Reflecting On A Day Of Discussions Surrounding The Important Student Role From Invention To Commercialization

March 26, 2013 by Sean Jackson

On March 22, 2013, IP Osgoode and the Canadian Intellectual Property Office (CIPO) co-hosted a conference examining the role of student researchers in commercializing intellectual property. Inspired by her SSHRC-funded research, IP Osgoode’s Professor Giuseppina D’Agostino, the conference chair, skillfully orchestrated an impressive line-up of guest speakers and panellists representing the full spectrum of key stakeholders who shared their unique perspectives on this important and timely issue.

IP Osgoode Board Member, Sylvain Laporte, CEO of CIPO, opened the conference by highlighting the quality of research being conducted at Canadian Universities and Colleges. He emphasized that this research is as strong as that being generated by students in any other country and represents a great Canadian resource. Commissioner Laporte presented data demonstrating that while IP applications are increasing in Canada, this increase is small relative to Canada’s major trading partners. Although the underlying research is happening, it appears that Canada lags behind in its ability to capitalize on a strong innovation base using the intellectual property system. Commissioner Laporte discussed how commercialization can transform Canadian research and entrepreneurial talent into economic and social benefits for all Canadians. As such, a major goal of CIPO is to use IP and commercialization to leverage Canadian innovation in order to promote economic growth in Canada.

To highlight the importance of the student perspective on this issue, the first panel of the day consisted of three student researchers at various degree levels, who shared their first hand experiences with student innovation and commercializing their research. Razieh Niazi, a PhD candidate and CEO of Kaypok Inc. discussed her experience as a graduate student who has successfully commercialized her doctoral research. Razieh highlighted the process involved in patenting her research and establishing Kaypok Inc., which specializes in filtering, analyzing, and interpreting large data sets. Razieh also discussed the difficulties encountered while trying to run a company and complete her PhD. The time demands for running a start-up company are significant and have caused her to take a leave of absence from her studies. Furthermore, the strategy utilized in patenting her invention prevents her from publishing her research, a requirement for completing her PhD. Pasan Hapuarachchi, a law student at Osgoode Hall and entrepreneur stressed the importance of institutional infrastructure in supporting student inventors. Pasan also touched on the need to educate students and supervisors on all aspects of IP and commercialization.

Dr. Verkerk, a research associate at York University, discussed many of the practical challenges facing student inventors. These challenges include everything from a simple lack of knowledge regarding IP to relationships with supervisors who are averse to the idea of student inventorship or commercialization of academic research in general. A prominent theme that emerged from the first panel is the need to properly educate students and supervisors about IP and the commercialization process.

The second panel shifted the discussion from the perspective of students and supervisors to that of the university. Dr. Phipps, Executive Director of Research & Innovation Services at York University and Salvatore Paneduro, Research Officer, Faculty of Graduate Studies at York University provided an overview of the existing infrastructure to help students acquire IP and commercialize their research. This system has resulted in several success stories including that of Kaypok Inc. Professor O’Connor of the University of Washington School of Law provided a perspective from south of the boarder and stressed the importance of the student-supervisor relationship in the innovation to commercialization process.

Bill Mantel, Assistant Deputy Minister of the Research, Commercialization & Entrepreneurship Division at the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, delivered the luncheon keynote. Minister Mantel provided an overview of the infrastructure in place in Ontario for supporting academic innovation and its commercialization. Local environment is one of the greatest determinants of start-up company success.
and growth. The government is taking an active role in developing a local environment where small start-ups can flourish and help drive the commercialization of academic research.

The afternoon session featured a panel of speakers representing the industry perspective. Jeremy Laurin of ventureLAB tackled the differences between Canada and the US with respect to commercialization of academic research, stressing that Canada must foster an entrepreneurial culture in academia amongst students and faculty. Reza Yacoob of Sanofi Pasteur, David Laliberté of Microsoft and Bill Chan of IBM discussed the important contribution of student research to innovation in the industry sector. The discussion revealed that while relationships with academic institutes are improving many student inventors approach industrial partners with expectations that are too high.

Dr. Kozinski, Dean Lassonde School of Engineering, closed the conference by sharing his vision. Dean Kozinski is striving to create a program that brings together Osgoode Hall Law School, the Schulich School of Business and the Lassonde School of Engineering to create an environment that removes obstacles to innovation and promotes student-led innovation and commercialization.

After a day of stimulating discussion I believe the following thoughts aptly summarize the emerging themes. Canada has a great and largely untapped resource in the academic research being conducted at Canadian Colleges and Universities. Federal and Provincial governments have recognized this and are actively working to create the infrastructure necessary to support the commercialization of academic innovation. Academic institutes are also establishing programs to help student inventors obtain IP and commercialize their research. One area that I think requires attention is educating students and supervisors, about entrepreneurship, IP and commercialization. The majority of students appear to have little or no knowledge concerning these important topics. One recommendation discussed on several occasions was implementing mandatory IP and commercialization courses for graduate students. Regardless of whether or not this is the best solution, ensuring students and supervisors are properly educated on issues of IP, entrepreneurship and commercialization will be crucial to realizing CIPO’s goal of using IP and commercialization to leverage Canadian innovation to promote economic growth in Canada.

At the end of the day it was exciting to see voices from different sectors recognizing the important role students play in the innovation to commercialization process. It is important to keep the discussion alive and the ideas flowing. On this note, Toronto will be hosting the 5th Canadian Science Policy Conference in November 2013. The conference brings together stakeholders from many different areas to discuss important issues concerning Canadian science policy. This would be an excellent opportunity to keep the momentum rolling and I encourage all those interested to attend.

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