Thrivecast Episode 55: Innovation and Commercialization with UW's CoMotion

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help school of medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Fiona Wills. Fiona is the associate vice provost for innovation development and commercialization. And what that means is in that role, she focuses on supporting researchers in our community on issues around intellectual property.

And that work comes out of an organization in our community called CoMotion. So, first of all, Fiona, thank you so much for joining us today.

Fiona Wills: Thank you for having me.

Trish Kritek: I think this is a great topic. I want to give credit to Dr. Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert for suggesting it to me and pointing me in your direction. So thanks, Shelly, for that.

As I kind of thought through what we might talk about, I realize that a lot of faculty do know what CoMotion is, but my guess is not all our faculty know what CoMotion is. So I thought I might start off by asking you to explain a little bit about what is CoMotion [00:01:00] and what is the work that you do there?

Fiona Wills: Absolutely. Thank you. CoMotion is the innovation hub for the University of Washington. So when we think about researchers wanting to take the work they do at UW and have it move outside of the university into products or services, ways to have additional impact on patients, often you need to think about, can we license it to another entity? Can we commercialize it?

And what CoMotion does is thinks about every step in that journey and how can we support researchers? How can we make sure that we have the programming, the resources, the guidance needed for the researchers to be successful in that journey? One of the key pieces in that can be intellectual property.

That is one way you can protect what you've created at the University of Washington and have an outside entity be interested in taking it on and further [00:02:00] developing it. There are other ways, but it is a very important way.

And my group is very centered on providing the resources to understand how to protect your intellectual property, when is the right time, what is intellectual property, and what does the process look like around moving that out into industry.

Trish Kritek: I think I want to focus most of our conversation around intellectual property, but for completeness, what are the other aspects of work that you could support through CoMotion?

Fiona Wills: Absolutely, so we start with the training, you know, when somebody first comes and starts interacting with our office, it's pretty rare that they have already done commercialization and they know what steps need to happen.

So we start with programs where somebody can understand what are the steps that need to be taken and how do you walk that path? And then we think about how do you further develop the ideas that they might have? So we have programs for funding and mentorship to take that idea [00:03:00] and further test it, further prove it out so that it becomes obvious that it would be a solution for a problem that people would want a service or a product for.

And then, you know, we go through the process of protecting the intellectual property. We can license it out. But once you've done that part, if you have created a startup, you need to know where you're going to have your startup. What do you do once your startup? And so we also have CoMotion labs, which is space incubation space as well as wraparound services for training and mentoring at that level of your journey.

Trish Kritek: Okay, so you just said a ton, so I'm going to try to pull apart some parts of that. So what I heard was first, there's some education around what is that process with kind of having an idea and turning it into intellectual property. And I'm going to probably dig into that more in just a minute. But then I heard there's other things around mentorship around funding around incubation space.

And so if we have time, I'm going to come back [00:04:00] to those and if not, I might have to invite you back for another podcast. So let's start with, I think one of the things you said that was interesting is one of the things you teach about is what is intellectual property. So I'm going to actually ask you that question.

What do we mean by intellectual property?

Fiona Wills: Sure, and it is property. It's not tangible property. It's intangible property, and it usually comes out of federal law. Sometimes there's some state law involved, and it is when you create something new. There are mechanisms to protect that so that somebody else can't simply copy what you have done.

And so there is patent law. If you have created an invention, there's a mechanism to fully describe what it is that you have created and then have the world know that you've created it in a patent. And there are specific claims in that patent that describe what you have invented and other people know that they have to come to you [00:05:00] to get a license in order to practice that invention.

There's also copyright. So every time you create something new that you write down, there is copyright in that. And if somebody really admires what you've done and wants to do it as well, they have to come and get what we call a license to practice your copyright. You may create a trademark and if somebody else wants to use your trademark, they need your permission.

So it's a way of protecting what you've created so that somebody else has to use it with your permission and on the terms that you tell them that they can use it on.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate that and I appreciate I'm going to actually probably focus our questions around patents and things that are patentable, but I want to reinforce that.

That's not the only way that you can protect something that trademarks and copyrights or other opportunities. And those would be things that CoMotion could help support as well.

Fiona Wills: We can and I will say that copyright has long been important, but particularly where [00:06:00] there is usually an element of code along with an invention, oftentimes there is a mixture of intellectual property rights that, that get licensed.

Trish Kritek: Oh, okay. That's important to understand that, that you might be doing multiple at the same time depending on what the intellectual property

is. I'm curious, I think one of the things that I was thinking about as I kind of read about this and talk to folks about this is what are the first steps that you would go through to say, is this innovation actually something that's patentable?

Like, how would I know that? And what are the kind of questions that you ask? Or I should ask myself as I'm thinking about some innovation that I've come up with.

Fiona Wills: The short answer to that is we'd love to sit down and talk to you about it. We have innovation managers that are able to talk with you, and we really want a low barrier to that conversation.

