

Technology Transfer Tactics™



The monthly advisor on best practices in technology transfer

Regional TTO network

PA model gives small colleges a shot at commercialization

Most small colleges lack the resources to maintain a dedicated technology transfer office, but that doesn't mean there aren't ways to pursue commercialization. Consider what's going on in central Pennsylvania with the Innovation Transfer Network (ITN), an organization that basically serves as the TTO for 13 smaller colleges, each of which has a representative on the ITN board. Established in 2006 with the assistance of state funding, ITN staff go from campus to campus to scout out faculty inventors and rev up interest in technology transfer. At the same time, the fledgling agency is reaching out to the regional business community, doing its best to forge links between academia and the commercial world.

"When you combine the 13 schools, we have 3,000 faculty members and we are equivalent to a major research institution," explains **Jennifer Hammaker**, the director of business development for ITN. "When I talk to CEOs, they want to work with ITN because we are their feet on the street on the campuses, and that is what is required for this to be successful."

While ITN cannot claim credit for any million dollar licensing deals, it was instrumental in helping Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg land a \$750,000 grant to establish a regional biofuels center, and it has helped several other schools form potentially lucrative ties with local businesses.

For example, a member of the physics faculty at Dickinson College has worked with a local company to design a solar panel. "It is still in the prototype stage, but I think for a liberal arts college to even have a relationship with private industry is a little unusual for us," explains **Christina VanBuskirk**, PhD, the associate provost and associate vice president for development at Dickinson College, and a member of the ITN board.

Further, while Dickinson has not yet seen any

commercial revenues from its work with local businesses, it has realized some budget efficiencies stemming from a joint research project based on biodiesel fuel production. "Some of our fleet vehicles are being run on fuel that we are generating from waste vegetable oil," says VanBuskirk.

Some of these business connections are made at events that ITN sponsors at member colleges. For instance, last October, Dickinson hosted an event dubbed *Plug into the Private Sector*. "It gave us a chance to bring faculty not only from Dickinson, but from neighboring colleges together with business partners to hear a little bit about opportunities and stimulate the thinking [among] faculty on how they might be engaged," adds VanBuskirk.

Business ties pay off

Serving on the ITN board has been a bit of a crash course in technology transfer for **Dick Fluck**, PhD, the associate dean of faculty at Franklin & Marshall College (F&M) in Lancaster, PA, but it has opened his eyes to some new opportunities. "I believe the economic future of the college and this region are tied to each other, and I think the college has resources that we can use to reach that end," he says.

In fact, through connections made via ITN, one company is in discussions with F&M to potentially use some of the school's high-end scientific equipment, and another company has already agreed to lease some space in F&M's science building. "It was the right kind of space that they needed to help them relocate to Lancaster," says Fluck. "They will be bringing some of their own equipment and using some of the equipment that is already there."

In addition, Fluck says ITN has helped to nurture an invention from F&M to the point where the college is now considering whether it will file a

patent application. "There have been webinars and educational opportunities to learn about patenting and licensing. It is a whole new world for me," he says.

Andy Petroski, MS, the director of learning technologies at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, first became involved with ITN when he decided to take advantage of one of the network's seed-assistance grants, which are targeted to faculty who are working with a local business on product development or idea generation, he says. "I have a background with a local multimedia and e-learning production company, and they had a new project they were working on commercializing," says Petroski.

That project resulted in a solid concept and an on-screen prototype for a patient education tool, and Petroski is now eager to take the next step. "ITN put together a group of business leaders involved with medical communications and patient education, as well as people who are entrepreneurs and who could provide assistance, ideas, and feedback on start-ups," he says. "We received a lot of great input from that, and as a result we are now looking for additional grant funding from larger organizations, but we have also recently applied for another grant from ITN."

Grassroots effort is critical

Hammaker says the small seed-assistance grants -- in the range of \$10,000 -- have played a crucial role in helping ITN identify the entrepreneurial faculty at the member colleges. And she recommends that other regions interested in developing a similar model find a way to develop this type of offering. "It doesn't have to be a lot of money, but there needs to be some funding that goes to the faculty and requires a business partner," she says.

Another key recommendation is to establish an engaged board. "You need people on the board who are leaders in the schools so they have the right level of access to the right people," says Hammaker, noting that most of ITN's board members are deans or vice

presidents involved with research. "Find people who are willing to get involved and roll up their sleeves to make things happen on their campus."

In addition, Hammaker stresses the importance of developing a good understanding of what each of the member schools is doing and what sectors they have expertise in before launching any events or building a flashy website. "Otherwise, you are just throwing darts at a board," she says. "Even though you've got a dean in there making connections with faculty, there are also respected faculty members who are going to carry a project all the way through to the end, so you need to meet those guys and understand who they are so that you can get some early successes."

Also, find community champions who will work for you and provide support behind the scenes at the state level, advises Hammaker. These individuals can come from business, government, or other groups, but look for respected leaders who have influence, she says, noting it was community champions who came up with the idea for ITN in the first place.

In determining how to staff an ITN-like model, consider all the legwork required to make such an organization successful. "You cannot overestimate the amount of grassroots work that you have to do, particularly in the beginning," says Hammaker. "We have 13 schools that are part of the program, and that is probably close to the right number for the four-member staff that we have right now."

Once your organization is established and has momentum, consider asking the member colleges to help fund the operation, suggest Hammaker. At the end of 2009, ITN's board decided that each school would pay a membership fee of \$1,000. It's a small sum, acknowledges Hammaker, but in this economy, when most of the colleges were already canceling other memberships and subscriptions, it seemed like a good place to start, she says. "We all know that will increase over time, but we wanted to get it started and moving."

Contact Hammaker at itnwk@psu.edu; VanBuskirk at vanbuski@dickinson.edu; Fluck at dick.fluck@fandm.edu; and Petroski at apetroski@harrisburg.edu. ►