

Tom Tom Festival and UVA Launch 2026 Innovation Summit for Cross-Sector Collaboration

LÄRABAR founder Lara Merriken launches two-day event uniting entrepreneurs, investors, researchers & leaders for 40+ sessions spotlighting Virginia growth.



CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA, UNITED STATES, April 21, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On Thursday, April 23 and Friday, April 24, the Tom Tom Foundation, UVA Health and UVA Innovates will co-present the [2026 Innovation Summit](#). The event is part of the [14th Annual Tom Tom Festival](#) which will draw more than 25,000 people to downtown Charlottesville.



Charlottesville has a top research university, growing startup momentum, and a community that values bold ideas. This Summit joins those pieces to ask: what can we build together?"

Paul Beyer, Founder and Executive Director of the Tom Tom Foundation

The Summit is designed to accelerate innovation and economic growth in Virginia by convening startup founders, investors, researchers and ecosystem builders for sessions led by more than 150 speakers. The emphasis of the event is on collaboration and connection.

"Charlottesville has the ingredients for a world-class innovation ecosystem — a top research university, growing startup momentum, and a community that values bold ideas," says Paul Beyer, Founder and Executive Director of the Tom Tom Foundation. "This Summit joins those pieces to ask: what can we build together?"

Through the Innovation Summit, the partners aim to amplify the opportunities and discoveries that are transforming the region. As Virginia's top-ranked Research 1 university, UVA is a powerful engine of world-changing ideas and technologies. The Tom Tom Foundation is a Charlottesville-based nonprofit that brings together diverse communities to build a brighter tomorrow.

"We're proud to partner with TomTom on the 2026 Innovation Summit," says Paul Cherukuri, UVA's Chief Innovation Officer, "Together, we're building a bridge from idea to implementation — connecting our faculty and students with investors and business leaders to accelerate real

economic growth across Central Virginia.”

Featured Sessions:

“Courage is the First Ingredient: The LÄRABAR Founding Story and Building Companies With Intention” — Lara Merriken grew her company from a kitchen experiment into a nationally recognized clean-label brand, striving to stay true to her mission along the way. Her keynote is relevant to entrepreneurs seeking to build and scale purpose-driven companies.

“The Luminoah Story: From a Son’s Rare Tumor Diagnosis to a Medical Breakthrough” — Neal Piper will share his journey from a parent on a quest to improve nutrition delivery for his child to an innovator in medical technology. With Monique Adams of 757 Angels and 757 Collab, he’ll unpack his insights on what it takes to succeed as an entrepreneur in the healthcare sector.

“The Future of Biotech and Regional Innovation Hubs” – Biotechnology innovation is no longer confined to a handful of coastal mega-clusters. Leaders working at the center of translating scientific discovery into real-world impacts will discuss the rise of regional biotech hubs and how collaboration is accelerating innovation. Panelists include Joe Benevento, President and CEO, the Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation; Paul Cherukuri, Chief Innovation Officer, the University of Virginia; Michael Steele, President & CEO, Activation Capital; Erin Burcham, President, Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance; Nikki Hastings, Executive Director, CvilleBioHub.

Tracks:

The Summit’s 40+ sessions address four core tracks: Technology (AI, Life Sciences, Defense), Entrepreneurship (skill building, showcases, competitions), Investment (Angel networks, accelerators, commercialization) and Government (policy making, collaborations, infrastructure). Over 45 startups will pitch to investors via showcases.

About the Tom Tom Foundation:

The Tom Tom Foundation is a Charlottesville-based nonprofit dedicated to connecting communities through innovation, music and ideas. Each spring, the Tom Tom Festival brings together entrepreneurs, civic leaders, artists and residents to explore the future of society while celebrating the creative spirit of the region. (tomtomfoundation.org)

About The University of Virginia & UVA Innovates:

The University of Virginia is an iconic public institution of higher education, founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819. It is characterized by its student self-governance, its historic Academical Village—a UNESCO World Heritage site—and its unwavering commitment to excellence in research, scholarship and patient care. UVA is dedicated to being a "Great and Good" university that serves the Commonwealth of Virginia and the world. UVA Innovates was established in September 2024 to help catalyze innovation and entrepreneurship at the University of Virginia. UVA Innovates sits within the Office of the Provost and helps coordinate, communicate and amplify various entrepreneurial initiatives around Grounds and beyond. (virginia.edu,

innovates.virginia.edu)

About UVA Health:

UVA Health is an academic system with hospitals across Charlottesville, Culpeper and Northern Virginia, along with the UVA School of Medicine, UVA School of Nursing, UVA Physicians Group and the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library. The UVA School of Medicine consistently attracts nationally prominent researchers to develop breakthrough treatments to benefit patients around the world. (uvahealth.com)

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