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**Recommended Citation**
Sanberg, Paul R.; Gharib, Morteza; Harker, Patrick T.; Kaler, Eric W.; Marchase, Richard B.; Sands, Timothy D.; Arshadi, Nasser; and Sarkar, Sudeep, "Changing the academic culture: Valuing patents and commercialization toward tenure and career advancement" (2014). *College of Business Administration Faculty Works*. 1.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1404094111
Available at: https://irl.umsl.edu/business-faculty/1

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Changing the academic culture: Valuing patents and commercialization toward tenure and career advancement

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Edited by David A. Weitz, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, and approved March 27, 2014 (received for review March 3, 2014)

There is national and international recognition of the importance of innovation, technology transfer, and entrepreneurship for sustained economic revival. With the decline of industrial research laboratories in the United States, research universities are being asked to play a central role in our knowledge-centered economy by the technology transfer of their discoveries, innovations, and inventions. In response to this challenge, innovation ecologies at and around universities are starting to change. However, the change has been slow and limited. The authors believe that this can be attributed partially to a lack of change in incentives for the central stakeholder, the faculty member. The authors have taken the position that universities should expand their criteria to treat patents, licensing, and commercialization activity by faculty as an important consideration for merit, tenure, and career advancement, along with publishing, teaching, and service. This position is placed in a historical context with a look at the history of tenure in the United States, patents, and licensing at universities, the current status of university tenure and career advancement processes, and models for the future.

There is changing demand on academia to expand the research enterprise beyond just basic research and to contribute directly toward tangible economic development. Basic research is important for future innovation and funding should continue in this area. This position was well articulated recently by Leshner in his editorial commentary on the role of basic sciences in spurring innovation (1). However, societal expectations of universities now go beyond just research, teaching, and public service. University missions are expanding to include economic development, of which translation of university research is a major part (2). The greatness of a university is not just in its research grants and contracts metrics but also in how the university impacts and changes the world and society at large (3). To unleash the innovation potential of university research, there is a need for conducting scholarly activity that translates basic research into commercially viable processes and technology. However, addressing this need often requires faculty members with a different working mindset and modus operandi than those conducting purely basic research. It also requires engagement of the researcher in a period of translational work that does not necessarily result in outcomes that are traditionally counted in career advancement, such as publication.

Edison can be credited with being the inventor of the industrial research laboratory (at Menlo Park in 1876), and most of the use-driven national research and development that translated basic research into innovative products came from these kinds of industrial laboratories over the past century. As the 2012 report on research universities by the National Research Council of the National Academies notes, “business and industry have largely dismantled the large corporate research laboratories that drove American industrial leadership in the twentieth century (e.g., Bell Labs), but have not yet fully partnered with our research universities to fill the gap at a time when we need to more effectively translate, disseminate, and transfer into society the new knowledge and ideas that emerge from university research” (4).

Universities can and should take steps to bridge this gap and accelerate “time-to-innovation.” A similar sentiment is echoed in the Advancing Research in Science and Engineering (ARISE) 2 report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which advocates as one of its two broad goals, “the creation of an environment that allows flexible interactions among the academic, government, and private sectors throughout the discovery and development process” (5). The US Department of Commerce’s report on “The Competitive and Innovative Capacity of the United States” lists as one of the 10 policy proposals the need to “speed the movement of ideas from basic science labs to commercial application” (6). The Research Universities Futures Consortium declares “The American research university has long been critical to the economic and social success of the United States. Expectations are high that academic research and innovations will play a central role in addressing current and future national and global challenges” (7). A recent report from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recognizes that “collaborations between industry and the academy present tremendous opportunities for advancing knowledge,.


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

Freely available online through the PNAS open access option.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1404094111/-/DCSupplemental.
applying it to real-world problems, and bringing about various social benefits. Coopera-
tive research involving both university and industry scientists has proven critical to the
development of numerous powerful methods, products, and technologies (8).

The histories of academic tenure, invention, and patenting in the United States have
taken on new meaning in recent years (9, 10, 11, 12, 13) and extend beyond just direct
revenue generation through licensing, and consist of advantages such as: increased op-
opportunities for research funding, access to unrestricted funds for further institutional
investment, sustaining high scholarship level, student success, increased prestige, public
benefit, and economic development.

**Advantages of Technology Transfer**

Benefits of patents and commercialization have been articulated in recent articles (8, 10,
11, 12, 13) and extend beyond just direct revenue generation through licensing, and consist of advantages such as: increased opportunities for research funding, access to unrestricted funds for further institutional investment, sustaining high scholarship level, student success, increased prestige, public benefit, and economic development.

