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Researchers are in demand as biotech firms seek innovations

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Democrat business editor
Nov. 9, 2011

Bio-technology companies looking for the next great idea rely increasingly on the talent and innovations of university researchers, so much so that today's Ph.D. scientists are more likely to work in industry than in academia.

"The point here is that science has changed," neuroscientist Richard Nowakowski told the audience at Tuesday's symposium on "The Business of Life Sciences."

When he got his doctorate 35 years ago, Nowakowski said the typical move was to look for a job as an associate or assistant professor.

"That was it. There were no other ideas or jobs or anything that one should do. Now, that's not true."

Today, only about 15 percent of U.S. scientists with doctorates remain in academia. The rest work in some industry somewhere, said Nowakowski, chairman of biomedical sciences at the Florida State University College of Medicine.

"It's not that academia has shrunk. Industry has grown, and I think that the American biotech industry, the pharmaceutical industry has grown so tremendously that we need to recognize it and prepare our students for it," he said.

The FSU life sciences faculty at the symposium heard presentations by several scientists-turned-CEOs who talked about the path they took to bring inventions to the marketplace — and how the startup company is the vehicle for that commercialization.

"It's very hard for big companies to innovate," said Harold Van Wart, president and CEO of Metabolex Inc., which has developed new drugs for treating Type II diabetes. "In fact, they are terrible at it, at least in the health care industry. Most innovation actually comes from universities and from bio-techs."

Van Wart was an FSU faculty member from 1978 to 1992.

FSU becoming an entrepreneurial university is one of the goals President Eric Barron has set for the institution, and all colleges are encouraged to explore the business potential for their ideas or research.

Pharmacologist Christy Shaffer did postdoctoral work at the University of North Carolina that led to a job at Burroughs Wellcome Co. "I actually went from the basic scientist in a lab to clinical research, which is quite different than working in a lab and I loved the idea of translating basic science into something clinically meaningful that can become a product," Shaffer said. One was a treatment for primary pulmonary hypertension, the drug capable of saving patients' lives.

In 1995, she became the first full-time employee at startup Inspire Pharmaceuticals, eventually becoming the CEO. Inspire grew to a staff of 250 and was acquired by Merck this year. Shaffer is now venture partner and managing director of Hatteras Discovery, a venture capital firm that explores investment opportunities in university technologies.