GRAY MATTERS: UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS’ DECISIONS ABOUT COMMERCIALIZING THEIR DISCOVERIES (SUMMARY)

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Summary

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Principal Topic

At the same time American lawmakers and business groups are placing particular emphasis on commercializing technical innovations created on college and university campuses, increasing numbers of universities are embracing regional development and new venture creation as their mission (Markman, Phan, Balkin, & Giandonis, 2005). Meanwhile, academic entrepreneurship has been receiving growing attention from a number of research perspectives, including management (Shane, 2004), sociology (Owen-Smith, 2000), higher education (Powers, 2000) and, particularly, economics (Siegel, Waldman, & Link, 2003). This study seeks to understand what influences faculty researchers as they decide whether and how to commercialize aspects of their scholarship using narrative interviews for grounded theory development to arrive at a model that later could be empirically tested in a field study.

Method

This research uses data collected from seven biographic-narrative depth interviews collected from a purposive, maximum variation sample of academic researchers for grounded theory development. This approach yields rich data about what makes the cases unique while allowing meaningful conclusions to be drawn about commonalities that emerge from cases representing significant diversity. Respondents were selected to maximize variation on theses attributes: institutional governance/faculty unionization, institutional environment, discipline, research intensity, and commercialization experience.

Results and Implications

During the process of conducting interviews and now, preliminarily analyzing qualitative data, my focus has evolved to also consider questions about how faculty researchers think, i.e., the role(s) intentions play in the decisions of individual researchers involved in knowledge transfer within the context of their university. For example, Agrawal & Henderson (2002) report that faculty researchers are not, a priori, intending to commercialize a specific research stream. Hence, findings from studies conducted within the domain of entrepreneurial cognition became salient and understanding behavioral triggers became crucial.

I aim to contribute both to the growing body of knowledge about academic entrepreneurship and to the entrepreneurial cognition literature (Mitchell et al., 2002, 2004). Additionally, the questions proposed here are of material interest to faculty involved in the governance of intellectual property matters at their institution and to university administrators tasked with increasing faculty involvement in commercial knowledge transfer, with practical implications for institutional promotion and tenure policies and for the creation of alternative revenue streams.

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