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A link between business, science

VCU scientist with MBA from William and Mary brings research to fruition

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Businesspeople speak the language of profit, marketability and return on investment.

Scientists talk in tongues of pathogens, electrons and molecular genetics.

Ivelina Metcheva can make a good translator.

"Businesspeople and university faculty really like you to speak their lingo," said Metcheva, director of Virginia Commonwealth University's Office of Technology Transfer. She has backgrounds in science and business.

By understanding science, Metcheva can translate a complex discovery to the business community, which could turn that research into a money-generating product or service.

Such is the mission of the tech-transfer office, which shops around VCU's patentable inventions to bring a return to the state school's -- and therefore taxpayers' -- investments.

"If you don't have this tech-transfer component, the research will stay in the university and may never lead to the product on the market," Metcheva said.

She began her career at the university in the early 1990s, researching an AIDS-related disease. But she wanted something less isolated than doing experiments all day.

"I decided to look for an alternative career, for something what matches better my



Ivelina Metcheva confers with Darrell Peterson in a lab at the Virginia BioTech Research Park. Metcheva watches for marketable inventions in the research park.

P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

personality, because I'm a people's person," said Metcheva, a native of Bulgaria.

Growing up, the athletic and tall Metcheva had the chance to attend a high school used by the formerly communist country to mold Olympic hopefuls.

She chose not to go and instead enrolled in a school that specialized in science. By the time she finished earning a doctorate in molecular biology, changes had swept through Eastern Europe leading to the fall of communism.

There was no money left for science research, so Metcheva came to a place where there was.

She arrived in the U.S. in 1991 and chose VCU for her postdoctoral work. She became a research associate in the university's Department of Microbiology and Immunology, securing research grants of more than \$100,000 and then giving them back to go to the College of William and Mary to pursue a master's in business administration.

It was there that she took an internship with VCU's tech-transfer office.

"I just fell in love," Metcheva said, and her work led to a full-time job.

She was named director in October, succeeding Richard C. Franson.

With her experience, Metcheva was a natural choice for the position, said Mark Licata, president of Richmond medical-device firm BioTrack LLC. But delegating which technologies are licensed to another firm or turned into a brand-new company shouldn't rest solely on the tech-transfer director's shoulders, he said.

Last month, Licata was named the first member to the office's advisory board, a group Metcheva hopes will grow to about 20 executives within three years. Licata envisions the advisory group as a panel of experts in different science-related areas, such as software, medical devices or drug development. This group could better evaluate commercial potential of VCU's discoveries, more than just one person, he said.

This board is just one part of the overhaul to the office Metcheva is leading.

Established in 1992, the tech-transfer office works with researchers who have inventions to file for a patent or copyright. The office stays at their side until commercialization.

About 80 to 90 inventions pass through the office every year.

One problem, Metcheva said, is that tech transfer isn't too well known by VCU's researchers. She's trying to change that and generate a greater understanding of the office's offerings.

"We're making small steps in the right direction," said Licata, "and this advisory board is one step in the right direction to have companies spring forth from the loins of our university."

In most cases, intellectual properties are created by VCU researchers using the school's funds and facilities. Therefore, VCU is entitled to its share of revenue generated by sales of the product or service.

Governance of the tech-transfer office comes from VCU's Intellectual Property Foundation, a group of business executives and school officials led by Metcheva. The foundation takes a 40 percent cut of sales, while the inventor takes the same. The leftover 20 percent is split between the researcher's department and school.

Dr. Sheldon Retchin used the tech-transfer office in 2003. The chief executive of VCU Health System and vice president for health sciences co-developed technology behind a gadget that lets swimmers listen to music underwater.

The office negotiated with a California company to license VCU's technology behind the SwiMP3 headset, a process Retchin would have been unable to do on his own.

"Proceeding from invention disclosure to patent filing can be a pretty rigorous effort without expert assistance," he said.

"If the society or the public knows that based on their discovery there's a product on the market that cures disease or improves the quality of life," Metcheva said, "that is a good recognition of their contributions."

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