

**Come together:**

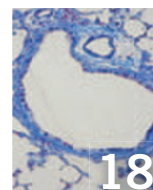
Phil Willis gives his take on how nonprofits can collaborate

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Clinical drive prompts pharma and academia to partner up

Pharmaceutical companies have sponsored research at academic centers for decades. But in the past few years, these collaborative agreements have escalated from small one-off contracts with individual labs to broad, big-money alliances that offer a hefty supply of perks but also a fair share of conflicts.

“Over the years, things have changed,” says Inder Verma, a Sanofi-Aventis-funded gene therapy researcher at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. “There’s greater and greater interest in seeing whether our discoveries have the potential to be used in translational research. And, really, who is better at that than industry?”

In November, the University of California–San Francisco (UCSF) and the pharma giant Pfizer announced the most recent such strategic alliance—an \$85 million, five-year partnership to spur the discovery of new medicines. The deal includes research funds, access to advanced technology and a new physical research space at UCSF’s Mission Bay campus, where 20 Pfizer scientists will work alongside 20 UCSF scientists on a variety of projects.

UCSF and Pfizer had signed smaller, shorter agreements before. But “what’s different this time is a sense of a partnership,” says immunologist Jeffrey Bluestone, executive vice chancellor and provost at UCSF. “Having partners that help us get our ideas into humans is a big deal.”

“On the academic side, the stigma of having a corporate partner has eroded as people understand the value, both financially and from a resource perspective,” adds Scott Forrest, director of business and technology development at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, which signed a \$100 million, five-year agreement with Pfizer in 2006.

For pharmaceutical companies facing looming patent cliffs and shriveling drug pipelines, the benefits of partnering with academic researchers are also clear. “We’re moving away from centralized, vertically-integrated R&D,” explains Anthony Coyle, who heads Pfizer’s Global Centers for Therapeutic Innovation. Since the UCSF announcement, more than 20 universities across North America and Europe have contacted Pfizer about putting



Fair shake: Industry and academia both see the benefits of broad strategic alliances.

similar collaborative research spaces on their campuses, and the company plans to announce six or seven more alliances with US academic institutions in the coming months, Coyle says.

Pfizer’s not alone in forging partnerships with academia. Last year, for example, AstraZeneca inked a two-year deal with the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia to pursue new treatments for Alzheimer’s disease, and Johnson & Johnson, through its Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals subsidiary, signed a five-year oncology pact with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

However, such partnerships do not always run smoothly. Last year, officials from the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston filed a lawsuit to get out of a licensing deal with the California biotech start-up Gatekeeper Pharmaceuticals, which was founded a year earlier by Dana-Farber scientists. The institute claimed that a long-term collaborative agreement with Novartis dating back to 2005 meant that the Swiss drug heavyweight had first dibs on the drug, an anticancer molecule known as WZ4002 currently in preclinical testing. After the suit was filed in September, both Gatekeeper and Novartis submitted claims over the drug compound, and litigation is ongoing.

Property dispute

According to Gene Slowinski, who studies strategic alliances at New Jersey’s Rutgers

Business School–Newark and New Brunswick, the stickiest issue that arises in pharma-academia alliances is the trade-off between the desire of researchers for academic freedom and the need for companies to secure intellectual property. “The foundation of any university–industry relationship is the quality of the patent,” he says. “It’s a big-ticket issue.”

Bluestone notes that, before signing with Pfizer, UCSF spent considerable time assessing scenarios of how to preserve academic freedom while recognizing the value of intellectual property. The school settled on a plan that allows scientists the freedom to publish and present their data without restriction early in the research; then, at a certain point, Pfizer can step in to access discoveries “lock, stop and barrel, if they want,” he says. The partnership, however, is completely opt in, so only investigators who apply for Pfizer funding are subject to the agreement.

Collaborations between pharma and academia are “very much a positive development for advancing drug discovery and development,” asserts John Brennan, president and managing director of the Boston-based consulting firm Arthur D. Little. “It’s going to take some trial and error, some balancing, to get it right,” adds Amy Porter, a senior partner with the Alliance Management Group, a New Jersey-based consulting firm that specializes in partnerships and mergers. “But if it’s done well, I think it’s a good thing.”

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