

Invention Triage

Harl R. Tolbert

Harl R. Tolbert is associate director, biological sciences at the Office of Technology Transfer at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York.

Introduction

Technology transfer programs need to establish effective and efficient procedures to manage the review of new technologies. For all practical purposes, the technology transfer program is generally the party charged with selecting the winners and losers among an organization's technologies. In other words, selecting the technologies that will be marketed, patented, or have other resources devoted to them and determining those that will or will not be promoted. Often, the success of an office in picking between these two groups determines actual and perceived success.

Making the evaluation process somewhat perilous is the fact that every person evaluating technologies has the fear of passing on the one that got away and the subsequent retelling of the tale for years to come by administrators, disgruntled faculty, and researchers. While these stories are legend at some campuses and likely to occur in the future at others, the actual occurrence is rare. Nevertheless, every office should strive to perform a thorough evaluation of every invention disclosure and develop a complete understanding of the potential of each submission. Further, the establishment of, and compliance with, a well-crafted and thorough review process can ensure that such occurrences are unlikely to happen.

An institution's criteria for evaluating invention disclosures and technologies will vary—there is no one-size-fits-all model. Every institution's evaluation will be shaped by a variety of organization-specific issues such as patent budget, size of research program, types of technologies evaluated, goals, etc. One place to start is to think about the main goals of the office.

The two general guiding themes are:

- maximizing commercialization, thus, leading to revenue generation
- service to your research community

These are not mutually exclusive—almost every enterprise will strive to satisfy both these demands. However, every institution is likely to place more emphasis on one area (or at the very least, place more emphasis on one in specific situations). This section should provide some examples of tools that can be useful in the management or development of a system to manage the invention disclosure review process. Not all of these examples will apply to any one institution, and it will probably be necessary for every office/individual to decide which of these methods would be useful (and, in fact, develop its own methods for its unique needs).

(For more on the invention disclosure process, see Volume 3 of the AUTM Technology Transfer Manual.)