**Increased Opportunities for Research Funding.** Many funding agencies are start-
ing to place emphasis on technology transition and translational research and development; for example, the National Science Foundation’s I-Corps program, the US Department of Commerce’s i6 Challenge grant program, and the NIH’s National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences. Technology transfer activities help build long-term partnerships. “While that initial technology may never reach the market place, additional research contracts, student educational experiences, and potential employment opportunities will continue to develop” (10). There are also increased opportunities for university–industry partnerships. Because economic incentive programs exist around the world, technology transfer can be a bridge for international collaborations. An innovative and entrepreneurial branding of a university can help attract philanthropic funds and fund raising from alumni.

**Access to Unrestricted Funds for Further Institutional Investment.** There have been consistent increases in royalties of academic inventions in recent years (14). As reported in The Chronicle of Higher Education in August 2013, the Association of University Technology Managers’ recent survey found that the total license income of 161 universities, 32 hospitals, and research institutes was $2.6 billion for the 2012 fiscal year (15). Although this total amount is not large when considered at a per university level, it provides universities access to unrestricted funds that can be used for further investment and expansion that would otherwise not be possible. Both the individual and the university benefit from access to these funds that can be reinvested in productive ways.

**Sustains High Scholarship Level.** Technology transfer activities are correlated with increased industrial connections. Studies have shown that faculty with industrial connections are academically more productive and have more impact than those without such connections (8). A survey of 3,080 life science faculty members found that those with industry relationships also published significantly more and in higher impact journals than those who did not have any industrial relationship (16). Papers published by university–industry collaborations are cited more than multi- or single university papers (17).

**Student Success.** Education of undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral trainees is a core mission of the university. Technology transfer activities provide students and trainees with unique exposure to real-world translational research experiences that connect with an immediate societal need, which is not available in the traditional curriculum structure. The student also gains valuable experience in the process of intellectual property management. The entrepreneurial spirit in the student is nurtured and encouraged, thus rounding off the university experience. Academic curriculum at the universities is also enriched by the inclusion of new courses on entrepreneurship, intellectual property, and technology transfer, opening up new possibilities for non-traditional students (10).

**Increased Prestige.** Technology commercialization through patents, licenses, and start-ups is a critical component of the dissemination of knowledge, falls under the umbrella of engagement, and is, essentially, an important part of being a university. Successful technology transfer brings recognition to universities and helps communicate, in a tangible way, the impact of university research, which might otherwise seem esoteric.

**Public Benefit.** Technology transfer helps strengthen the larger university mission of improving and uplifting the human condition by providing near term solutions to social, medical, environmental, and technical problems. Innovations from universities have improved the quality of life for people in the United States and the world (e.g., the hepatitis B vaccine, the prostate-specific antigen test, Google, the Honeycrisp apple, and FluMist) (18). A larger list of university research-based companies that span technology and the Web, materials, manufacturing, biomedical, education, energy, and chemicals, and defense and safety is maintained by The Science Coalition at www.sciencecoalition.org/successstories-list.

**Economic Development.** From 1997 to 2007 university licensing had a $187 billion impact on US gross domestic product, a $457 billion impact on the US gross industrial output, and created 279,000 jobs (18).
universities are also providing entrepreneurial training, product proof-of-concept support, and seed stage or gap funding to the local community, which contribute to local economic growth and retain local talent (10).

Current Efforts to Encourage Academic Inventors
To facilitate technology transfer in an efficient manner, the entrepreneurial ecology at and around universities has been changing. Rothaermel et al. provide an overarching taxonomy of the ecology in terms of the entrepreneurial research university, technology transfer offices, incubators, and surrounding innovation networks (19). Attempts to stimulate technology transfer directly include a number of mechanisms, such as technology transfer offices on university campuses becoming more actively engaged in soliciting disclosures from faculty, handling intellectual property, lowering the barrier of upfront royalty, sharing royalty and licensing income, internally investing in ideas, and establishing relationships with local businesses through student internships and research projects. A model example is seen at The University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, in which potential collisions between researchers and industry are encouraged to solicit the kinds of collaborations that would lead to intellectual property (20). Another example is the University of Minnesota’s unique Minnesota Innovation Partnership program, which allows companies to sponsor research at the university with exclusive rights to any intellectual property produced by paying an upfront royalty. Such partnerships lead to a much deeper relationship and engagement that can ultimately lead to philanthropy and partnerships that are very significant (20).

