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UTD hopes new office will help it spin out more biz

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Class dismissed: Robert Robb wants to streamline the process of commercializing technology created at the University of Texas at Dallas.

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Officials at the [University of Texas at Dallas](#) admit the school historically hasn't been good at getting its researchers' inventions into the marketplace.

Now they're trying to fix the problem.

In the past couple of weeks, UTD, using \$125,000 in state grants, formed an Office of Technology Commercialization. The school is hatching a process for spinning out technologies into commercial ventures, which will include heavy involvement from its Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

"We are just in the formation stage," says Robert Robb, associate vice president for technology commercialization. "There has been a quasi-tech transfer function at the university, but it has been understaffed and underfunded."

As head of the newly created office of technology commercialization, Robb will help spearhead UTD's effort to change that. Robb, who also is director of venture development at the Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, has worked as a "technology commercialization executive" at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and the University of Michigan, along with stints as CEO of seven startups and as a venture capitalist.

The job of so-called "technology transfer" -- a term for commercializing university research -- was previously handled in large part by Rafael Martin, the school's associate vice president for research. Tech transfer and intellectual property were just two items on Martin's plate.

Both Martin and Robb say that moving the responsibility for those to Robb's office will sharpen the school's focus on both activities.

Before, Martin says, a committee of researchers, sometimes along with a few staffers, would help evaluate technologies and determine whether the school should pursue a patent and seek to commercialize the invention.

While the school has a number of "brilliant" researchers, it didn't have many individuals experienced in commercializing the broad array of technologies that its researchers produce, according to Martin.

The consensus, he says, is "we weren't necessarily making the best decisions in regards to what we should commercialize and what we should pursue patents on."

Now, UTD officials say, there will be an entire program dedicated to looking at new technologies to see if they merit building start-up companies around them. That will include market and feasibility assessments, business plans and outreach to outsiders like venture capitalists and people in companies with whom UTD has relationships. Students will be involved in screening research for its commercialization potential, school officials say.

Thus far, the new approach has produced one spinout company, a medical-device concern called Microtransponder. Joseph Picken, executive director for the Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, says UTD has a 15% stake in the business.

Jim Von Ehr, founder of [Zyvex](#), a four-company group of firms specializing in nanotechnology, welcomes any streamlining of how UTD commercializes its technology. Von Ehr says he's been frustrated trying to work on tech transfer with the UT system, and that the promised improvements at UTD would be a nice change. "I find that to be pretty refreshing," he says.

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