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"Home-grown" ideas for sale

Research park will turn UNL projects into patents, companies

By Karen Okamoto

Having a good idea is not always enough. Capitalizing on a good idea is what counts.

Historically, the United States has done a lot of basic research, but it has not always benefitted from it, according to Bill Splinter, vice chancellor for research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Splinter said Americans did the research to develop televisions, videocassette recorders, fax machines and copy machines, but other nations capitalized on the American research. Now, technology transfer, or moving technology from laboratories into the commercial world, has become important to the United States, as well as to Nebraska, Splinter said.

Unitl recently, UNL has never done much with technology transfer, he said. But in 1987, the Nebraska Technology Development Corp. was set up to market UNL's patents.

Lacking funds, however, the corporation has been able to operate only on a "marginal basis," Splinter said.

Rather than making personal contacts, Splinter said the corportation had to establish contacts by mail.

Technology transfer will now be helped by a Nebraska research park, Splinter said.

In 1987, the university began working with the city of Lincoln to develop a research park, which will provide space for UNL spin-off companies to grow in northwest Lincoln's Highlands area.

The Whittier Building at 22nd and Vine streets, which is operated by the Nebraska Technology Development Corp., now houses spin-off companies at the incubation stage.

Once the Nebraska research park opens, companies that are ready to advance to the commercial level will be able to move to a proposed $2 million building at the park, Splinter said.

University-related research parks are nothing new to America. The United States has 130 research parks either in the planning or development stages.

The first union between a university and research-type companies was the Stanford Research Park in Stanford, Calif., which opened in 1951.

Today, claiming about 55 companies, the Stanford park is one of the few parks to be totally developed, according to Chris Boettcher, executive director of the Association of University-Related Research Parks.

The Stanford park employs about 25,000 people, making it one of the largest in the country in terms of employment.

But Nebraska is one of only a handful of states that doesn't have a research park. Alaska, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wyoming are also without a research park, but none of them are planning one.

Assisting in technology transfer, Nebraska's research park will benefit the economy of the city as well as the state and will create jobs for Nebraska graduates, Splinter said.

Many will be high-tech jobs, which pay more than shop-worker jobs, he said. For example, BioNebraska, a UNL spin-off company, employees 17 people with doctorafes. And Having higher-paying jobs, he said, is a better economic strategy.

The park will also broaden the state's economic base by bringing in new industry, Splinter said.

In developing the Nebraska research park, Splinter said, those involved are taking precautions.

"We're not pushing it," he said. ""We're taking a longer-range approach."

Those developing the park will not ask the state Legislature for a large sum of money and then look for renters, Splinter said.

"The objective is to proceed with home-grown research, instead of outside research."

Other university-affiliated parks have had trouble when they start with expectations that are too large, Splinter said.

Boettcher said that with 130 research parks, there had been 130 different ways to develop a research park.

He said a research park needed the following things to be successful:

— A good location.

— University programs related to the industry clusters that the park was trying to attract.

— Patience with the long development period.

— Financial backing.

— A sufficient industrial base to draw from.

— Good leadership from the sponsors of the park, whether they are from a university or a city.

Boettcher said UNL's approach was a good one.

Nebraska's research park, like many other parks, will have some amenities to make it more attractive to companies, Splinter said.

Researchers expect amenities, he said. A golf course is expected to open this summer in the Highlands area.

The research park will also be close to the Lincoln airport, Interstate 80 and the railroad, Splinter said.

Planners do not expect any construction on the park to begin for another three to eight years.

A committee charged with developing an implementation plan for the park is expected to meet in the next few weeks.