

Technology Transfer Office Models: An Introduction

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This section presents various thought-provoking perspectives on how technology transfer offices are structured to meet differing objectives and environments. As a whole, this series of articles provides perspectives from seasoned technology transfer professionals representing both public and private institutions, as well as large and small offices, and offers insight into the strategic and tactical issues encountered in diverse institutions. Several common themes emerge from these articles. First, it is clearly articulated in each that a primary role of a technology transfer office is to facilitate interaction between the university and the private sector. It is also clear that all technology transfer offices engage in providing service, generating income, and complying with regulations; however, there are some very distinct differences in how each office approaches these three missions. Finally, the authors illustrated that technology transfer offices tend to evolve over time as objectives and environments change.

Christopher Capelli, MD, presents an example of a technology transfer office engaged in licensing, intellectual property management, and education, but clearly set up as a business unit with a stated objective “to seek the fair market value of the university’s intellectual property ... for the benefit of the university, faculty/staff, and community.” In this model, the University of Pittsburg emphasizes assessment of the fair market value of a technology and negotiates with potential licensees to extract the agreed-upon fair market value. Capelli’s chapter details the process the office uses to value technologies and how the office effectively uses a faculty-based technology transfer committee in the selection of the most promising inventions for patent applications.

Andrew Neighbour, PhD, discusses technology transfer operations at the University of California at Los Angeles, a large state university within a large state university system. UCLA serves the three goals of technology transfer—revenue, service, and compliance—

but is clearly aligned toward service over revenue generation. The UCLA office encompasses “six distinct, but integrated, groups of specialist individuals.” These groups include licensing, business development, patent management, marketing, materials transfer, and administration. An interesting element of the UCLA program is the use of business development professionals to forge relationships with key faculty in areas that are likely to produce potential solutions to market needs. Once an opportunity is identified, the project is handed off to the licensing professionals to finalize the agreements.

Michael Batalia, PhD, provides an example of a technology transfer office in a private university that is set up under a “hybrid model that focuses its efforts on the development of the value proposition of each technology disclosed.” The Office of Technology Asset Management at Wake Forest University is also structured atypically in that it reports to the financial administration of the university in contrast with a more common reporting structure through research administration. An interesting element of the Wake Forest model is the use of a wholly owned, for-profit subsidiary called Seed Stage Associates (SSA). This for-profit entity in-licenses technologies that need further development and business-development expertise, rather than just an infusion of capital, to become commercially viable. In addition, SSA provides other highly customized services such as technology transfer consulting to other schools in the state of North Carolina without established technology transfer offices.

James Severson, PhD, provides a view on technology transfer operations at a large, standalone state university. UW TechTransfer is a large office with four distinct operational units: invention licensing, digital ventures, policy and strategic initiatives, and finance and business operations. The University of Washington has been a pioneer in licensing software and digital assets, and the parallel licensing office model provides a method for optimizing licensing and campus interaction strategies for traditional patented inventions and software and other copyright works. UW TechTransfer considers itself to be a service organization, and it emphasizes outreach to campus units, interaction with the local venture and business community, and completion of licensing transactions to ensure technologies are effectively moved to commercial application.

Robert MacWright, PhD, Esq., presents a view of a mid-sized technology transfer operation focused on faculty service using a deal-based business model. The deal-based model in use at the University of Virginia Patent Foundation emphasizes marketing prior to patenting and only pursuing patents where a licensee can be found. The University of Virginia Patent Foundation was developed in 1978 as a non-for-profit corporation that is not part of the university. The foundation and UVA have a contractual relationship that provides for assignment of inventions to the foundation in exchange for evaluation, protection, licensing, and revenue-distribution services. MacWright provides an analysis of the advantages of the separate foundation structure and advocates that this model allows for greater flexibility in decision making and hiring than a traditional office within a state university.

Bruce Wheaton, PhD, comments on managing a mid-sized technology transfer office in a state university. Wheaton discusses the hierarchical set of priorities used in patenting and licensing decisions at the University of Iowa: Adhere to applicable laws, optimize the opportunity for the public benefit, create or retain research opportunities, and “don’t be dumb about money.” This priority scheme establishes Iowa as an office more closely aligned with compliance and service missions than that of revenue generation; and most specifically, one that illustrates that the activities of technology transfer offices are largely influenced by legal considerations.