Communicating University Research Strengths to Industry Partners

Quick Guide

UIDP

Strengthening University-Industry Partnerships

Universities have much to offer industry research and development endeavors – from faculty expertise, state-of-the-art facilities, and consortia to federal partnerships in need of industry expertise.

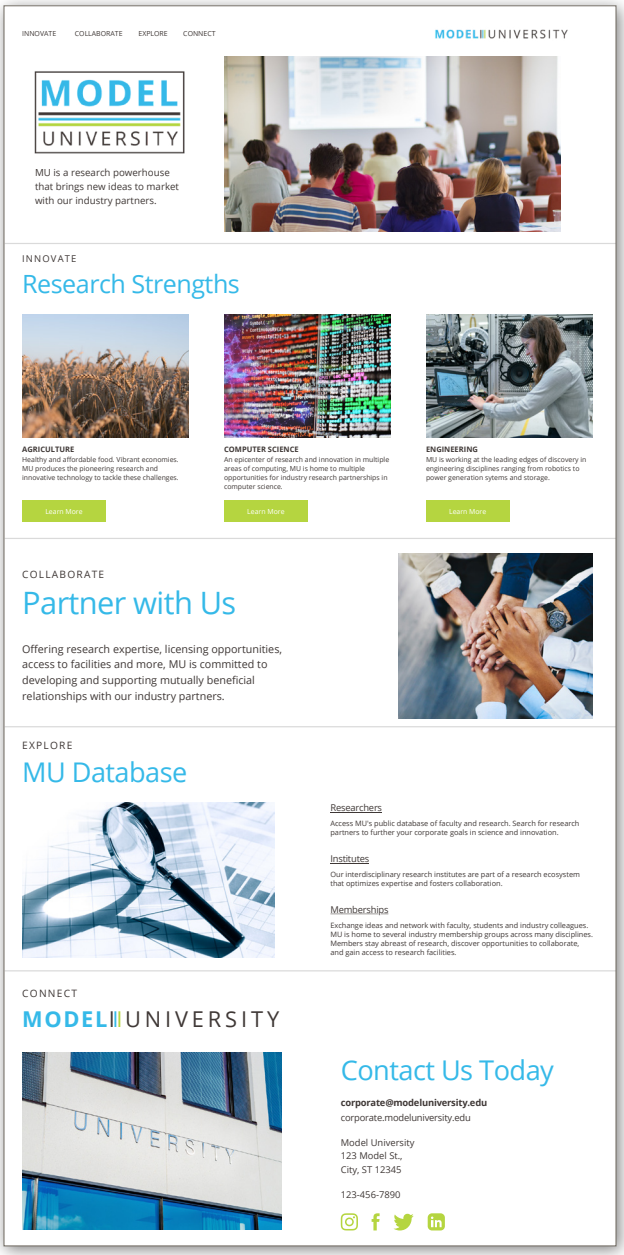
When corporate goals for research and innovation align with university strengths, university-industry research collaborations thrive. (See *UIDP Partnership Continuum* for all the ways that companies and universities can collaborate.)

A university's success in communicating research strengths comes down to its ability to reach the intended audience. All too often, universities direct industry representatives to dense websites and print materials written for faculty or students. This frustrates corporate partners and increases the time it takes to form a collaboration. Poor communication can cause universities to lose strategic opportunities before even engaging in a conversation with a prospective corporate partner.

The *Communicating University Research Strengths to Industry Partners Quick Guide* provides guidance on how university faculty and staff can proactively present research capabilities to prospective industry partners, as well as best practices for specific corporate requests. This Quick Guide can assist university representatives charged with industry engagement and university faculty and staff dedicated to building industry partnerships. Its focus is on early-stage discussions or publicly available communications about research areas. When entering into more detailed discussions about specific research directions or projects, all parties involved should consult the appropriate offices about the type of information that should or should not be shared and whether a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) should be signed. (See *UIDP NDAs 101* for more details.) This Quick Guide is not a substitute for university policies and the role of communications departments. (For guidance of communicating research results, see the *UIDP Communicating Research Quick Guide*. See *UIDP Networking with a Purpose* for a list of the people who may serve as "connectors" between companies and universities and how they can support faculty.)

