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Exclusive: Virginia Tech taps D.C. incubator leader for new role

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Sally Allain, head of Johnson & Johnson Innovation's D.C. incubator, is departing for a newly created position with Virginia Tech. VIRGINIA TECH

By Sara Gilgore - Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
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Sally Allain, the inaugural head of Johnson & Johnson Innovation's D.C. incubator, has left her position after more than four years — to grow Virginia Tech's health sciences research enterprise.

Allain, a longtime J&J exec who built up and led the local JLABs hub that planted roots on Children's National Hospital's Walter Reed campus in spring 2019, stepped away this month, announcing her departure in a LinkedIn post. She'll start with Virginia Tech next week as chief health sciences growth and innovation officer, a newly created position charged with spinning out technology companies and tapping big-name partners across sectors.

In her new position, Allain will report to Michael Friedlander, Virginia Tech's vice president for health sciences and technology, and executive director of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC.

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Allain was "looking for new challenges" and wanted to get back to strategy and business development, she said in an interview Tuesday. Blacksburg-based Virginia Tech, also with a presence on the Children's National Research and Innovation Campus, is "at such an inflection point of growth and opportunities," she said. "Knowing some of their immediate plans and then being able to move into a role and help them shape longer-term plans — it's just the right time to join."



The JLABs incubator lives in the Children's National Research Institute building, pictured here. COURTESY JOHNSON & JOHNSON INNOVATION

Johnson & Johnson Innovation's plans for JLABs

J&J has named Rachel Rath, director of its joint initiative with the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, as interim head of JLABs in D.C., a company spokesperson told me in an email. That Blue Knight collaboration, based within JLABs, aims to support companies addressing health threats and emerging infectious diseases.

The J&J spokesperson declined to comment further regarding plans to permanently fill the position, citing company policy around personnel matters. Allain said she thinks they will be backfilling her role.

The J&J spokesperson confirmed that JLABs is committed to maintaining its D.C. campus footprint, because that presence "is critical to accelerating the translation of potential breakthrough discoveries into new treatments and technologies."

Allain took the top post with JLABs in D.C. after nearly 15 years with Johnson & Johnson. She was most recently interim head of JLABs initiatives across New York, Boston and Philadelphia, and previously spent a couple years as senior director of strategy and operations for J&J Innovation. Within the company's immunology work, she also managed a team responsible for portfolio alliances and external innovation, among other roles.

At JLABs, Allain led business development, managed a portfolio of companies and worked with industry, government and academic partners. In the three years since J&J's incubator went live, it has served more than 55 companies, "and that portfolio could and should still grow," Allain said. To date, those ventures have collectively raised more than \$600 million in funding.



Michael Friedlander is Virginia Tech's vice president for health sciences and technology, and executive director of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC. COURTESY VIRGINIA TECH

Virginia Tech's health sciences expansion

With Virginia Tech, Allain will be spearheading research collaborations with academic, corporate and industry partners across pharmaceuticals, medical devices, imaging, diagnostics and digital health, Friedlander told me in an interview Tuesday.