Some universities are exploring the use of the sabbatical leave process to encourage faculty to invest time into transitioning their technology to start up a company (21). Half of the universities surveyed in a National Council of Entrepreneurial Technology Transfer (NCET2) survey indicated that faculty are permitted to use sabbatical leave for this purpose (22). Although sabbatical leave is not discussed in depth in this paper, as it only occurs posttenure, faculty may have increased interest in attaining tenure to use sabbatical leave to pursue commercialization activities. Although it is clear that innovation in academia is a potentially lucrative and growing field and that tenure and career advancement are shifting as well, what has not been articulated until now is a clear national model for including academic innovation in tenure and career advancement decisions.

Efforts across the nation have resulted in significant impact in some cases, as exemplified by the list of 100 university research-based companies highlighted in The Science Coalition report, Sparking Economic Growth: How Federally Funded University Research Creates Innovation, New Companies and Jobs (23). However, results have not been widespread. Even after two decades, traditional academic culture, centered on publications and recognition from peers, has not changed.

Misalignment of Incentives
There is a fundamental disconnect between technology transfer activities and incentives to faculty members in terms of merit raises, tenure, and career advancement. Beyond the monetary benefit of licensing, which is small in most cases, there is little or no benefit to a faculty member’s merit raises, tenure, and career advancement. Current policies, at best, mostly tolerate commercialization efforts. Only the few persistent faculty entrepreneurs consider building their careers along these lines, despite this misalignment of rewards. Renault rightly noted, “As long as the intellectual property, conflict of interest and tenure and promotion policies are not providing a consistent message for faculty about what is appropriate and desired behavior, the variety of actions shown in this study will continue” (24).

Based on 98 interviews spanning five research universities, Siegel et al. found that reward systems for faculty members, particularly untenured ones, are not aligned with institutional aspirations toward technology transfer (25). Interviewed subjects specifically reported that technology transfer activities should have a greater weight in faculty career advancement and tenure decisions. More recently, in a survey of 73 public and 28 private universities, Lach and Schankerman found a similar disconnect. “First, faculty in both public and private universities are well aware of monetary incentives from commercializing their inventions. Second, in the vast majority of cases in both public and private universities, faculty reward structures (salaries and promotion) do not give any significant weight to technology transfer outputs” (26). Nelsen and Bierer also see a need for change in career advancement and tenure criteria, especially for biomedical sciences, “as research moves further toward product development” (27). Traditional tenure and promotion criteria are also flagged by Pain as an impediment to investment by industry, which is an important source of funding as universities seek to diversify their research portfolios (28).

The merit, tenure, and career advancement process should reward applied scholarly activity and impact on society. Renault’s 2006 survey on faculty entrepreneurship concluded that “until patents and spin-off companies are recognized as evidence of scholarly contributions, and used and not just tolerated in the tenure and promotions processes, the willingness of the faculty to spend their time on such activities will be considerably reduced” (24). The current academic emphasis on publications and research grants does not accurately capture use-oriented research, development, and technology transfer efforts. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences ARISE 2 report recognized this and recommended that universities “give greater weight to the public service criterion in promotion evaluations and consider knowledge export activities, including entrepreneurship, to be a component of public service” (5).

In 2011, Stevens et al. found 16 United States and Canadian universities that consider patents and commercialization in tenure and career advancement decisions, 5 y after Texas A&M officially declared commercialization as a sixth factor in their tenure considerations (14). This finding was corroborated 1 y later by a survey prepared by NCET2, which found that only 25 of the top 200 national research universities include patents and commercialization in tenure decisions (22). Stevens et al.’s survey revealed a number of striking similarities between universities that take patenting and commercialization activities into account when offering tenure and promotion (14). These universities are public institutions, they consider US patents a priority, they have adopted the policy in the last 6 y, and they publish their tenure and career advancement guidelines. The authors note that even the staunchest supporters of the inclusion of faculty patenting and commercializing activities into tenure and career advancement decisions agree that these activities should not replace scholarly pursuits, such as teaching and mentoring students and publishing research.

History of Tenure and Promotion and Patents and Licensing
Although academic tenure and intellectual property have not been historically linked, this paper serves to juxtapose the rise of tenure and promotion in an academic setting with the rise of academic patenting and licensing. The purpose of comparing these two histories is to set the stage for a discussion on the current and future role
of commercialization in academic tenure and career advancement from both an individual and university perspective. Fig. 1 shows a timeline of important events. By the 19th century in America, tenure was an understood benefit, or gentleman’s agreement, between distinguished university professors and the universities in which they were employed, and had existed as such for generations (29). Without contractual obligations however, universities were free to dismiss faculty at the request of their boards of trustees; “Before 1915, respected university presidents and boards of trustees had little hesitation in firing senior professors who took positions on great issues of the day contrary to the conventional wisdom” (29). Pressure grew for universities to seriously commit to academic freedom as a right of tenure with the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and several prominent cases of faculty dismissal.