Faculty members should engage early and work toward value propositions specific to individual companies. They should connect with the university's corporate relations or communications office to explore applicable policies, including confidentiality and the use of existing promotional materials. It is also advised that university representatives *listen first*. It is crucial that the university team understand each company in terms of what it needs, if and how it supports research, and how to connect industry representatives with research leaders and individual researchers. Developing a customized understanding of each corporate partner limits the number of companies with which the university can develop close ties. However, this understanding will enable targeted communications and longer-term relationship building. This Quick Guide focuses on research collaborations that are faculty-driven and designed to solve major challenges that companies face.

University-wide Research Communications for Industry



Web-based Content

Consolidating university-wide research strengths and capabilities for an industry audience into an easily accessible format is a valuable tool for early-stage interactions with corporate partners. The first step is to ensure that a prospective partner can find industry-focused information on the university website. A rule of thumb is to make it as easy for an industry representative to navigate to desired content as it is for a prospective student to learn about admissions. From the home page, company representatives should be able to find "research." From the research page, they should easily find content specifically for external partners.

Industry engagement pages can be brief. Start with a straightforward landing page that provides information and connects interested parties to a person at the university. A non-negotiable requirement is that the information responds to industry needs or challenges by speaking directly to an industry audience.

If an industry representative is looking for something specific on the website, they may ask the following three questions:

- Does the university have the expertise and capabilities (e.g., equipment) they seek?
- What are the mechanisms and processes for partnering with the university?
- Who is the right contact for more information or to get started?

Make it easy for corporate representatives to find and read the answers – avoid dense pages of small text, acronyms, and academic jargon. Opt instead for visual and graphic representations, photos, and news stories or testimonials that tell the story of research capabilities at the university.

Key Learning: Information on research capabilities must be written expressly for an industry audience. Avoid dense pages, small text, acronyms, and academic jargon.

The standard outline for simple industry engagement web content includes a few elements: a limited number of research strengths, information on how companies can partner with the university, a link to a database of faculty research (if one is available), and a call to action that encourages companies to speak to someone who can assist them in navigating the university.

DO

- Clearly state a succinct value proposition – tell the company why they should work with the university.
- Highlight two to four interdisciplinary research strengths.
- Include information on centers and institutes that support the highlighted areas.
- Feature one to two industry research success stories.
- Include a photo and quote from a corporate partner.
- Briefly describe common mechanisms for research partnerships with industry – general lab support, PhD projects, consortia, sponsored research projects, collaborative research projects, etc.
- Provide information on shared use facilities of particular interest to industry.
- Show a sample materials research agreement, sponsored research agreement, and facilities usage agreement.
- When sample agreements are not available, include text that indicates the university has a technology transfer office that is able to advise on intellectual property.
- Include a link to an existing database of the university's faculty research.
- Include a call to action, either a simple box to submit an inquiry or a telephone number to call for more information.
- Design the page/site for search engine optimization.
- Ensure that the page is linked to the university home page, even at the bottom.
- Ask outside entities to link to the page, such as trade organizations, affiliated companies, economic development organizations, etc.

DO NOT

- Rely on links to existing websites that provide information for faculty and students.
- Provide an exhaustive list of every principal investigator at the university.
- Include a full list of centers and institutes.
- Present department-by-department research strengths.
- Assume that the website will be found by those who need it.
- Neglect to respond to industry inquiries within a 48-hour timeframe.

Key Learning: Industry-facing web pages must highlight a limited number of strengths and resources. Avoid exhaustive lists.

Rather than providing companies with details about every faculty member and research project, highlight high-value or highly relevant faculty and projects. Industry representatives are pressed for time. Remember that there are over 1,500 universities in the United States alone, over 650 of which are ranked by the National Science Foundation annually in the Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) report, which provides information on both federal research dollars and industry research dollars that flow into the university.

Universities that are able to briefly state their unique strengths and how they partner with industry are more likely to gain corporate partners than those that drown companies in information. No single institution can appeal to the needs of every company. The universities that deepen corporate partnerships year over year are those able to make the information a company needs to know both simple and inviting.