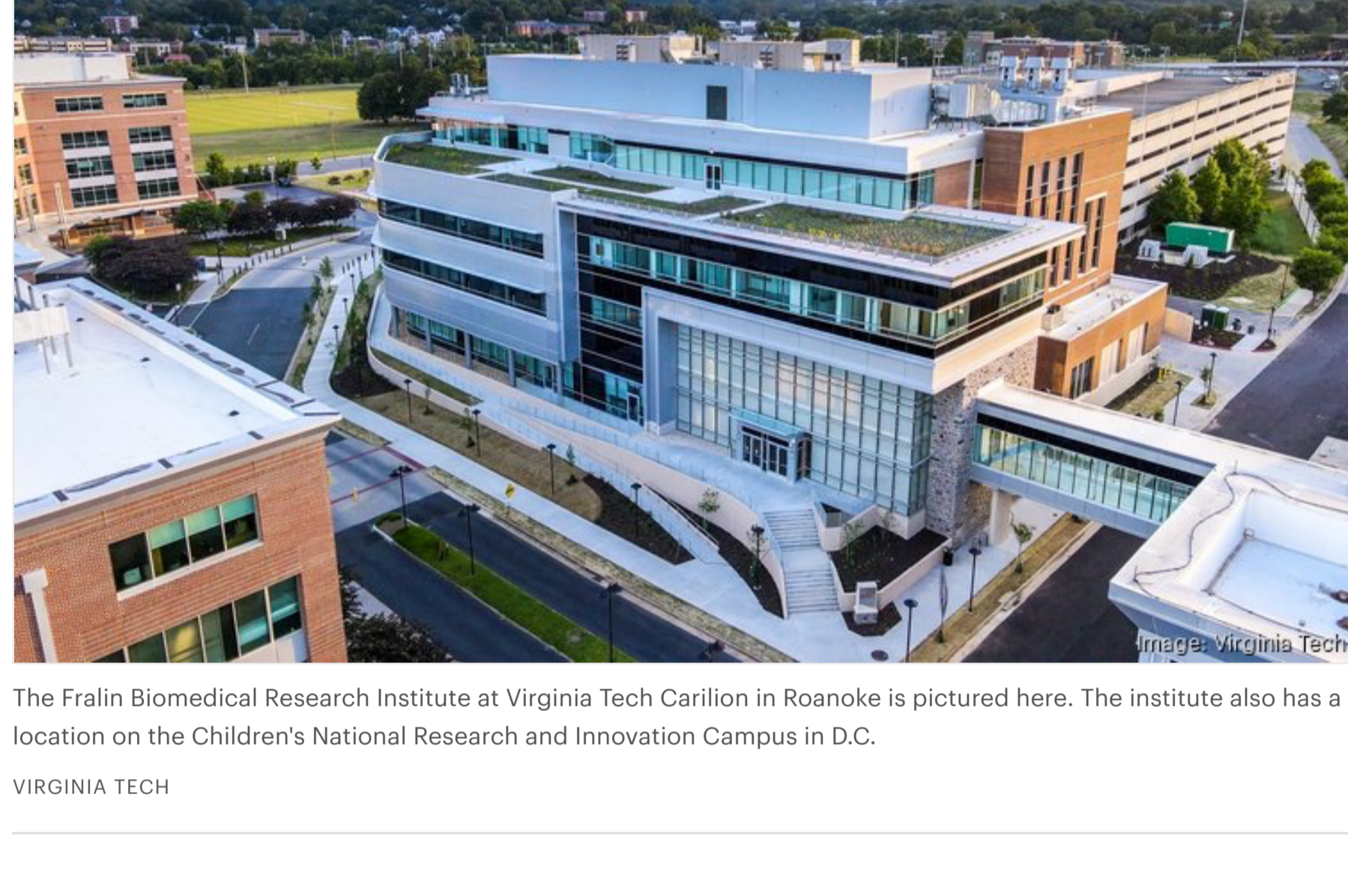
"We want her to think, of course, regionally, but also very much nationally and globally," he said. That could mean, for example, bringing an industry player to set up a satellite site in Roanoke, he said, adding that VT is now in the early stages of some discussions about that.

Allain will also be helping to bootstrap, mature and commercialize technology startups; the Fralin institute already counts about a dozen small spinoff companies, "but it's still early days," Friedlander said. "So we really could use somebody with her knowledge and skill sets and experience and contacts, to help us in that space."

Allain is not relocating, she said, but will remain based in the D.C. area, which she called "a great place to be able to expand the network for Virginia Tech." She will first focus her work at the Health Sciences and Technology Campus in Roanoke, where she'll have an office.

But over time, Friedlander said, her work will also impact the school's main Blacksburg campus, as well as the \$1 billion innovation campus coming to Alexandria, and its cancer research center on the Children's National D.C. campus — an outpost of the Fralin institute — which Dr. Christopher Hourigan leads.

Virginia Tech's desire to push deeper into health sciences won't stop with Allain's position. Up to this point, Friedlander has been working closely with two other senior staff, who will form Allain's team initially, he said. And while the school doesn't have any jobs posted yet, "I would bet we will over the course of the next year," Friedlander told me. "We staff up as we grow, and I think that will be our philosophy here, as well, but I expect that there will likely be a need for more support going forward working with her."



The Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion in Roanoke is pictured here. The institute also has a location on the Children's National Research and Innovation Campus in D.C. VIRGINIA TECH

Allain's transition

Allain connected with Friedlander after meeting years earlier, when J&J and Virginia Tech each signed on as partners for Children's National's campus at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center. That project — the brainchild of Dr. Kurt Newman, the health system's former CEO — took shape years earlier and broke ground in late 2018. Securing those partners helped solidify the vision for that site.

Since then, JLABs and the Fralin institute have occupied space in the same building on that campus. The organizations — and Allain and Friedlander — have increasingly worked together over the years. Some Fralin spinouts have gotten plugged into the JLABs network; and JLABs teamed up with Virginia Tech's corporate research center to help sponsor early-stage companies set to be housed in a new accelerator under development on the Roanoke campus.

To the university, Allain brings deep knowledge of the commercialization landscape and startup ecosystem, according to Friedlander. Her track record and impact in Greater Washington made her "ideal" for this role, he said. And for Allain, the move was also a homecoming; she earned a bachelor's in biology, and master's in microbiology and immunology, from Virginia Tech. She also holds an MBA from the University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

"It's pretty magical to go back now on staff, to really push forward their growth," Allain said, noting that the university, and its health sciences work, have "changed dramatically" since she was there. "So to go back and be able to be a part of further expansion and growth is pretty special."

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