A $23.3-million award from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) last October was the second-largest competitive award in Morgan’s history and the highest ever from the NIH. The award, from a program called Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity (BUILD), is designed to attract more students from underrepresented minority groups into the biomedical sciences and help enable their success in NIH-funded research after graduation.

“While past efforts to diversify our workforce have had significant impact on individuals, we have not made substantial progress in supporting diversity,” said Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., director of NIH. “This program will test new models of training and mentoring so that we can ultimately attract the best minds from all groups to biomedical research.”

The NIH points to social science research suggesting that a fundamental shift in the way scientists are trained and mentored is required to attract and sustain the interest of people from underrepresented groups in the scientific workforce at all career stages. Toward this end, researchers from Morgan have designed an innovative research training method they named “A Student-Centered Entrepreneurship Development (ASCEND) Training Model.” Unlike apprenticeship models, ASCEND allows students to be creative and take ownership of their training by proposing and selecting their topic of research, developing the research methods, writing small grants and moving the project forward. The model has been tested in international environments with great success.

“Morgan has a very good track record of enhancing diversity in the sciences in Maryland and around the
country, and this is the goal of the NIH initiative," said University President David Wilson. "We believe that winning this competitive award is recognition by NIH and others that the best way to bring more minorities into the sciences is with best practices: programs that work. And Morgan has surely proven that it has the ability to show how it is done."

The University will establish a dedicated environment, where student researchers can exchange ideas and enjoy substantial peer support. MSU will also use the BUILD award to strengthen its training and research infrastructure, create active learning centers, improve science curricula and acquire state-of-the-art educational technology, all aimed at providing a highly enhanced training in science and biomedical research.

A number of elected officials expressed their support from Morgan's selection as a BUILD award recipient.

"In order to out-build and out-innovate the rest of the world, we must first out-educate," said U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski of Maryland. Mikulski is vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which funds NIH, and is an advocate of the BUILD program. "Morgan State is on the front lines of preparing a diverse biotech workforce for in-demand jobs right here in Maryland. This partnership between NIH and Morgan State, one of Maryland's and the nation's great Historically Black Colleges and Universities, is a smart investment in the future of Maryland life science jobs."

"NIH has selected the very best as a partner to foster the next generation of biomedical researchers, scientists and clinicians," said U.S. Sen Benjamin Cardin of Maryland. "Diversifying our biomedical workforce will help mitigate many of the inherent disparities of our health care system. I've been a proud partner with Morgan State University as they strengthen their STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education programs and reach deep into our communities to make a difference in people's lives."

Said U.S. Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland's Seventh District, a member of Morgan's Board of Regents: "Promoting diversity in biomedical research ensures that a range of views is always present in the important studies undertaken in this field. This award will support the training of bright young minds who are often underrepresented in biomedical science."

The NIH BUILD award affirms Morgan's commitment to faculty and student research," said Victor R. McCravy, Ph.D., Morgan's vice president for research and economic development. "(This research will lead) to innovative outcomes which will transform our Maryland communities as we focus on the future in creating a biomedical workforce with the technical prowess to make critical research contributions to our nation's challenges."