Delegate Jason Buckel
February 20, 2025
Appropriations Committee
House Ways & Means Committee
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of Frostburg State University (FSU) in support of HB0799. On behalf of Frostburg State University, I would like to thank Delegates Vogel and Buckel for sponsoring this important legislation. FSU has an unwavering commitment to fostering economic growth and innovation in rural Western Maryland as part of the University System of Maryland (USM). As the only comprehensive four-year university in the Appalachian part of Maryland, FSU plays a critical role in driving economic development through strategic investments in entrepreneurship, technology transfer and commercialization, and workforce development. A key component of these efforts has been the utilization of Maryland Innovation Initiative (MII) funds, which have enabled the university to implement and expand high-impact programs that directly benefit students, faculty, staff, and the broader community. Among the most successful initiatives supported by MII funding are the Bobcat Innovation Launch Pad competitions, FSU Intellectual Property Disclosure, Validation, Technology Transfer and Commercialization Program, and the Regional Cyber Security Operations Center (R-SOC).

Frostburg State University, in collaboration with TEDCO's Maryland Innovation Initiative (MII) and the University System of Maryland Launch Fund, successfully hosted two Bobcat Innovation Launch Pad competitions on campus. This unique program, designed to merge the hackathon model with a business pitch competition, provided students with a high-pressure, collaborative environment to develop commercially viable solutions to real-world challenges.

The first event, held in September 2023, saw 70 students from seven different majors apply to participate. The competition focused on critical issues such as distributed energy resources, virtual power plants, climate change, and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors. The second event, in November 2024, expanded to include over 80 attendees from more than 20 unique majors, addressing the theme of "Revive & Thrive: Reimagining Rural Resilience."

Student participants were assigned into 8 and 13 teams, respectfully, with individuals they had never met before and were given just two and a half days to develop and pitch real-world solutions before panels of expert judges. The pressure-filled experience honed their ability to work collaboratively under tight

deadlines, sharpened their communication skills, and enhanced their career prospects by providing tangible experiences to bolster their resumes. Winning teams received financial support to further develop their ideas. The mentorship component of the competition played a crucial role in its success. In its first year, industry experts from Deloitte Innovation Lab, along with FSU faculty and staff, guided student teams. By the second year, the mentorship network had expanded to include over 15 subject matter experts from diverse industries, including small businesses, entrepreneurship, healthcare (including mental health), outdoor recreation, and technology sectors. These experts provided hands-on guidance, offering valuable insights and real-world expertise throughout the competition.

Beyond financial rewards and mentorship, the competition delivered significant intangible benefits. Students improved their pitch and presentation skills, learned to engage in deep discussions with industry experts, and refined their ability to articulate complex ideas while receiving constructive feedback. The experience strengthened their problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities, increased their capacity for stress management, and encouraged teamwork under tight deadlines.

The competition also fostered an entrepreneurial mindset, exposing students to market research, business modeling, and prototype development. Many participants reported increased confidence in their ability to tackle real-world challenges, while others, who had never considered entrepreneurship, discovered that their ideas could be transformed into viable business ventures. The event's interdisciplinary nature further enriched the experience, with students from computer science, business, nursing, education, and other fields collaborating, mirroring real-world professional environments and expanding their professional networks.

The Bobcat Innovation Launch Pad has established itself as a premier innovation competition, helping students develop essential skills and transform ideas into practical business solutions. Winning teams continue to refine and scale their projects with the support of industry mentors and FSU resources. Even non-winning teams remain engaged, leveraging their expanded networks and available tools to bring their concepts to life. The competition has been especially impactful for first-generation students who previously lacked access to entrepreneurial opportunities, equipping them with the mentorship, tools, and confidence to turn their ideas into reality. Many projects have the potential to be implemented beyond the competition, benefiting local businesses and communities, particularly in addressing rural challenges in Western Maryland. These initiatives contribute to regional economic growth and sustainability and could potentially be scaled for larger markets.