You don't have to know what your invention is and what you're going to do with it. You just have [00:07:00] to know that you're interested in commercialization, and we're in coming and chatting with you about it. And then we also have on staff patent attorneys who can really dig into the details of what you've done and understand whether or not this is a space that's already crowded and somebody has done something very similar before or whether there's a very good chance of a strong patent.

But ultimately what you're thinking about is, is it new? Is it something, you know, in patent law they talk about novelty. Is it something no one has done before? And is it useful? And so if those two things are true, in many cases, it is patentable. You still really want to layer on understanding the market to make the investment in patenting, because it's both time intensive and it does cost a fair amount of money.

So, you know, you want to have all those conversations at the same time as you're deciding how to move forward.

Trish Kritek: First of all, I appreciate the come [00:08:00] talk to us. And so I want to reinforce that. But what I heard was, if you have something new and useful, you might be thinking about this and then you have to take into consideration the market.

I guess that makes me ask myself. The question is like, so when in the process of coming up with my invention or innovation, when's the right time to come talk to CoMotion?

Fiona Wills: And I'm still going to say earlier, and the reason I'm going to say that is sometimes you might do something that could actually undermine your ability to get intellectual property protection.

So, as university researchers, everybody is thinking about presenting and publishing their work and that actually creates It's a bar to patenting. So in the United States, you can patent something for one year after you've made it publicly known. Internationally, though, sometimes you've lost all rights as soon as you do that.

So we would actually want to talk to you fairly early so that you can be developing it and publishing it as you're going along. It's not getting in the way of your academic activities. Again, I think there [00:09:00] are aspects of patent law where some things are not patentable. Sometimes it's very clear and sometimes it's more about case law.

And so again, it's that conversation. If you're interested in commercialization, if the first thing doesn't work out, usually there's another path and we can help guide you on what that other path is as well. So I would say if you're wondering about it, then either come to one of our training sessions or request a consultation and sit down and chat with us.

We don't think things are too early.

Trish Kritek: I so appreciate that because I suspect many faculty would be like, I don't have this a hundred percent baked, so I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about it. So earlier is better. And then the other thing that I wanna just tease out that you said, which is that tension of wanting to publish about this, which is our academic credit for the work that we do in our science and then wanting to do the right timing around patenting.

And I wonder how do you navigate that? How do you help support [00:10:00] people in that kind of tension.

Fiona Wills: Honestly, we work with your timeline. One of the tools that we have that is extremely useful is filing a provisional patent, and that is one that isn't as fleshed out as a full patent application, but still protects your priority date.

You put enough information in there to Protect that priority date. So very frequently what we do is we start talking to somebody early and we're watching. We're talking to them about when they're planning to present or publish. And just before that date happens, we gather up the information they have to that point, make a determination whether it, you know, that is enough to file at that time. And within a month we can get that provisional application filed. So again, an important reason to be talking all along. If you come to us at the last minute and you're presenting tomorrow, that's something that we can't really fix. But if we're talking to you ahead of time, we can make plans for that.

And I'm just going to throw in one more thing is I appreciate that this podcast is focused on [00:11:00] faculty. I want faculty to know that we're very happy to talk to their grad students and postdocs as well, and that everybody is welcome to use our resources.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate that and I suspect there may be some grad students and postdocs who also listen to this podcast.

So thank you for being inclusive of them. I think of them as future faculty. So all of this is relevant to their work as well. Okay. So that's super helpful because I think you've already started to answer the next question that I had, which is, let's say I come to CoMotion. We have that conversation and you say, Trish, yeah, I think this is probably something that's patentable. Okay. Just to set expectations, kind of what is the usual timeline or steps that evolve for people? And I know it's going to vary, but maybe you could give kind of broad strokes of how that process plays out.

Fiona Wills: I'll start with saying often when somebody first talks to us, unless they're about to publish, there often is a period of 6, 9 months, a year that they're thinking about when they're going to publish.

And so during that time, we'll be having [00:12:00] conversations. About two months before that presentation and publication is going to happen, or if we feel we need to file for another reason, maybe the invention is ready to be filed on, then we start getting approval to file that provisional application. We bring in our staff patent attorneys, who also will look at the materials and they will ask for what additional information you have. Are there grant applications you've written on this topic? Are there manuscripts? Are there presentations

that you've made at conferences? Because all of that then is used to write the provisional patent application.

The inventors then review that application and work with outside counsel providing comments to make sure that it accurately captures the work that was done. And then we have outside counsel that actually files it with the Patent Office and at that [00:13:00] point, there is a year before we have to file that full patent application.

So there's a flurry of work just before the presentation or publication is happening. And then you have this period of time where you can think about what additional work you might want to be doing with it before we invest in that full patent application.

