

U.Va. Helps Researchers Commercialize Discoveries

Nate Delesine III - The Daily Progress - Associated Press

Brian Pollok is the University of Virginia's newest advocate for commercializing research discoveries that emerge on Grounds.

It's a role he'll hold formally as UVa's first entrepreneur-in-residence. In that capacity, he'll work with UVa Innovation and the university's Licensing and Ventures Group, where he will offer guidance, perspective and a voice on how researchers can amplify their discoveries.

Pollok is a 1979 graduate of UVa's College of Arts and Sciences. He brings with him nearly 30 years of experience in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries.

His experiences include serving as a senior research investigator with Pfizer, and as a faculty member at Wake Forest University Medical Center in North Carolina, according to an online profile. Pollok also is the founding CEO of Neoantigenics, a company that's developing targeted cancer therapeutics and diagnostics to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy.

In the last decade, Pollok said, the Charlottesville area's biotech community has emerged as the state leader.

"(There are) more companies, more activities, more translational science, to a point now where Charlottesville really is the epicenter of biotech in the commonwealth and it's got a great vibe," said Pollok. "Since (we have) that kind of momentum, I think my job is to kind of add to that, to enhance it."

Pollok said researchers hard at work sometimes overlook the importance of explaining what they're doing and why they're doing it to a larger audience.

"They're so devoted to getting their first (National Institutes of Health) grant, learning how to train students in the lab . and they really have a great story that lies under what they're doing, but they don't often have time to develop the story and think about the broader implications of their work," said Pollok.

"That's really what I think this job is about," Pollok continued. "It's to be a mentor to the faculty, to ask the right questions and to explore with them how to commercialize their science."

In the post-recession era, universities "realize that we're going to have take these technologies a little bit further along to 'de-risk' them so that they're still competitive in this investment landscape that's somewhat constrained," said Michael Straightiff, director of the Licensing and Ventures Group.

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Pollok said students also benefit by getting the opportunity to take charge of their careers by practicing entrepreneurship. Straighttiff echoed that sentiment.

"I think the days of the students simply relying on being able to go out and find a job in existing industry is waning," said Straighttiff. Higher education, he added also has a responsibility to lead by example by pursuing the commercialization of research discoveries that come from the halls of academia.

Although UVa is perhaps best known for its biotech and medical research, Pollok said breakthroughs with commercialization potential are also emerging in other fields, such as engineering and education.

"The goal is not to become another San Francisco, Boston or even an Austin," said Pollok. "It's to keep Charlottesville's distinctive character, but to make sure we have a vibrant economy so people can live here and grow here."

"By creating an entrepreneur-in-residence program specifically for our researchers, UVa Innovation is providing the expert guidance and mentorship that is often so critical to the successful launch of a new technology, product or service," Mark Crowell, executive director of UVa Innovation, said in an announcement.

"Brian brings a wealth of expertise in the founding and management of biotech companies, a core area of interest for many UVa researchers, and we're honored he's chosen to share his expertise with us," said Crowell.

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