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PAUL CASTLE, ANCHOR

New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada in general have more than their share of universities, 14 to be exact. And there's a lot of original research that goes on in university labs and offices. But there's a concern that not enough of that smart thinking is making its way into our business community in the region. Sara Jane Snook is the executive director of a relatively new organization called Springboard that is trying to change all that. Good afternoon.

SARA JANE SNOOK:

Good afternoon.

CASTLE:

What led to the formation of Springboard?

SNOOK:

It think Springboard just arose from a recognition by both government and university of the potential of university research to be a real driver in our economy here in Atlantic Canada.

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CASTLE:

What do you mean by that?

SNOOK:

Well, there's just been a lot of investment in research and development at universities and universities are an area that Atlantic Canada has a lot of strength. We have a 14 universities involved in Springboard and that provides an opportunity in the region to really capitalize on some of the wonderful research that's going on at the university.

CASTLE:

Give us an example of where it's been done elsewhere.

SNOOK:

There's some great models actually and we've been spending some time looking at best practices elsewhere. The American models are probably most famous at MIT and Stanford and we did do some visiting with some of the ones that are most successful. We had a trip this year to the University of Illinois and the University of Wisconsin and were really able to spend some quality time with them, learning how they have done it successfully and we're taking some time to adapt those models to our scale here in Atlantic Canada because, of course, we're not in the same research investment league that they are, but we certainly have a lot for the size of our economy and we're setting up the foundation here to be successful in commercialization.

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CASTLE:

So when you say they have done it successfully, give us an example.

SNOOK:

The larger schools over the past 20 years have had some real notable commercialization successes and those are what we're trying to emulate here in Atlantic Canada. Famous Canadian examples would be the macular degeneration eye treatment from UBC, the company is called QLT.

CASTLE:

So in those cases, what exactly happened? I gather some independent research was going on through the university and then what happened?

SNOOK:

Those researchers developed some intellectual property that was then developed and protected in a patent and then the patent was able to be licensed out to have start a company in the case of QLT.

CASTLE:

So in cases like that, these were places that were actually depending on grants originally and are now generating their own income.

SNOOK:

They share in the revenue, yes, you know, in some cases, which is a nice opportunity. So that is one of the advantages. The universities don't own these companies. What we're trying to do is lnk

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the private sector to the universities to do some of that development. Universities will continue to be places of research and teaching. When there's commercial applications that happen, we want those to happen in the private sector, mostly.

CASTLE:

What are the signs then that led you to believe there's room to commercialize our university research here in the Maritimes?

SNOOK:

Well you often see articles in the paper about innovation and discoveries and it was felt that there wasn't a body that could really lead those discoveries through the commercial process to get the companies started or find a home for those technologies so that there was some feeling that there were missed opportunities there for Atlantic Canada and we've also had an increase in federal funding research to universities so we were fortunate that our own economic development at ACOA, through the Atlantic Innovation Fund, allotted some money to begin Springboard and then that was supplanted by funding from the tri-councils of the federal government's intellectual property mobilization program as well and those pieces will allow us to really attack university research as an economic development challenge.

CASTLE:

Why were they missing the opportunities, do you think?

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SNOOK:

Well, I think that as I said, universities are really good at research and they're really good at teaching, but they maybe not always are in tune with, you know, private sector development, business development, in particular, and they felt there was a gap in terms of bringing those technologies to fruition in the marketplace, so wee needed some extra skills, which Springboard is able to add, you know, even if it's just making the connections to other government agencies or private sector people that can develop the technology, somebody has to make the connections. That's the unglamorous part of economic development work. You know, it's the one phone call, one meeting, you know, one technology at a time. But it tends to be that kind of deal making that will, you know really start something in Atlantic Canada.

CASTLE:

Is it crass to say they're eggheads, not entrepreneurs?

SNOOK:

Probably.

CASTLE & SNOOK:

[Laughs]

CASTLE:

I'm going to be crass then.

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SNOOK:

You're just going to make my job [inaudible] difficult.

CASTLE:

Well you understand what I'm saying.

SNOOK:

They're really smart. It think that's what you're trying to say. Some of then are entrepreneurs, but for the most part, you know, they're more interested in the lab and we're happy with that. They should be interested in the lab.

CASTLE:

Can you give us some examples of what you're doing here in New Brunswick?

SNOOK:

New Brunswick is really a busy spot and a hotbed of activity at the moment. UNB has some interesting developments going on. They've been doing some spin-off companies. They have a new one, Green Imaging Technology, which is using an application of MRI technology on core from the oil fields and that's very promising, just starting out. One of the UNB researchers received some program funding from us in terms of Proof of Concept Award last year, which is about 20,000 dollar award that you can use to bring your research to the next step in commercialization and in this gentleman's case, Doctor Deslongchamps needed to refine some of his software that he was then able to sell for educational purposes to be used in the classroom to

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make chemistry that much more easy to understand. Now they have several spin-off companies, one that's just getting some attention, Environmental Proteomics, led by Amanda Cockshutt, is really enjoying some success at selling antibodies that have been developed in the lab at Mount Allison and there's just a number of exciting little prospects going on in New Brunswick. New Brunswick was really key in setting up Springboard as well because UNB recognized the potential for us to work together and share resources. Nobody can afford to have all the resources in one office with the size of our universities, but when we all work together, we can have some network resources and you can access them from anywhere.

CASTLE:

From what you've seen elsewhere, how have you seen this make a difference in the communities in which the universities reside?

SNOOK:

I think we've seen some really interesting models where you develop these clusters of companies right around the universities that are working in very innovative space. Some of the universities that we see have also developed incubation space that is very useful in the community for nurturing these small companies and new technologies into a commercial stage, so we're really hoping to – but are starting to see some of these things starting. It's going to take some time. It's definitely a work in progress, but I think it's a really important area for Atlantic Canada to have seized upon and be working because we do see it successful in other places in the country and in other countries.

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CASTLE:

Thanks so much for your time this afternoon.

SNOOK:

Okay. Thank you very much. Bye.

CASTLE:

Bye-bye. Sara Jane Snook is executive director of Springboard, an organization put together by the region's 14 universities.

End of item

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