PROVOST JONES REMARKS

College of Agricultural Sciences Research Innovator Award Ceremony
Tuesday, May 11, 2021

“The Importance of Research Commercialization at Penn State”

In these remarks, delivered during a ceremony that recognized the 2020 and 2021 winners of the College of Agricultural Sciences Research Innovator Award, Penn State Executive Vice President and Provost Nick Jones discussed innovation and its importance related to the commercialization of University research and the institutional strategic plan.

Thank you, Rick, and good afternoon, everyone. I’m pleased to join you today to celebrate and honor the innovative and entrepreneurial work of researchers in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

On behalf of the University, I’d like to thank Dan, Steve, and Rick for their hard work and support of the College’s Research Innovator Award program, as well as Maria Spencer, the John and Patty Warehime Entrepreneur in Residence in the College’s Entrepreneurship and Innovation Program. Your leadership and stewardship are invaluable. I also want to thank everyone attending this special event to recognize our researchers for their innovative and significant work.

The concept of innovation can be tricky to articulate, let alone put into action. Ask 10 business gurus to define “innovation” and you’ll probably get 10 different responses. But the principal purpose of innovation is to make progress and, in the process, improve people’s lives.

Meaningful and beneficial change doesn't come simply from throwing out buzzwords, adopting the latest trending technology, or chasing silver bullets. It occurs through iterative processes of missteps and lessons, and incremental failures and advancements.
Does that sound familiar? It should! Like it or not, those iterative processes – the good, bad, and occasionally ugly – are part of academic research, which ultimately leads to innovation.

No person or enterprise has cornered the market on innovation. But Penn State and the College of Agricultural Sciences have stakes planted firmly in that fertile ground.

As this institution’s chief academic officer, I’m proud of the fact that we are deeply invested and engaged in research University-wide – work that contributes to a better quality of life for individuals and communities worldwide. We’re recognized as a leader when it comes to innovation and the positive things that come from it.

As Pennsylvania’s only land-grant university, Penn State prides itself on fulfilling its three-pronged mission of teaching, research, and service. The vision of this institution – articulated in our strategic plan – is that Penn State will be a leader in research, learning, and engagement that facilitates innovation, embraces inclusion and sustainability, and inspires achievements that will affect the world in positive and enduring ways.

The strategic plan also identifies six institutional values that provide essential support and context for the execution of Penn State’s mission. One of them is “Discovery,” which is another potentially tricky word to define. But here’s our take on it: Through advanced research and scholarship, we seek and create new knowledge and understanding, and foster creativity and innovation, for society’s benefit.”

So, we clearly have an institutional commitment to impact, and researchers’ work across the University is vital to achieving and sustaining it. But discovery is only the beginning. By extending our research beyond the Penn State and applying it to solve real problems, we shorten the distance between discovery and impact to make life better.
Discovery through research provides the foundation and fuel. But the rubber hits the proverbial road through the commercialization of research.

Of course, not all research lends itself to commercialization, and the public sector plays a key role in supporting quote-unquote “basic” or “pure” research that is often several steps away from commercial application.

But, to advance our mission of research for the public good, we must embrace innovation and promote economic development by encouraging and rewarding entrepreneurship. Important discoveries shouldn't be limited to academic journals and conferences, or to events like this one.

Commercialization moves institutional knowledge and discoveries to the public realm. And if a pressing societal need or challenge is addressed in your research, commercialization attracts companies and investors with resources to bring that solution to market.

Winners of the Research Innovator Award exemplify the power of research in the agricultural sciences and its commercialization. Shortly, you’ll hear from the 2020 and 2021 award winners to learn more about their outstanding work.

But first, I’d like to take a quick – one might say “bite-sized” – look back at one research commercialization success story.

Several years ago, Research Professor Nina Jenkins in the Department of Entomology discovered a fungal spore that kills bedbugs without chemicals. She later co-founded ConidioTec to commercialize her Penn State research and, in 2017, the company launched Aprehend, a non-toxic, fungal bio-pesticide for the elimination and prevention of bedbugs. Since then, pest management professionals have used the product in more than 20,000 field treatments.
Dr. Jenkins, who won the Research Innovator Award in 2017, and her team led to one of the earliest success stories spawned by the Invent Penn State entrepreneurial ecosystem, which has been pushing crucial discoveries out of the lab and into the marketplace for six years.

The team did extensive testing, developed the formulation and delivery system, secured EPA approval, hired a CEO, and set up a production facility and office. And they had support and guidance from people and entities across Penn State to ensure it all came together – from the Office of Technology Management to the Penn State Law Clinic at the Happy Valley LaunchBox, to name only a few.

Ultimately, Dr. Jenkins’ research and the commercialization process changed how bedbug issues are managed in the United States and beyond. It’s a great example of the power of Penn State researchers to not only make great discoveries, but also to nurture those breakthroughs into businesses that make a difference.

We work closely with industry to ensure our research aligns with real-world needs. And robust support from partners within the University, including the Fund for Innovation – in addition to those in government, business, and other sectors – helps bring many ideas and discoveries to commercial reality.

All of our researchers want to make new discoveries or develop groundbreaking products and services that enhance people’s lives. That’s why commercialization considerations matter throughout your research, and participating in the commercialization of your technology has many potential benefits:

You can attract research sponsors and generate additional lab or department funding. You can achieve recognition – for yourself, colleagues, your Department, the College and the University. You can create outstanding educational and career opportunities for students. And you can make a positive impact in society.
All of these can give you a profound sense of professional and personal fulfillment.

As a premier global research university, we are increasingly invested in translating academic research into something that makes a social impact, with associated economic development considerations. As corporate R&D labs have waned, academic research at universities has soared.

And while many universities have commercialization programs, the speed and volume of Penn State’s success is remarkable, thanks in part to the College of Agricultural Sciences and its people.

You and other Penn State researchers are at the cutting edge of innovation and entrepreneurship, enabling us to engender positive change throughout Pennsylvania and well beyond.

Congratulations to the winners of the Research Innovator Award. Thank you all for your hard work and for being here today, and for your continued commitment to impact.