To determine which university research strengths and capabilities to include, consider gathering a list from key internal stakeholders. To compile the list, ask a series of questions:

- Is this a nationally ranked research area? Is there something notable about the university's ranking?

- Is this a research area that has historically been of interest to the university's corporate partners? Which ones?
  - » Is there an industry sector represented in this list that has done considerable work with the university?
- Is this research group one that has performed well with federal agencies?
- Does this research area align with the university's stated mission and strategic plan?
- Is there something that makes the university of particular interest to industry, such as the location, access to a particular research subject, or a university partner with which a company has interest in collaborating?

Choose two to four research areas to highlight from among those that have "yes" answers to these questions. If there is an industry sector that is well represented in the answers to these questions, highlight university research capabilities that meet the needs of that sector. For example, if companies from the agricultural sector are among those that have historically expressed interest in the university's research, think about highlighting any research capabilities and strengths that align with climate change technology, such as sensors, agricultural sustainability, food safety, biotech, water quality, and other topics of interest to companies in this sector.

Key Learning: Promptly respond to inquiries generated through a call to action that allows industry representatives to get additional information.

While an industry representative may find something of interest on a website, it does not matter if they do not know whom to contact for more information. A call to action is necessary to take the engagement to the next level. A simple box to submit an inquiry can work if it is directed to an email address that is regularly monitored by staff. Contact information for a corporate relations office or other industry-serving staff member can also serve this purpose. The email or phone number that receives this information must be staffed. Any inquiries should receive a response within 48 hours.

Make sure faculty web pages are up-to-date. Industry researchers often know the academic researchers in their field and look at their websites. Since publications have a significant time lag, it is helpful to have at least general information about current research.

Print Materials

An in-person meeting with a corporate partner may necessitate print rather than web-based content.

A general one-page document for first-time meetings should mirror the web-based content above by highlighting two to four research strengths and a few research capabilities (facilities, consortia, etc.) of particular interest to industry. The print material should contain a call to action that directs company representatives to the industry-facing website, as well as contact information to speak with someone in person.

As the print material will likely be passed along to others at the company who are unacquainted with the university, it is important to be sure that the name and logo are accurately represented. In addition, including *At a Glance* information provides a framework for the university's research endeavor. The section should be brief and graphically represented. Avoid dense pages of small text, lists of codes and numbers, acronyms, and university terminology. Include select information that tells the story of the overall research endeavor, providing a sense of the scope and scale of research activity.

Use icons, graphs, or charts to display the information, and create white space on the page.

Points to consider including are:

- National Science Foundation's Higher Education Research and Development ranking,
- specific discipline rankings,
- Carnegie Classification,
- Minority Serving Institution status,
- annual research expenditures,
- percent of research expenditures funded by industry or dollar amount funded by industry,
- number of researchers,
- number of graduate and undergraduate students involved in the research endeavor,
- core research facilities, and
- volume of active relevant licenses.

Key Learning: Introductory print materials should be kept to one page and should include a link to information about the university's industry engagement information on the internet.

Specific Corporate Partner Research Communications

Content for industry-specific or company-specific research communications can vary from intermediate discussions with prospective partners to retrospective reviews of established partnerships. No matter the channel or purpose of the communications, they should follow the key learnings presented above:

- Write for an industry audience.
- Avoid exhaustive lists, codes, university terminology, and acronyms.
- Provide a call to action that directs corporate partners to a contact who can assist in building a research partnership.

Menu of Options

Once the company has contacted the university and expressed an interest in partnering, a menu of options is a useful second step. The outline for such a document should mirror the "ways to partner" listed in the university-wide communications above. In addition, it should be as specific to the company's interests as possible. Ideally, this information will emerge from the initial conversation with the company.

The menu should include a range of options, from simple, short-term engagements to a multi-year sponsored research project. (See *UIDP Avenues for Engagement* for a brief summary of different ways that companies can invest in universities and the relative investment level. The *UIDP Partnership Continuum* includes a more exhaustive list of types of engagements.) If the company has an interest in the university's core strength and want more specific research, the document should indicate whether a consortium, sponsored project, corporate affiliate program, or research park would best fit the company's desired level of engagement.