Looking ahead, plans are underway to expand student participation, enhance industry sector involvement, and provide better post-competition support. Future initiatives will include increased mentorship opportunities, improved access to funding, and encouragement for students to attend events such as the TEDCO Entrepreneur Expo to further scale their projects. By continuing to evolve and grow, the Bobcat Innovation Launch Pad will remain a driving force in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship at Frostburg State University and beyond.

Cyber security is an ongoing and growing concern for organizations of all sizes. In rural areas of our state, the concern is no different though the resources and ability to provide protection to vulnerable organizations are significantly less than in more metropolitan parts of the state. FSU worked closely with Deloitte to conduct a study of the needs and opportunities to establish a Regional Cyber Security Operations Center in Western Maryland to provide affordable 24/7/365 IT systems security for institutions of higher education – universities and community colleges; for school systems, for civic and non-profit organizations, and for small businesses who otherwise are all operating with no to very little protection against cyber criminals. The result of the work was a comprehensive and detailed implementation plan to establish an R-SOC in Western Maryland which could serve as a demonstration for other parts of the state

or for a statewide Cyber Security Center. A key component of the R-SOC plan was the training of a cybersecurity workforce and the deployment of FSU students and graduates as the backbone of the R-SOC operation. We had anticipated approaching the State to fund the initial phases of the R-SOC implementation but have delayed those plans because of the State's budget challenges.

With MII funding for Fiscal Year 2025, FSU is developing a thriving entrepreneurial hub that supports the commercialization of new technologies and strengthens the regional economy through the Intellectual Property Disclosure, Validation, Technology Transfer, and Commercialization Program. At the heart of this initiative is the creation of a functional and inspiring space designed to cultivate an entrepreneurial ecosystem, where faculty, staff, students, and community members can collaborate and launch technology-based ventures. This spring, funding will support participation at several key technology conferences, enabling faculty and researchers to build industry connections and gain valuable insights into the commercialization process. Additionally, in partnership with TEDCO/MII, we will be hosting seminars and workshops tailored to encourage research-driven innovation. An Innovation Talk Series will bring subject matter experts to campus to discuss emerging trends and strategies for commercialization, while collaborative innovation meetups at the center will provide a platform for students and entrepreneurs to form teams, develop skills, and create startups. Finally, we will be hosting an end of year event to recognize the achievements of participants and celebrate their contributions to patentable technologies, technology commercialization, and entrepreneurial success.

To further streamline commercialization efforts, student interns will play a key role in developing a technology commercialization dashboard—a digital resource hub designed to provide faculty and researchers with essential tools to connect with industry partners and advance their innovations. To ensure the protection and commercialization of intellectual property, FSU will invest in USPTO-recommended software (Sophia), enabling researchers to safeguard their innovations effectively. Furthermore, the university plans to host a Community Entrepreneurial Symposium, a dynamic one-day event featuring keynote speakers, hands-on workshops, and breakout sessions on topics such as patenting, securing funding, and business development. This symposium serves as a catalyst for regional entrepreneurship, providing aspiring innovators with the knowledge and connections needed to succeed.

Thank you to the chair and the members of the council for your time and support. FSU respectfully urges continued legislative support for MII funding. FSU strongly believes that the continued Maryland Innovation Initiative (MII) funding in Fiscal Years 26, 27, and 28 will be instrumental in sustaining and expanding these efforts. All these programs have been recognized as essential resources for our rural region. These initiatives align with the mission of FSU's Division of Advancement and Regional Engagement, which is dedicated to increasing and stimulating economic growth through innovation, collaboration, and workforce development. This funding will enable us to continue operations, enhance opportunities in rural Western Maryland, and strengthen Frostburg State University's role in bridging academic and economic growth. By leveraging MII funds, FSU will be able to create a sustainable model that not only strengthens the university's research capacity but also supports local businesses and industries in an ever-evolving economic landscape.