

UCI to Community of Business: Hello, Partner!

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Applied Innovation: latest link between school, business community housed at The Cove in University Research Park

University of California, Irvine will make a concerted effort to increase collaboration with the local business community as part of its new 10-year strategic plan.

UCI last released a strategic plan in 2005. Such plans are roadmaps that lay out a blueprint of how the university wants to proceed in the future, according to Tom Vasich, director of research communications.



The new plan is the first issued under Chancellor Howard Gillman, who took over the reins of the university in September 2014 after a brief stint as provost and executive vice chancellor.

The overall plan has four main prongs: growth, including adding 250 faculty over the next five years; expanding the student body and making UCI a first-choice campus for students, including reaching a milestone of graduate students comprising 25% of the student body; service to the community, including the cross-pollination of on- and off-campus research, teaching and community engagement; and developing a sustainable financial plan, including diversifying revenue streams.

It aims to expand the depth and breadth of partnerships with private-sector enterprises, with a particular emphasis on accelerating the commercialization of technology developed on campus, according to Carolyn Stephens, associate director and chief of staff at Applied Innovation, UCI's innovation institute.

"We have \$300 million worth of research that generates substantial output," Stephens said. "We clearly have the opportunity to work with industry to assist in research that's (able to be made commercial)."

Existing Opportunities

There are already several existing entities that foster relationships between UCI and the local business community, including the Don Beall Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, part of The Paul Merage School of Business; the Antreprenuer Center, which opened in 2014 as a support service for student entrepreneurs and part of a national campus entrepreneurship program called Blackstone LaunchPad; the UCI Invention Transfer Group (formerly the Office of Technology Alliances), which helps to commercialize UCI technology; and Applied Innovation, which opened in 2014 and is housed at The Cove in University Research Park.

Campuses need to find new partners for support as state funding for public universities becomes more challenging, Vasich said. They also need to strengthen the existing partnerships, Stephens said. As part of the new strategic plan, the university intends to be even more aggressive and proactive in interacting with local businesses, she added.

Applied Innovation

One example of how UCI is already entwined with the business community is through Applied Innovation. The institute acts as an accelerator for startups, with investors and startups housed at The Cove— providing opportunities for connections—in addition to the plethora of events held there that bring together entrepreneurs, investors and other key players involved in the startup ecosystem.

The former Office of Technology Alliances had a Rolodex of investors to whom UCI could refer startups. Applied Innovation gives UCI a much closer relationship with investors, Vasich said. That's partly because executive Director Richard Sudek is chairman emeritus of Tech Coast Angels, a Southern California group made up of angel investors. There also are venture capital firms at The Cove, including Auctus Global Capital.

Applied Innovation also has created an industry advisory board known as the Council of Industry Advisors—a panel of executives with extensive experience in bringing technologies to market, according to Stephens. The advisers volunteer their time and expertise to assist UCI faculty in developing strategies for commercializing research results, she said.

The first few members comprise Has Patel of Irvine-based Infologic Inc.; Michael Krupp of Xfibra Inc. in Del Mar; Claude Benchimol of Damol Innovation LLC in Rancho Santa Fe; and Steve Flaim, president of both CardioCreate Inc. and OncoFluor Inc. in San Diego County.

Another opportunity for partnership is when UCI receives equity when investing in startups that license intellectual property acquired while at UCI, Vasich said. In those cases, the university gets the equity, and the startup pays reduced fees and receives less in royalties, he added.

Innovation Fund

The university also recently announced the selection of six projects that will receive funding from UCI's Technology Development Innovation Fund. The research projects were awarded \$400,000 in grants, each ranging from \$25,000 to \$50,000, with the opportunity for follow-up funding, Vasich said.

Those are commercialization grants for early-stage projects that have potential but are not ready for commercialization, he said. The grants are not intended for basic research, but to fill the gap between potential and marketability, he added. The grants are given for a wide variety of activities, including toxicity studies, preclinical work and prototyping, he explained.

"This funding is important as there are very limited funding opportunities for this type of work," he said via email. "While six awards were given, 21 proposals were submitted and reviewed—all of which received valuable feedback—by a panel comprised of subject matter/domain experts from industry, venture capital and trade associations, and UCI Applied Innovation."

Another goal of the strategic plan that relates to business is for UCI to work with various industries to get their personnel integrated into UCI's labs earlier in the process, Stephens said.

"This would be in an advisory capacity, looking at commercial applications that might not be considered (otherwise)," she said. "You want industry advice and relationships as early as possible."

Ph.D.s

The goal when it comes to Ph.D. students is ensuring they are getting more experience working with local industries.

Applied Innovation currently has an informal program for graduate students to work in the Invention Transfer Group and help review the patentability and marketability of potential UCI intellectual property, Vasich said. There are plans to expand the program and make it more formal, he added.

Other programs exist on campus, such as the GPS Biomed program, which gives Ph.D. students in the program short-term internships at local businesses to expose them to various industries.

Applied Innovation also set up internship programs for grads and undergrads that don't overlap with what's already being provided by campus programs, Vasich said.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a culture of entrepreneurship, something that can be challenging, Stephens said.

“We’ve had some good successes, but we need to use that as a launch pad, to really drive these programs to what their potential is,” she said. “We need to make advances in the area of taking the programs that have been designed and really embed them into the culture and maximize the student experience and the commercialization opportunities.”