

ITRAC on track and bridging gap between academic research and applied discovery

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In a novel manner which gives new meaning to the word transformative, researchers from the Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Cancer Center are integrating some of the best practices of industry into the strengths of the academic research process to propel the development of innovative cancer treatments from the bench to the bedside.

The IU Simon Cancer Center has initiated the Translational Research Acceleration Collaboration (ITRAC) and is providing rapid response funding and expertise to speed early discoveries to improve patient care, solve perplexing treatment problems, and lead the way to future therapies.

Traditionally, external academic grant funding applications take nine to 12 months from time of submission to funding, if approved. With ITRAC, researchers can receive incremental funding in a fraction of that time.

"ITRAC also helps investigators form research teams and break down silos that are naturally found in any research environment," said Mark Kelley, Ph.D., associate director for basic science research at the IU Simon Cancer Center. "The ITRAC process requires that research teams, including basic and clinical scientists, work together to speed the velocity of the science from the bench to the clinic as well as from the clinic back to the bench. With science becoming ever more complex, the formation of multi-disciplinary teams is the most effective and correct way to undertake complex problems in cancer prevention, detection,

treatment and delivery.”

This initiative also helps investigators forge new collaborations, share costly resources such as reagents, and develop interactions internally and externally. To date, ITRAC has supported collaborators from the Purdue Cancer Center, the University of Notre Dame’s Walther Cancer Research Center and the IU Simon Cancer Center.

According to Dr. Kelley, the ITRAC process requires greater accountability by researchers of how funds are used and careful scrutiny of the outcomes. Only research with the greatest patient impact potential is supported.

David Johnson, president and CEO of BioCrossroads, the state’s initiative to develop the life sciences, said he’s not aware of any other university using ITRAC’s approach to translate discovery into action.

“It’s revolutionary,” Johnson said. “Although it’s in an academic environment, ITRAC tries to bridge the gap between the traditional – the pure discovery domain of academic research – and the very applied discovery domain of corporate research and development. It’s an approach that says we’re going to borrow some of the project management processes that organize corporate research and focus more specifically on outcomes.”

Leaders at the IU Simon Cancer Center approached BioCrossroads for insights into project management practices used in the corporate world.

In addition to grant money, ITRAC helps researchers map out their projects, and it provides expertise to scientists who have made significant discoveries in their labs but aren’t sure what steps are necessary to turn those discoveries into products that will improve patient care. This decreases the amount of time the scientists have to

spend running around trying to find out how to accomplish the next step in their projects.

The program complements a growing emphasis by the National Institutes of Health on accelerating the development and testing processes that basic science laboratory discoveries go through to become new patient treatments. One of the major goals of National Cancer Institute designated centers like the IU Simon Cancer Center is to increase translational initiatives.

IU Simon Cancer Center committees review research projects and identify those with the most potential for clinical applications as well as commercial potential – potential that the individual scientists may not even realize is there.

Since its establishment in November 2006, ITRAC has mapped 73 projects, established and/or recommended 50 project collaborations, and identified numerous intellectual property needs.

“After little more than a year, an exciting benefit we are seeing is the identification of intellectual property, which, we hope, will continue to grow and dovetail with the growing emphasis in the state’s life sciences initiative and lead to more biotech startups and licensing opportunities and decrease the ‘brain drain’ from the state,” Kelley said. “Whatever it takes to help speed research findings to help cancer patients is what this initiative is all about.”

Source: Indiana University

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