Trish Kritek: That seems super helpful to kind of just get a little bit of the road map of kind of a lot of stuff right around when you're about to share something forward, and then some more time to kind of sort out the details a year is what I heard you say. I think that I know that there are faculty who actually then want to proceed to have a startup or really take kind of their concept to the next level.

And is that some of the work that you also help folks with as they kind of go along this journey?

Fiona Wills: It absolutely is. And startups have become a critical mechanism, vehicle for taking ideas out of the university, [00:14:00] in part because companies just don't do that early stage research. So when research happens and it's cutting edge, the companies aren't really seeing at that point how that fits into their products.

But what the startup does is take it that step further so that the companies can go, okay, I get it now. I can see how that fits in. And then they will license or acquire from the entire startup. We really do want to provide all the resources from introducing the university faculty members to mentors who know how to do startups, who can help them understand that journey to training programs that help them think about who else do I need on my team?

What does my go forward plan look like? What are my next milestones? What do I need to be thinking about with funding? And when does that have to happen? So hopefully the goal is to break it down into steps that people feel

like they can continue to take the next step [00:15:00] each time and keep moving along towards launching their startup.

Trish Kritek: That kind of chunking it into manageable chunks makes a lot of sense to me, and I suspect takes what at least at first blush would be overwhelming into something that's manageable. So that makes sense. And I heard you say what you had alluded to before, which is you have folks to mentor people in this space. You had mentioned earlier the incubation space, and I wonder how that plays into this whole process.

And maybe you could comment a little bit more about that.

Fiona Wills: When a startup is first launching, one of the things they need is accessible and affordable space. And if you have your responsibilities in teaching and in the lab, in the clinic, and then you have to travel across the city for where your startup is, that's pretty prohibitive. But because we have space actually on campus, it makes it much easier for the faculty members to be spending some time with their [00:16:00] startup and some time with their university activities.

In addition to that, we really want a community around the faculty members as they are trying to spin out their companies because other people have been on the same journey. They've experienced the same problems. They can share resources. They can share how they manage to do things and then bringing in speakers to talk to them about next steps.

So really that helps that transition out of the university until they're ready. They have sufficient funding that they can move into space outside the university.

Trish Kritek: I think that's really cool. I mean, the proximity and the ease is a really nice part, but I think the community building aspect and the learning from each other and creating a different peer cohort organically is really nice.

And I think probably something that maybe our faculty aren't all aware of. So I appreciate you highlighting that. You've shared a ton in a very short period of time. I feel like people have already learned a lot, but I'm wondering, like, [00:17:00] one thing I always ask is if there was, you know, a final pearl that you wanted to share with everyone about this process and any aspect of it that

I didn't ask about, I would welcome your thing that I should have asked about that I didn't ask about to share.

Fiona Wills: And I don't know that I'd put it in the category of what you should have asked about, but I would say that one of the very important things that we try and introduce our researchers to at the beginning is what we call customer discovery, that there is incredible knowledge building that goes on in the university.

But you have to find that match to something that the market wants. There has to be a pull. You can't just push out, "I have a great idea. You really want it." And so you need to be asking your customers, whether that's clinicians, whether that's somebody who's going to use a piece of technology, whether that's a patient, you need to ask them, is this something that solves a problem you have?

Does it solve it in a way that's acceptable to you? So, that actually is one of the [00:18:00] hardest things for people to do, to ask. And you don't wanna say, here's my solution, because someone's probably just gonna tell you your idea's great, right? Instead, you wanna explore what the problem is, and explore if the way you're approaching it is gonna work for them.

And so, as people are starting on that journey, getting in that mindset of finding out what people need, I would say, is the piece that I would suggest people keep in mind.

Trish Kritek: That completely resonates with me, because I feel like so many of us are like, we've got the idea, or we've got the solution, and like, kind of going backwards and making sure that that actually works for the folks or the issue or whatever that you're trying to address.

That's like a slowing down and kind of checking back in part that I bet isn't natural for all of us and that's it might not be natural for me. So I really like the reinforcing of that doesn't mean you don't have a great idea, but it has to be a great idea to actually meet the needs of the folks that you're trying to help.

Fiona Wills: Yes.

Trish Kritek: As I said, you've [00:19:00] shared a ton. I hope that everybody feels like the door to CoMotion is very open because I feel like that after this

conversation Fiona. So I very much appreciate that. And we will, when we launch this podcast, also share the links to all the information that's on the website for CoMotion, because I think it's also inviting and another door that's open for folks.

Thank you so much for spending time with us today and sharing so much of your knowledge.

Fiona Wills: It's been terrific. I will just also add that we're also happy to come and chat at various meetings or, you know, if there's a group that's getting together. So please do chat with us, but also feel free to invite us to your retreats or wherever it is.

Trish Kritek: That's convenient. Appreciate that open invitation. I suspect there will be people who take you up on it. Thank you again, and for all those folks who are out there listening, to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. You can also find them on the UW School of Medicine faculty [00:20:00] website at faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks for listening, and have a great day.