Many UIC faculty members and graduate students spend countless hours in a lab working on research projects. During this time, they may come up with an innovative concept that could have a positive impact on society. They would love to get this idea out to the market, but are not sure where to start. They need help protecting, funding, supporting and launching their technology, but where do they start?

Dr. Craig Niederberger, Professor in the Departments of Urology and Bioengineering at UIC, found himself in this very situation. “I’m a professor. I have no experience in taking IP and turning it into a product,” said Dr. Niederberger.

Fortunately, he knew he could call the UIC Office of Technology Management (OTM) and schedule an appointment with a Technology Manager to file a disclosure. This began the first phase of the commercialization pathway in which the OTM also connected him with a team of experienced professionals at Chicago Innovation Mentors (CIM).

Dr. Niederberger received assistance from several sources on his path towards founding NexHand, Inc., a company focused on developing innovative medical devices to more safely and effectively treat patients suffering from stress urinary incontinence (SUI). “Having someone from UIC with my interest in mind was incredibly useful,” he said.

Dr. Niederberger was more than happy to have a Technology Manager from the OTM assess his IP for viability, and then help him begin the second phase, protecting the technology. “It’s so thrilling to take an idea that’s been sitting on the bench and be able to start medical trials that could change lives!”
Over the past three years the OTM has executed an average of 45 licenses and option agreements. Each of these startups has benefited from the vast amount of resources that are available within the pathway that helps inventors to protect, fund, support and ultimately launch their innovations. Though many new inventors may enter the commercialization pathway from the first phase (proof-of-Concept funding), this isn’t necessary for everyone. Each inventor has his/her own unique needs, however; no matter the nature of those needs, there are resources within the commercialization pathway suited to meet them.

“We want (inventors) to understand that the process to commercialization is a collaboration between (IllinoisVENTURES), the UIC Office of Technology Management, EnterpriseWorks Chicago, Chicago Innovation Mentors, the UIC Innovation Center and every meaningful connection that our units have established,” says Nancy Sullivan, CEO of IllinoisVENTURES, LLC. “It takes a community, and that’s what we’ve built here at UIC.”

Another inventor who benefited from this community was Dr. Jason Leigh, Professor of Computer Science and Director of the Electronics Visualization Laboratory (EVL) at UIC. Dr. Leigh had been developing the Scalable Adaptive Graphics Environment, or SAGE™ with his team at the EVL for about 10 years with funding his lab received from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). SAGE™ is currently used to run the EVL’s CAVE2™, (CAVE Automatic Virtual Environment) a large-scale virtual-reality environment, which enables researchers to “walk into” a human brain and view bundles of nerve fibers or walk through space without ever leaving the EVL lab.

With the first phase of the commercialization pathway well underway (disclosure and Proof-of-Concept Funding), the OTM was able to transition SAGE™ and CAVE2™ into the second phase. SAGE™ was successfully licensed as open source and was in use at several academic institutions, which were suddenly in need of customer support. “We’re just a research lab. We (have) a very small staff. We decided we had to work with a company to transition the technology into a commercial form, so that they could take care of it and we could move on to continue to do great research,” said Dr. Leigh.

The OTM licensed the middleware to a new company, Vadiza, allowing the EVL focus on new research. Vadiza would be responsible for upgrading SAGE™ to an enterprise-quality version, providing customer support to users, as well as creating and delivering custom ordered appliances that use the SAGE™ software for collaborative projects.

CAVE2™ was licensed to Mechdyne Corporation, who recently worked with the EVL to assemble the world’s second CAVE2™ at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Faculty and students at Monash University and UIC are excited about possible collaborations on future research.

Both Vadiza and NexHand, Inc., transitioned into the third phase of the commercialization process with funding from IllinoisVENTURES, the University’s early-stage technology investment firm. NexHand also found its first home at UIC’s accelerator, EnterpriseWorks Chicago (EWC). EWC, as well as continued guidance from CIM have allowed NexHand to successfully reach the fourth phase of the commercialization pathway. The company is currently reviewing term sheets to acquire additional funding for continued growth. “I see NexHand becoming the ‘Apple’ of medical devices,” said Dr. Niederberger.

While Dr. Leigh and Dr. Niederberger have two completely different technologies, one thing remains constant; the commercialization pathway. What was once an abstract idea has evolved to become a clearly identifiable tool which helps many inventors navigate the murky waters of
technology commercialization. UIC faculty, staff and students are able to leverage strategic partnerships and resources along the commercialization pathway to truly take an idea from innovation to impact.

**Tags:**
- UIC Office of Technology Management
- Chicago Innovation Mentors
- NexHand
- Inc.
- IllinoisVENTURES
- EnterpriseWorks Chicago
- UIC Innovation Center
- SAGE
- CAVE2
- Electronics Visualization Laboratory
- Vadiza

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