

Collaborate and Innovate

Campus Collaboration Leads to Business Innovation

By Jennifer Hammaker, Director of Business Development, Innovation Transfer Network



BERKS COUNTY IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF A pioneering academic model to connect faculty expertise with private sector companies in an effort to drive innovation and engage students in real-world business issues. The stage was set for accelerating collaboration in late 2010, when the Greater Reading Keystone Innovation Zone (GRKIZ) and the Innovation Transfer Network (ITN) blazed a record-setting pace to craft a successful application, which ultimately attracted a \$50,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (PA DCED). And the pace hasn't slowed since then.

Robotics and unmanned vehicles, solar powered charging stations, microbiology and mushrooms, and text messaging product design—these are just a few examples of exciting collaborations underway between colleges and universities and private sector companies in Berks County. These four projects, which include Penn State Berks' activity with Reading Electric Renewables, were awarded a total of \$30,000 in ITN seed grants to jump start new commercialization efforts in 2011.

Aside from the local advantages, having an organization available to assist in identifying where the expertise is located and then to proactively make the connection, saves considerable time for everyone.

Very few professionals take the time to search and make those connections on their own.

Jim Kurtz, General Manager of Reading Electric Renewables describes it this way, "Being involved in the dynamic energy sector, Reading Electric Renewables needs to stay ahead of the curve in evaluating ever evolving alternative energy technologies. ITN provides an ideal platform to connect us with the right professors and research efforts to help us explore promising new solutions and business models."

In the case of start-up companies, founders are typically interested in a means to substantiate their product potential and/or business model, often via market research or other due diligence. Jose Cortorreal, founder of Ceelink says, "The value of ITN is priceless. In my case, the connection with the members of Albright College has been a tremendous asset to the development of the concept that we are currently working on. The connections that I have made because of ITN have saved me a lot of time and headaches."

In addition to seed grants, the leadership at network members Kutztown University, Penn State Berks, Alvernia University, Albright College, and Reading Area Community College has led to enhanced faculty networking, visibility with economic development groups like



the Berks Economic Partnership Energy committee, and full-blown conferences, such as the NanoTech Conference hosted by Penn State Berks.

Dr. Paul Esqueda, Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Penn State Berks, has been instrumental in establishing traction on campus. "For new ideas and new knowledge generated in higher education institutions to have an impact in our society with new processes and products, there needs to be strong networks to connect faculty with the opportunities. That is precisely the role of the Innovation Transfer Network and they are doing an excellent job."

Much attention has been focused on intellectual property and patents at universities and colleges; however, this new model highlights the impact of networking faculty across campuses and bridging the gap between company CEOs and campus expertise—not to mention the resume impact of engaging students in real-world business challenges.

Data supporting this regional collaboration can be found regularly in blogs, major newspapers, and in federal grant requirements. *Blogging Innovation* posted an article entitled, "Do Universities Matter for Innovation?" In it, the author addressed the significance of conferences, informal networking, and interaction with students as the real drivers of business and academic innovation.

The ITN model of connecting small colleges and universities together to create one virtual commercialization office has attracted national attention. The Greater Reading KIZ, led by Jennifer Leinbach's vision, smartly plugged into the network to take advantage of the existing resources and experience in play.

After six years, ITN has funded more than fifty new technology products and services, and attracted more than \$1.5 million in outside funding to Central Pennsylvania. Inquiries from West Virginia, New York, and New England indicate the fire-power percolating in regions where small colleges and universities are beginning to understand the academic and economic potential of formal collaboration.

To learn more about the Innovation Transfer Network, visit <http://www.innovationtransfernet.org>.



MESSAGE *from the* CHANCELLOR

In the short time I have spent at Penn State Berks, one of several highlights has been learning about the breadth and depth of scholarly inquiry here. Curiosity and the asking of good and important questions define a vibrant academic community, and those two qualities are alive and well here on the campus.

The new issue of *Research at Penn State Berks* reflects the wide-ranging research interests of our faculty and the students they mentor. From Associate Professor Lolita Paff's work on research and development tax credits and their effect on where businesses choose to locate, to Associate Professor Hassan Gourama's research on food and water pathogens, and a number of additional articles that describe intriguing examples of Berks faculty research, there is much to celebrate and applaud.

I've also been pleased to learn of the many opportunities for our students to become involved and assist in faculty-directed research. Two examples of research and international opportunities available to Berks students are included here: one involves technology transfer from Penn State Berks to the National University of Singapore and another a recent graduate's Fulbright Scholarship to teach in Taiwan.

External funding is also critical in supporting ongoing scholarly inquiry, along with the scholarship of teaching and service, of our faculty, staff, and students. Over the past fiscal year, Penn State Berks had twenty-five active grants with awards totaling \$1,007,672. In addition, between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011, twenty-two proposals were submitted from the campus that requested a total of \$10,584,234, and of the twenty-two submitted, eleven are pending.

Thanks for your interest and support for Penn State Berks and all that is going on here. We are an undergraduate teaching campus that prides itself on our commitment to student learning, achievement, and success. But, as this issue of *Research at Penn State Berks* also attests, we are actively supporting and contributing to Penn State's broader mission as a world-class research university.

Dr. R. Keith Hillkirk
Chancellor
Penn State Berks