

nature medicine

The twain shall meet

Announcing an initiative to connect commercially oriented academics with their local business community.

Profound cultural differences remain between the worlds of commerce and of scholarship. These not only perpetuate mistrust but also impede the translation of scientific discoveries into products. Too few academic investigators ever interact with knowledgeable business leaders. And too few investors have an opportunity to meet the future research leaders. That is why *Nature Medicine* and *Nature Biotechnology* created the SciCafé—a series of networking events in Boston and San Francisco that help researchers connect with investors and serial entrepreneurs. Next month, we launch our first event in London.

Historically, academia has regarded the business world with suspicion. This attitude is gradually being tempered both through increasing familiarity and with recognition that accelerating the commercialization of technology can benefit any number of constituencies. Many universities have set up technology transfer offices, sometimes motivated by the ideal of making advances in knowledge useful to society, and sometimes (perhaps erroneously) expecting licensing and spinout activity to provide significant revenue. Some even allow faculty who enter the commercial realm to retain their academic positions. Others exhibit the work of their faculty through ‘investor days’, where business people listen to presentations from researchers.

Despite these initiatives, it remains rare for scientists to forge close and sustained links with the business community. An established mentor or a close colleague may be able to provide an introduction to an appropriate business person. But those without such contacts must rely on secondhand linkages and the outreach of their tech transfer office, networks that can be parochial and fragmented, and fail to put them in touch with the ideal people.

Investors, for their part, have equally scant opportunity to interact with researchers, especially those with emerging reputations—the scientific dynamos of the next decade. Their investment histories may bring them into trusting relationships with established scientific entrepreneurs—the Bob Langers or Greg Winters or Corey Goodmans—any of whom may be conduits for scientific renewal or for introductions to up-and-coming researchers. But these scientific celebrities are rare birds, often oversubscribed to the point of extinction: they exist but are lesser spotted.

Researcher-investor intersections are infrequent: a shaded sliver on the Venn diagram of time spent by either party. And even when they do occur, the timing is often bad. They may meet when a tech transfer office is trying to engineer a licensing or spin-out contract, circumstances too late and too adversarial to be wholly productive. The university wants a deal with the best yield and the investor the best return, leading to interactions that are more confrontational than collegial. The science and investment worlds turn on such radically different axes that relationships between them need to start earlier to build mutual understanding and trust.

This prompted *Nature Medicine* and *Nature Biotechnology* to start the SciCafé. The idea is to ‘showcase’ to an invited audience of 30 or so business people the work of investigators publishing cutting-edge work.

The first SciCafés were in Boston and San Francisco because each area not only produces a prodigious amount of high-quality science, but is also home to a large number of sophisticated, early-stage life science investors/entrepreneurs. Starting next month, we are now extending the concept to Europe, with a SciCafé in London, one apex of the London-Oxford-Cambridge ‘Golden Triangle’ of R&D, and a global investment center.

So who gets a table at the SciCafé? Academics are selected on their publication record and on the potential commercial interest of their research. Editorial responsibility for selection rests with the participating journals, which take an ecumenical approach, looking at the whole literature—not just papers published in *Nature* journals. Those selected are given one-on-one coaching by the editors on how best to present their research to an investor audience. We also invite the technology transfer offices of any selected academics to send a representative to the SciCafé.

Importantly, SciCafé presenters are not ‘pitching’ to attract immediate funding. To avoid any biases or conflicts of interests—the selected scientists don’t pay an admission fee and the venture capitalists don’t pay to attend—no money changes hands. The SciCafé is simply a means of connecting the best and brightest researchers and business people within a biohub. Productive outcomes may be weeks, months or even years away: the SciCafé makes introductions and hopes the actors build from there.

And, indeed, building there has been. According to Bruce Booth, a partner at Atlas Ventures who helped us conceive and start the first SciCafé back in 2007, seven out of 12 academics who presented during the first year of the Boston events are involved in at least one commercial enterprise, some as company founders. This seems a respectable figure.

In announcing the SciCafé to the broader biomedical community in these pages, we would like to also invite applications from investigators in the Boston, San Francisco or London areas who are interested in presenting. Applications should be sent to scicafe@us.nature.com outlining in 1,000 words the applicant’s contact details, the three peer-reviewed papers most relevant to their work, a clear but brief description of the commercial potential and any associated intellectual property.

We acknowledge that many in academia have no interest in seeking closer ties with the investor community. But for those who do wish to commercialize their work, we hope SciCafé offers a new opportunity.

The sooner productive relationships can be built between investors and commercially oriented scientists, the better. Investing in a biomedical venture is not simply bankrolling an investigator’s idea. Business people can provide advice on developing academic ideas to the point of commercialization, at which point they can also help establish operations, recruit management and develop strategy.

It is our goal to help the research community build these types of relationships. And if SciCafé facilitates the commercialization of just one more lifesaving medicine than would otherwise have been realized, then it will have been well worth the effort.