

Managing a Medium-Sized Technology Transfer Office

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Bruce Wheaton, PhD, began phased retirement September 1, 2005. However, this article was written in early 2005, when he was serving as executive director of the University of Iowa Research Foundation and director of Technology Innovation Center and Oakdale Research Park in Iowa City, Iowa. Since then, the technology transfer program is under different management, and, therefore, some of the principles, strategies, and objectives mentioned in the article may have changed.

Introduction

Having agreed to undertake the task of commenting on managing a “medium-sized” technology transfer office, a few fairly obvious questions come to the fore: How is managing a medium-sized office different from managing a big one—or a small one? Would one imagine different missions, different philosophical underpinnings for operations of varying sizes? And what in the world defines a medium-sized office?

Factual Background

Let’s start with a sense of where I’m coming from—a sense of the University of Iowa Research Foundation (UIRF)—an organization that, in some way, must be, by definition, medium-sized. In our fiscal year that ended June 30, 2004, we earned \$10.7 million, received 86 invention disclosures, and filed 118 U.S. patent applications and 62 additional foreign counterparts. In the same period, we received 46 patents and entered 47 licenses. (The relationship between the number of issued patents and the number of new licenses is largely coincidental; despite our fondest hopes, we are not able to license 97 percent of patents as soon as they issue.) Our staff includes 5.3 FTE licensing

professionals and 2.5 FTE support persons. During this same fiscal year, the university received about \$333 million in grants and contracts. Given this scale, it might be said that the University of Iowa is a “small” large university, and that the UIRF is a medium-sized office as a consequence.