Dalhousie University is helping develop a vibrant cluster of marine science and technology in the region.

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Dalhousie University is the largest research enterprise in Atlantic Canada. At the centre of the commercialization activities at Dalhousie is its Industry Liaison and Innovation (ILI) Office, which unites university research capacity with the business requirements of regional, national, and international companies. And although Dalhousie is still very much engaged in traditional technology transfer, its ILI Office has begun going aggressively to industry to find out what companies need and how Dalhousie research can meet those needs.

“We have essentially created a door through which companies can enter with a problem and gain access to a wealth of talented researchers who can help those companies create new products, services, or processes to make them more competitive,” says Stephen Hartlen, the assistant vice-president of Industry Relations and the ILI Office’s executive director.

From a researcher’s perspective, it’s also a door outbound from the university to facilitate the transfer of Dalhousie’s scientific knowledge and technology for public use and benefit. “The services offered by the Industry Liaison and Innovation Office are a great asset to our local companies and also an attractive selling feature for companies looking at establishing businesses in Nova Scotia,” says Stephen Lund, the president and CEO of Nova Scotia Business Inc. “The alignment of academia and industry provides businesses with access to research and development, knowledge, and expertise that can help them compete in a global market.”

The success the ILI Office has seen to date is thanks in large part to the dedicated efforts of its eight full-time staff members, all of whom possess both a professional degree in a specialized discipline and private sector experience. These staff members have expertise in the areas of oceans, life sciences, cleantech, materials, and information and communications technology.

In the oceans sector, it isn’t difficult for the ILI Office to promote Dalhousie’s world-renowned research. By applying world-class science to public policy and commercial applications, Dalhousie is helping build a vibrant cluster of marine science and marine technology capacity in the region. In recent years, several companies with a focus on oceans have spun out of the university.

Today Dalhousie boasts more than 100 researchers focused entirely on ocean-related science and technology. “We also house the Ocean Tracking Network, Canada Excellence Research Chair in Oceans, and Lloyd’s Register Educational Trust, totalling in excess of $200 million,” says Hartlen. Private sector Nova Scotia-based companies that have partnered with Dalhousie in the past include Ocean Nutrition Canada, Satlantic, VEMCO, and Survival Systems, as well as various oil and gas companies.

“When we set out to work with the private sector, we use a variety of tools that encourage collaboration,” says Hartlen. Some of these tools include the Nova Scotia Department of Economic and Rural Development and Tourism’s Productivity and Innovation Voucher Program, the National Research Council’s Science and Technology Assistance Program, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada’s Partnership Program.

These programs can offer valuable R&D grants to help cover the costs of a short-term project to one that lasts six months. Larger programs such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency’s Atlantic Innovation Fund have the ability to tie private sector to research over a longer period of time. “Once you develop a relationship with a private sector company on a small research project, it often leads to larger projects,” says Hartlen.

Industry leaders who have partnered with the ILI Office have nothing but positive feedback to offer about their experience. “With a number of university partners around the world, Rolls-Royce highly prizes its strong relationships with university research partners such as Dalhousie,” says Dennis Duke, the Boston-based director of Advanced Programs with Rolls-Royce Naval Marine Inc. “As Atlantic Canada’s premier research university, Dalhousie will help ensure that the new Advanced Programs group at our Dartmouth facility is successful in creating new products and technologies for our naval business.” – Jane Doucet