Ensure that an investment range is also included, keeping in mind that this is not a contract; rather, it's a means of directing the corporate partner toward the most meaningful conversation possible. A list of options without any sense of the investment required does not further the conversation with the prospective corporate partner. When this information is missing, the company must engage in another conversation to request it, delaying the potential entry into a meaningful collaboration.

Capability Statements

For specific areas of expertise, a capability statement should follow the general format for university-wide web and print content. Ideally, specific capability statements are complementary, containing a similar layout and graphics. Create a one-page capability statement for each area of research strength highlighted in the university-wide materials. Avoid categorizing strengths by academic department or school in favor of interdisciplinary categories that speak to industry needs. For example, to present research strengths that speak to an industry partner's Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) goals, create one document than combines environmental expertise from colleges of engineering, business, social science, science, and public health.

Key Learning: Present research strengths as a whole. Avoid presenting research strengths as a function of the university's individual schools and colleges.

Partnering Reports

Impact or Stewardship Reports

Many universities choose to create web, print, and social media content for their strongest partners. The purpose of these material is to provide clear

feedback on the importance of a given company to the university. Rather than technical, these reports have the look and feel of a marketing document. It contains photos, graphics, and testimonials from leadership at the company and university.

Typically, an impact or stewardship report will cover a specific time period – whether a year in review or the lifetime of the research collaboration. Include a timeline or other visual image that shows partnership milestones. Show the financial investment over time, projects undertaken, federal projects tackled together, joint research presentations at scientific conferences, and the products and business lines that have benefitted from the collaboration. For reports that seek to provide insight into partnership impact, it is important to reveal the impact on people as well as qualitative factors. Provide stories with quotes from the researchers and students engaged in the project. Students who have gone on to work for the company as interns or full-time employees are excellent resources for this content.

Partnering reports also provide the opportunity to articulate ideas for strengthening the relationship. A closing section can highlight areas of defined mutual interest to explore during the coming years of the partnership. Distribute the report to the key contacts at the company and ask if they are willing to share it with university alumni or key executives employed at the company. The publication or report update is an opportune catalyst for a meeting between senior leaders at the school and company.

Partner Profiles

Some universities also choose to create content for new or prospective partners to provide a roadmap for the relationship. Such content can serve as a "how-to" manual for research and development leaders at the company so they can become familiar with areas in which the university's strengths overlap with the company's research needs.

Providing the project sponsor information they can use to document progress and success is another best practice. Corporate researchers must often defend their expenditures, so offering tangible information for reporting is important. These reports go beyond partnering reports, are on the project level, and should be timely.

Tools

There are a variety of tools available to assist universities in sharing their research capabilities with industry partners. These platforms are only successful if implemented with U-I goals in mind. A system built to support faculty and/or administrators will not necessarily serve the corporate audience well.

For example, Elsevier's Pure tool helps institutions raise awareness, showcase existing research expertise, and build reputation to increase industry collaboration opportunities. Beyond its ability to help identify partners, the Elsevier SciVal tool can assess how existing collaborations/partnerships are performing and inform strategic planning to enhance team building for stronger collaborations.

Key Takeaways

- Communications must be tailored to the industry audience.
- Avoid technical terms. Write content for intelligent lay readers.
- Present true strengths. Do not attempt to "be everything to everyone."
- Create web and/or print content that drives corporate partners to people who can work with the company to build a research collaboration.
- Keep materials and databases up to date.

Related UIDP Publications

In UIDP Avenues for Engagements: uidp.org/publication/avenues-for-engagement-ways-that-companies-invest-in-universities/

UIDP Communicating Research Quick Guide: uidp.org/publication/communicating-collaborations-2/

UIDP Maximizing the Benefits of Advisory Boards Quick Guide: uidp.org/publication/maximizing-the-benefits-of-advisory-boards-quick-guide-2019/

UIDP Networking with a Purpose: uidp.org/publication/networking-with-a-purpose/

UIDP Partnership Continuum: uidp.org/publication/partnership-continuum/

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