Q&A With Carol Stewart, New Leader of Tech Parks Arizona

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Carol Stewart [1], the newly appointed associate vice president for Tech Parks Arizona, has credentials that would be hard to top, like the time she helped turn a cornfield in Canada into a research park.

Stewart was the founding director of the David Johnston Research + Technology Park at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, where she helped establish the park and spearheaded its development, growing it to 1 million square feet. She assumed her new position with Tech Parks Arizona earlier this month.

While at Waterloo, Stewart also served as CEO of the Tucson-based Association of University Research Parks [2]. The association represents 200 research parks around the world.

Her arrival at Tech Parks Arizona follows the retirement of Bruce Wright, who developed the UA tech parks since their inception in 1994.

Stewart talked with Lo Que Pasa about what the future holds for Tech Parks Arizona, including its role in the UA's strategic plan, developments at the UA Tech Park at The Bridges, and what the UA’s tech parks can learn from others.

You've been involved with research parks for more than 20 years. What was it about the UA’s tech parks that made you want to lead them?

I was interested in the opportunity to implement my lessons learned and best practices from the University of Waterloo on a new tech park project.

You have said that one of your goals is to weave Tech Parks Arizona "into the very fabric of the University community." Can you explain what that means and how it can be accomplished?

I have already started to have conversations with the academic and executive leadership on campus regarding integrating University-based initiatives with the newest park project, the UA Tech Park at The Bridges [3], our successful 25-year-old UA Tech Park at Rita Road and this region’s longest standing incubator, AzCI [4] (Arizona Center for Innovation). There is tremendous opportunity for stronger connections and collaborations that will help frame the UA's leadership role in research and commercialization by being a living laboratory, a test bed for new technology and a startup business launch point.

Where do you see the Tech Parks fitting into the UA’s strategic plan?
UA tech parks are pivotal to the innovation ecosystem. They serve as the sandbox where academia, government and industry come to foster, support and grow innovation. The 4IR (Fourth Industrial Revolution) represents the fusion of technologies that blur the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres. Our role is to foster radical innovation that leads to economic benefit by moving research from the labs through the continuum of discovery, incubation, commercialization, funding and scaling.

One major upcoming project is the development of the UA Tech Park at The Bridges, near South Kino Parkway and East 36th Street. How will that park be used and in what ways will it be different from the Tech Park at Rita Road?

Rita Road is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, a milestone that the UA should be extremely proud of! A tech park with 6,000 knowledge workers in 2 million square feet, almost at full capacity and with new projects in construction. The Bridges offers us a closer proximity to the UA campus for increased engagement with students, researchers and faculty to what is envisioned to be the commercialization hub for the UA. Both parks recruit companies that align with UA research strengths. The UA Tech Park at Rita Road is suburban and lends itself to meet the needs of businesses in aerospace/defense and security as well as renewable energy industries with its vast amount of land and secure perimeter. The UA Tech Park at The Bridges is more urban and could recruit businesses that need closer connections to University faculty in, say, the College of Optical Sciences or smart vehicles and intelligent transportation systems.

You're succeeding Bruce Wright, who established the tech parks as part of his 32-year career at the UA. What’s it like to assume leadership over an area that has been led by one person since its inception?

Bruce and I have been colleagues in the research park world for 15 years and he leaves behind big shoes to fill. I have the luxury and extreme pleasure to work with President Robert C. Robbins, a true champion of research and technology parks. So, I believe there is no limit to what we can achieve as an institution committed to commercialization and the sectors of focus highlighted in the strategic plan.

You come to the UA after serving as CEO of the Association of University Research Parks, which represents 200 research parks worldwide. What is Tech Parks Arizona doing well compared with its counterparts in the U.S. and around the world, and what are some things we can learn or emulate from those other tech parks?

There is a mantra in the research park world: "If you've seen one research park ? you've seen one research park.” They are all very unique and align to the strengths of their affiliated university. There are fundamental elements of each park that are similar, but each is unique in the makeup of their incubation and business support services, small and medium enterprises, and global companies that call them home. One key component to success for any park is leadership and executive support; this is the key ingredient for success. With President Robbins’ passion for commercialization and University-based economic development, Tech Parks Arizona ? the UA Tech Park at Rita Road, the UA Tech Park at The Bridges and AzCl ? has the fundamentals to continue to grow and have a significant impact on the Southern Arizona region.

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