One of the best known is the case of progressive economist Scott Nearing at the University of Pennsylvania in 1915. At the time, Nearing spoke out openly against industrial capitalism, claiming that “unfettered wealth stifled initiative and impeded economic advancement” (30). With a university board consisting of several corporate executives, Nearing’s appointment as of June 1915 was not renewed, despite the disapproval of Nearing’s fellow faculty members. Even before Nearing’s noteworthy case, in January 1915 the AAUP formed a committee “to consider and report on the questions of academic freedom and academic tenure, so far as these affect university positions” (31). By December of that year, the AAUP formally published their “philosophical birth cry,” the 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure (29). The proposal described three end goals of academia: to safeguard freedom of inquiry and of teaching; to protect college executives and governing boards against unjust charges of infringement of academic freedom; and to render the profession (academia) more attractive by ensuring the dignity, independence, and reasonable security of tenure (31). It is important to clarify that although universities have academic freedom and tenure resolutions, all universities (both public and private) retain the right to dismiss a faculty member based on communication in their official capacity as an employee of the institution, as determined by the Supreme Court in Garcetti v. Ceballos (32, 33). The court reserved opinion regarding academic speech, and consequent lawsuits involving dismissal or tenure revocation have gone to state courts. As of now, there is no formal recognition of a legal right to academic freedom, and academic freedom remains a professional notion (32).

The development of patenting and intellectual property happened long before formal tenure policies. The Patent Act of 1790 was the first federal statute guaranteeing inventions, the Bayh-Dole Act. This act began as a 1978 policy and objective of the Congress to use the patent system to promote the utilization, and some specifically include patents and commercialization into tenure and career advancement criteria is the possible loss of free access to knowledge. However, studies have not found this to be the case so far. American Association for the Advancement of Science project on Science and Intellectual Property in the Public Interest surveyed 1,111 American Association for the Advancement of Science members and found that patents were the most common means for protecting intellectual property (39). Dissemination of the protected intellectual property was through publication and informal sharing for 85% of the cases. Licensing of these patented technologies was a secondary mode of dissemination for a minority of the cases. About one-third of the respondents who did use licensing in the dissemination of their technology included a research exemption. For the minority of academic respondents who chose not to disseminate in any form, the top reason was plans for future research.

Possible Models for Change in Tenure and Promotion Criteria

There are many possible ways for incorporating patents and commercialization into merit, tenure, and career advancement criteria. For example, each college at Purdue has its own tenure and promotion document, and some specifically include patents
and commercialization whereas others do not. The culture has been bottom-up and is dominated by local customs in the departmental committees (20). Under this model, as moods in the professions change, it permeates into the departments and eventually into the university. However, the model is too slow to be effective and ignores the leadership role that universities can play by explicitly including patents and commercialization activities in university-level tenure and career advancement documents.

Inclusion of patents and commercialization into tenure and promotion has begun at some universities, and examples of possible language in universities’ tenure and career advancement criteria exist. We list additional language found through extensive Web searches in Table S1. If a university is not listed in this table, that does not necessarily mean that it does not value innovation. It may not be codified in the tenure and career advancement documents, or these documents may not be publicly available or found by us.

Within the tenure and career advancement documents of the 39 institutions in the table, language varied from strongly endorsing innovation activities to weakly stating that patents can be listed. Although, for most universities, patents and entrepreneurial activities are counted under research, a few consider it under service. In weak instances of inclusion, patents are simply listed as one of the many items than can count toward research and scholarly activity. In strong instances, the criteria are explicitly spelled out and more descriptive language that better captures the spectrum of entrepreneurial and innovation activities is provided.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University is a good example of an institution with strong inclusion. As part of Research and Creative Activities, the tenure and promotion document explicitly lists what faculty members may include under economic contributions and entrepreneurship: “1. Start-up businesses (including competitive grants and contracts such as SBIR [Small Business Innovation Research] awards and other notable business achievements), 2. Commercialization of discoveries, 3. Other…Intellectual properties: 1. Software, 2. Patents, 3. Disclosures (pre-patent)” (40).

