

What the Stanford study **changes about** inventor engagement

A [study out of the Stanford Office of Technology Licensing](#) tracked 2,700 inventors over their careers and found that researchers who successfully licensed their first disclosure went on to publish 26% more papers per year than those who didn't. The finding is striking, and the panel that examined it had a useful and honest debate about what it means.

It doesn't mean first-time disclosers should get more attention than repeat inventors. It doesn't mean a successful first license causes higher research productivity — correlation is carrying weight here, and the causal story is genuinely unclear. What it does mean, as Luna Acosta at Arkansas State University put it, is that early engagement functions less like a trigger and more like a multiplier: it amplifies what's already there, but it can't create something from nothing.

What the study does clarify is that the first interaction with a tech transfer office matters more than it might appear from inside the office. If that first experience is confusing, slow, or makes the inventor feel like their work is being judged rather than supported, the relationship may not recover. If it's clear, fast, and human, it compounds over time.

This guide covers how three tech transfer offices approach that challenge — with different resources, different institution sizes, and different conclusions about what works. It draws on a panel discussion hosted by UIIN in collaboration with Tradespace, featuring Mary Albertson, Director of the Office of Technology Licensing at Georgia Tech; Tolulope Perrin-Stowe, Business Development and Licensing Associate at San Diego State University; and Luna Acosta, Director of Technology Transfer and the Catalyst Innovation Center at Arkansas State University. The panel was moderated by Stefanie Kennon-McGill of Tradespace.

You can read this guide alongside the webinar replay or independently.

[Watch the webinar replay →](#)

What the study changes — **and what it doesn't**

Mary Albertson at Georgia Tech was candid about her reaction to the Stanford data: interesting, and a little surprising, but it doesn't change how she wants her office to operate. Every disclosure should receive full attention regardless of whether it's the inventor's first or fifth. She noted a practical concern: if the study becomes known to researchers, some may use it to argue that their first disclosure deserves special treatment. That's not the right takeaway.

Tolu Perrin-Stowe at SDSU described how the finding maps to what her office already observes in practice. Inventors who feel supported at the first disclosure tend to come back. The ones who don't often disappear. That pattern is familiar to anyone in tech transfer. The study puts data around something the field has operated on instinct about for years.

Luna's take: engagement is a multiplier, not a trigger. For an office at an R2 institution without decades of licensing history to point to, the study is useful less as a prescription and more as a justification — for taking the first disclosure seriously, for investing in the relationship before there's a clear commercial outcome, and for making the case to campus leadership that TTO engagement warrants resourcing.

Reaching inventors who haven't disclosed yet

The hardest part of inventor engagement isn't managing relationships with people who are already in the pipeline. It's building relationships with researchers who don't know the office exists, don't think of themselves as inventors, or have heard things about the TTO that make them reluctant to engage.

All three panelists described a multi-pronged approach, but the common foundation is getting out into departments rather than waiting for researchers to come through the door.

Mary at Georgia Tech described the most direct version: physically going to talk to chairs and deans, getting on their calendars, and finding out which department heads are supportive of commercialization even when their faculty aren't yet engaging with the office. She's found chairs who are genuinely pro-commercialization but whose departments produce very few disclosures — often because no one has made the connection. Once those relationships exist, getting time with new faculty becomes significantly easier.

Tolu at SDSU built a more structured version of this through an innovation champions program. The office identified faculty in the colleges with the highest research expenditure, checked with deans on which candidates were approachable and well-connected, and trained those faculty members to have conversations about commercialization with their colleagues. The program counts as service — the deans agreed to that — and even in its early stages has brought in first-time disclosers who came to the office because a peer told them it would be time well spent.

Luna described what doesn't work: leading with process. Presenting the invention disclosure form, the IP policy, or the employment contract language shuts conversations down before they start. It signals compliance rather than support. What has worked for her office is targeted outreach to specific researchers, leading with what the office can offer them rather than what it needs from them, and hoping that a positive interaction generates word of mouth to others.

Why inventor engagement is a financial decision, not just a relationship one

Most TTOs think about outreach in terms of relationships and volume. This piece reframes it through a financial lens — how disclosure pipelines represent returns on R&D investment, how to quantify what a missed disclosure costs, and why offices that treat outreach as a budget line tend to sustain it better than those that treat it as goodwill.

