Finding reward in risk

Life has a habit of throwing curve-balls, and at about that time I was offered a chance to move from my stable post at the University of Cincinnati to a nontenured research faculty appointment at Brown University. There I would help start a spinoff company to advance cell therapies for Parkinson’s disease and diabetes. For the first time, I could translate my laboratory work into real-world impact, and the idea of delivering treatments directly to otherwise hopeless patients spoke to me on a deep level. Giving up a tenured position and the kind of financial security my parents could have never imagined was risky, but the potential financial rewards that the startup offered made the choice easier. It also helped that I was young and had few responsibilities. So I made the leap.

In an old brick building on the banks of the Providence River, three mentors—an investor and startup founder, a university administrator, and an academic researcher—showed me how to combine the rigor of scientific discovery with a determination to develop practical solutions for real-world problems. They also encouraged me to file for patents, which made a bold personal statement: My ideas had value beyond academia.

But as much as I enjoyed the pace and challenge of that entrepreneurial experience, I also missed many aspects of traditional university research, including collaborating with other faculty members and publishing and presenting my work. I wanted to bring these two passions together. This desire led me to my next gamble a few years later: As the startup went public, I left the company—and my Ivy League appointment—for a little-known public university not yet 40 years old. There I could have the best of both worlds. I would lead a laboratory conducting basic and translational research, and my superiors would support me in patenting new technologies and launching startups.

The combination worked for me as a tenured scientist. But I discovered that more junior faculty members had less freedom. The University of South Florida (USF), despite its youth, had traditional tenure and promotion practices. I heard distressing stories: the faculty member who was denied a promotion because she was spending too much time on an invention, the physics professor whose department chair discouraged him from starting a company because it would take time away from traditional research and publishing.

When I became a senior research administrator, I found that the challenge was even greater than I had realized. I hosted a lunch for any USF faculty members who held a U.S. patent, expecting maybe a dozen people would show up. More than 100 did. All these faculty members wanted to embrace their inventive side, but the traditional academic environment constrained them.

Over the intervening years, USF’s senior leadership updated the university’s promotion and tenure guidelines to credit faculty members who patent inventions and create startups, offering one model for how universities can promote both basic research and applied entrepreneurship. I hope that other institutions will develop their own models, and that the days of having to choose between being a traditional academic scientist or a future-focused inventor are coming to an end.

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