The University of Arizona explicitly recognizes, along with research contributions, “integrandive and applied forms of scholarship that involve cross-cutting collaborations with business and community partners, including translational research, commercialization activities, and patents” (41).

Other examples of institutions with strong language include Texas A&M, University System of Maryland, University of North Carolina–Greensboro, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska Medical Center, Arizona State University, The University of Arizona, North Dakota State University, The Ohio State University, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology (Table S1).

There is sometimes an implicit assumption that patents and licensing only impact the science, engineering, and medicine sides of a campus. However, there are also interesting models on the arts and humanities side of campus. For example, the University of Michigan School of Music includes the following language, from a memo from former provost Phil Hanlon, in their tenure and promotion document: “Full recognition, both in evaluating tenure and promotion cases, will be given for a broad range of entrepreneurial, outreach and creative activities in which faculty engage. These activities may enhance any of the criteria on which faculty are measured—teaching, research and service… Examples are… creating a start-up company that enhances the broader scholarly, public service, or health care missions of the University, … creating new or enhanced practices, products or services, working with the Office of Technology Transfer to patent or license an invention, encouraging and instructing students in entrepreneurial and public service activities, developing collaborative approaches to solving complex world problems” (42).

Measuring the impact of patents and commercialization in the context of tenure and promotion is not immediately obvious. Even universities that have a long history of leadership in technology commercialization still struggle with how these activities are valued and how to measure their impact and that value (20). However, a starting point can be an array of indicators, such as: (i) industrially sponsored research projects; (ii) disclosures submitted; (iii) patents filed; (iv) patents issued; (v) licenses executed; (vi) license income received; (vii) Small Business Innovation Research/Small Business Technology Transfer, and other technology transfer-related grants and contracts; (viii) companies started; and (ix) knowledge of innovation and commercialization imparted to students through coursework, certificate programs, and guided entrepreneurial activities. If promotion and tenure committees are measuring impact, they will value those accomplishments that best demonstrate impact, eventually taking us beyond the tabulation of commercialization and entrepreneurial activities to a point where invention disclosures may have relatively little value, patent applications slightly more, and licensed patents will be highly valued, especially those that produce royalties (20).

Another way to measure impact could be through third-party awards and honors. For the very few and most-accomplished academic inventors, there are avenues for national level recognition, such as the National Medal of Technology and Innovation and the Lemelson-MIT Prize. The United States Patent and Trademark Office recognizes the most highly accomplished inventors, some of whom are academic inventors, by inducting them into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. Table 1 shows the numbers of awards per year from 2008 through 2013. However, until recently there was neither any national

Table 1. Number of specific national level recognition awards for all inventors and academic inventors from 2008 through 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lemelson-MIT Prize</th>
<th>National Medal of Technology and Innovation</th>
<th>National Inventors Hall of Fame</th>
<th>National Academy of Inventors Fellows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. awarded</td>
<td>No. academic inventors</td>
<td>No. awarded</td>
<td>No. academic inventors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
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level organization nor recognition for the nation’s many other top academic inventors. To change this, the National Academy of Inventors (NAI) started the NAI Fellows program. This program touches many more academic inventors and institutions. To date, there are 244 NAI Fellows representing more than 120 universities (43).

Concluding Remarks

The academic culture, which has a very high inertia, must change from recognizing only basic research to rewarding use-oriented research, development, and commercialization as well. Future efforts should encourage this culture change by developing advocates for commercialization activity. We also have to research and experiment with ways to actually operationalize these tenure and career advancement recommendations at the level of the academic department, whose decisions and rationale form the core basis of final tenure decisions. The NAI and its university members throughout the United States can play an important role by encouraging innovation and bringing attention to the devalued role patents currently play in the process of tenure acquisition and career advancement at universities.

Tenure is about faculty being able to speak the truth and do what they believe is fundamentally important; the most important measure for success is the impact they have (20). This impact can come from basic research that drives further discovery or from direct solutions to society’s problems through inventions. We must encourage bright, young faculty to consider the possibility of transitioning between both roles throughout their careers. Ten years from now, the university culture will be, or should be, much more proactive in terms of nurturing ideas and trying to identify the ones that have the most potential to impact society, as well as being more active in finding resources to bring those ideas to reality (20).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. This paper is partly based on a panel at the 2013 Conference of the National Academy of Inventors. The authors thank Judy Lowry, Diana Vergara, Michelle Simha, and Keara Leach for their editorial assistance. Dr. Judy Genshaft at the University of South Florida; and our friends at the US Patent and Trademark Office.