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UMaine Today



MIRTA teams forging ahead with commercialization plans

December 9, 2020

Four faculty-led teams pursuing commercialization of research projects are ready for next steps, having completed the University of Maine's 2020 MIRTA accelerator program. The teams presented their projects at a virtual event Dec. 8 marking the conclusion of this year's program.

"While 2020 has brought a unique set of challenges to the MIRTA program, this year's cohort has persevered," says UMaine director of business incubation Veena Dinesh. "They pivoted to an online model and got creative in their approach to customer discovery and development. We're proud to showcase their hard work and look forward to continuing to support their commercialization goals."

All four teams have made notable progress in advancing their diverse projects despite delays related to COVID-19. The group represents the third cohort of the MIRTA program, which is designed to move university research projects along the path from discovery to becoming commercial products with public benefit. MIRTA is administered by the Office of Innovation and Economic Development (OIED) with support from the University of Maine System Research Reinvestment Fund and the Maine Technology Institute.

Over the course of the program, guided by OIED staff and external advisers, teams engaged in customer discovery, market analysis, prototyping, partnership development and technology evaluation to map strategies for bringing their research to market.

Daniel Puhlman, assistant professor of family studies at the University of Maine, and first-year master's student Emma Richardson have developed The Co-Parent Co-op, a mobile app-based intervention program designed to help high-conflict co-parents successfully resolve disputes and build a productive coparental relationship.

"Through MIRTA, our team has identified three channels to market: The legal system, mental health professionals, and co-parents themselves," says Puhlman. "We have seen our project move forward quickly and made incredible strides toward realizing the potential of AI and gaming, understanding our market, and learning about our customers. Our first prototype is under development and expected to be ready for testing by January 2021."

Joseph Staples, assistant professor of environmental science at the University of Southern Maine, and senior undergraduate student Elizabeth Davis, have worked on the Gorham Lamp, a novel microscope and benchtop light that combines multiple lighting techniques (brightfield, darkfield, transmitted illumination, etc.) in a single cost-saving and space-saving device.

"One of the major stumbling blocks for innovation is what to do with the idea after you have brought it to life," says Staples. "Through the MIRTA program, we have developed a much better marketing plan for getting the Gorham Lamp into the hands of customers. Moving forward, we are working with the UMaine Advanced Manufacturing Center to assemble a few working devices for direct sale. From there, we will continue to seek licensees and/or explore options for manufacturing this device here in Maine. This is a very exciting stage in the development of the Gorham Lamp."

Dorothy Klimis-Zacas, professor of clinical nutrition at the University of Maine and graduate student Natalie VandenAkker have advanced RegenBlu, a product that employs an anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and cost-effective Maine wild blueberry extract to promote wound healing and tissue regeneration. Klimis-Zacas' research has long focused on the beneficial health effects of wild blueberries, and this product draws on her recent work related to two classes of compounds extracted from wild blueberries — anthocyanins and phenolic acids — that have documented benefits in the treatment of chronic diseases.

"The MIRTA program was crucial in helping us determine the path to follow for commercializing our biomedical product," says Klimis-Zacas. "We plan to form a startup company in the future, and the professionals and entrepreneurs we worked with through MIRTA have guided us to develop a business model and understand the regulatory pathways to bring our product to market. With their input and the skills and strategies we learned, we're prepared to take our idea from bench to bedside."

Nimesha Ranasinghe, assistant professor of spatial informatics at the University of Maine, along with graduate students Chamath Amarasinghe and Meetha James, have developed Salty Spoon, a "smart spoon" that can enhance food flavor to improve quality of life for those on restricted diets.

"MIRTA, as well as the National I-Corps program, guided us to think about our research from the consumer's perspective and identify ways we could customize our product to solve real-world problems," says Ranasinghe. "We are moving forward to produce a one-of-a-kind digital therapeutic device to reduce salt consumption while keeping the same great flavors of food and beverages."

The Salty Spoon team has formed a startup, FlaVR Labs, filed a provisional patent application for their technology and is working on a prototype that can be used in clinical trials next year.

The students working on these projects say that MIRTA has broadened the ways they think about their research.

"Prior to embarking on our MIRTA journey, I saw myself as a research assistant who was excited to start working on a socially conscious project," says Co-Parent Co-Op team member and human development master's student Richardson. "One year on, I've gained a deep respect for dedicated co-parents and counseling professionals while simultaneously learning valuable information about the commercialization process."

In reflecting on his MIRTA experience, Salty Spoon team member and spatial information science and engineering master's student Amarasinghe notes "how customer discovery can lead to new research opportunities," and the particular value of "talking to the people who make purchasing decisions."

For Salty Spoon team member and spatial information science and engineering master's student James, "learning to market your product/science/technology in one-liners, three-minute presentations, elevator pitches, and cold calls was the adventurous part of my MIRTA journey."

MIRTA is among several commercialization programs offered by the Office of Innovation and Economic Development. Researchers are encouraged to participate in the [Commercialization Training Series](#), a webinar series providing topical overviews on subjects ranging from idea validation to intellectual property. UMaine's [I-Corps site program](#) is the next step, helping research teams explore commercialization potential with grant funding available through the National Science Foundation. The MIRTA accelerator helps I-Corps participants build on their knowledge and move their ideas even closer to market.

From the nine teams who participated in the first two MIRTA cohorts, three teams have gone on to the National I-Corps program, five startups have been incorporated, four patents have been filed or are in process, and more than \$2 million has been raised in external funding and prototype sales.

The next MIRTA cohort is scheduled to begin in February. For more information about the program, contact Veena Dinesh, veena.dinesh@maine.edu.

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