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Former Science Trust expert calls for overhaul of R&D approach [1]

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If Puerto Rico is going to have any chance of creating a biotechnology sector that creates quality research and independent-minded scientists for the island's biotech apparatus, the approach to research being conducted at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) must be revamped. That is where a former trustee of the Science, Technology & Research Trust, Mariano García-Blanco, is saying we have to eliminate the political ebb and flow that propitiates lack of continuity and affects the quality of research at the university.

The UPR has a significantly low amount of research being turned into commercial patents. García-Blanco said it could be much higher, but certain steps must be taken to change the situation.

"We need to turn the UPR into a world-class biotechnology and bioscience R&D [research & development] center," he said. "To accomplish this effort, we need to change the way we have been doing things at the university. The decisions at successful higher-learning centers around

the world are completely detached from any political considerations, and that hasn't happened here for many years."

García-Blanco's proposal calls for a blue ribbon committee composed of international experts to identify faculty members who are working on projects with real potential, and provide them all the funds and support needed to make their research successful. He also proposes that once this is accomplished, support in patent law, marketing and product development should be offered to help commercialize any new invention.

"I would divide the institution's faculty into two segments," he said. "Ninety percent of all teachers should dedicate their efforts to educating students and the other 10%—those with R&D expertise working with viable projects— should be funded, and get the required support to commercialize their inventions."

Another priority for García-Blanco is the Puerto Rico Science, Technology & Research Trust, whose mission is to promote and facilitate innovative research and develop human capital to create knowledge and technology with an economic impact. The trust also seeks to support people and the expertise to integrate technology from many disciplines, enable technology transfers to industry, sustain investment from international corporations and produce spin-off companies.

García-Blanco understands that to effectively carry out its respective mission, the trust must have complete independence from any political influence, something that seems to have plagued the trust since its inception.

The trust's board comprises trustees from the public and private sectors. The majority of private-sector trustees haven't been nominated by government officials, which has created accusations by private-sector members that the government wants to control the entity. The trust's private-sector representatives have also accused the government of insisting upon naming individuals to occupy vacant seats on the board, who lack world-class credentials equal to those being proposed by the private-sector trustees.

"Independence from any political influence is essential for the trust's ability to accomplish its mission," García-Blanco told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS. "Continuity is key. We must walk away from the four-year syndrome that has plagued the island, so we can create an effective R&D ecosystem that nurtures new technologies and propitiates local manufacturing."

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