[Read the article →](#)

Making the first disclosure a relationship, not a transaction

Luna described setting an explicit expectation with every new discloser: the disclosure is the beginning of a relationship, not the end of one. The inventions most likely to be successfully commercialized are the ones where the inventor remains involved throughout the process. That expectation runs both ways — she holds inventors accountable for staying engaged, and they hold her accountable for responding and following up.

The period between submission and first response is where a lot of offices lose momentum with inventors. An inventor submits something and hears nothing for weeks. From the office's perspective, the disclosure is in the queue. From the inventor's perspective, the idea went into a black hole. Luna's approach is to do intake meetings in person, acknowledge immediately that she doesn't have answers yet, and tell the inventor explicitly what the next steps are and when to follow up if they haven't heard. That transparency — about timelines, about uncertainty, about what the process looks like — has made a measurable difference in how engaged inventors stay.

Tolu at SDSU walks first-time disclosers through the full process: what the committee review looks like, how long it takes, what the most common outcomes are, and why most licenses come from faculty connections rather than cold outreach. Inventors who understand what they're in for tend to be more patient and more constructive when timelines extend.

Luna added the corollary: if you tell an inventor you'll get back to them in 48 hours and you don't, you've made the relationship worse. Better to be honest about your bandwidth, give them a realistic timeline, and explicitly invite them to follow up if they haven't heard. At a one-person office, that kind of direct communication is the only way to stay credible with a faculty population that doesn't have many other signals to go on.

How to decline an invention **without losing the inventor**

Every office has to decline inventions, and the first one is the highest-stakes version of that conversation. An inventor who hears no on their first disclosure before they've built trust with the office may not come back.

Luna's framing: the no is to this particular filing decision, not to the working relationship. Separating those two things explicitly — making clear that declining to pursue a use case is not a judgment on the researcher or their work — gives the conversation somewhere to go. There are usually other paths: future disclosures, adjacent applications, ways to stay connected to the commercial side of their research even when the current filing isn't the right one.

Mary's version: the question isn't do we file or do we not file. The question is what do we do next. Sometimes the answer is not yet — come back when there's more data, or when the market question is clearer. Sometimes it's pursue a different application. Sometimes it's let this one go and stay engaged for whatever comes next. Framing it that way — as a next step rather than a closed door — keeps the inventor in the conversation.

Tolu described the practical follow-up this requires. When the office isn't going to pursue a filing, they direct inventors to other resources: the National Science Foundation I-Corps program for further commercial development, other programs on campus that might support early-stage research with commercial potential. The message is not that the work isn't good. It's that the office is still invested in helping the researcher find the right path for it.

A framework for measuring what a TTO does — **not just what it produces**

Traditional metrics capture activity: disclosure counts, patents filed, licenses executed. This guide covers a lifecycle-based approach — early stage pipeline formation, mid stage execution quality, late stage outcomes — that gives offices a way to explain how engagement leads to results, and to identify where the pipeline is breaking down before it shows up in the numbers.

[Read the guide →](#)

What the best-performing offices do differently

Luna's: reduce friction at the very first interaction. That moment sets the tone for everything that follows. At a smaller institution with limited scale, the quality of that first impression is the biggest lever available.

Tolu's: build an ambassador program, or at minimum identify a few faculty champions who can have conversations with their colleagues about what working with the office is like. Researchers ask other researchers. A positive endorsement from a peer does more than any outreach the office can generate on its own.

Mary's: don't over-routinize. The technique for building inventor relationships isn't hard — show up, respond quickly, meet people where they are, have the conversation rather than sending the form. What's hard is doing it consistently with enough inventors, across enough departments, over enough time. That takes people, and most offices don't have as many as they need.

The Stanford data makes the case that investing in those relationships early — before there's a clear commercial outcome to point to — pays off. Whether or not the causal mechanism holds up to scrutiny, the pattern it describes is one that experienced tech transfer professionals recognize: the relationship that starts well tends to hold, and the one that starts badly rarely recovers.

Test Tradespace on your own IP to see how you can save time, develop stronger disclosures and filings, and maximize value for your office.

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