

Building an Entrepreneur in Residence Program: The Decisions That Matter

UC Berkeley and University of Virginia built their EIR programs differently, but both aimed to turn faculty research into companies. Their leaders explain what to settle before you launch.



Research universities have long relied on proof-of-concept funding, incubators, and similar programs to move discoveries from the lab toward the market. But many hit the same wall: researchers often need help taking the science the rest of the way.

That gap was the catalyst for UC Berkeley's Entrepreneur in Residence (EIR) program, said Darren Cooke, JD, MS, Chief Innovation and Entrepreneurship Officer and Executive Director of UC Berkeley's Life Sciences Entrepreneurship Center (LSEC).

"In conversations with other stakeholders, we discovered there was a real need among would-be academic founders, specifically those who received proof of concept, to take the science to the next level," said Cooke.

He said that although researchers were being encouraged to move their discoveries toward commercialization, many were asking the same questions. Should this research become a startup? Who would run the company? What are the first steps in building a business? How do you develop a commercialization strategy?

"We realized we needed an expert with extensive entrepreneurial experience to come in, chat with them, and help guide them on how to take those next steps," said Cooke.

In 2025, UC Berkeley launched a pilot EIR program within LSEC. It extended the center's existing virtual model and was designed to connect the university's many innovation resources and find where they reinforce each other.

Cooke said the response was strong. Faculty, graduate students, and postdocs embraced the chance to work one-on-one with an experienced entrepreneur who could help them evaluate commercialization opportunities and answer the practical questions that come up when turning research into a company.

The pilot did well enough that Berkeley is expanding the model. It is adding four EIRs for life sciences through LSEC and four for the Advanced Technologies Entrepreneurship Center (ATEC). Cooke said the program reflects the university's broader goal of getting more societal impact out of its research.

While licensing remains an important path, he said startup creation is often the best way to get breakthrough discoveries to the patients, customers, and industries that can use them. "By [embedding] experienced entrepreneurs alongside academic innovators, UC Berkeley is creating a bridge between scientific discovery and successful company formation."

There's no single blueprint here, which means you have room to build the program that fits your university. Some, like UC Berkeley, build structured programs that embed entrepreneurs inside the university. Others, like the University of Virginia (UVA), use a looser model where EIRs are part of a broader network of alumni, venture capitalists, and executives who support founders.

Here's what Cooke and Paul Cherukuri, PhD, UVA's first Chief Innovation Officer and the Donna and Richard Tadler University Professor of Entrepreneurship, say universities need to know about building their own EIR programs.

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Darren Cooke, JD, MS

Chief Innovation and Entrepreneurship
Officer and Executive Director, Life
Sciences Entrepreneurship Center (LSEC)
UC Berkeley

Initial Structural Decisions an EIR Director Must Make

A director's first decisions: what role the program should play within the university's existing commercialization work, how long an EIR stays, and what they're paid. At UC Berkeley, Cooke said, EIRs become university employees for about six months, work about one day a week, and receive a stipend.

At UVA, Cherukuri said, the arrangement is looser, with no set terms or requirements. Its EIRs are often volunteers who want to be involved: alumni founders, experienced CEOs, and investors. All share one goal, which is helping researchers evaluate ideas, refine business models, find funding, and keep supporting ventures well after incorporation.

Some universities use EIRs mainly to help researchers evaluate commercialization opportunities. Others focus on mentoring first-time founders, recruiting startup leadership, and speeding up venture creation. Others still want to attract investment. The key is defining those goals upfront. Cooke and Cherukuri say these are the structural decisions to work through when setting up a program.

Program Design Decisions

PRIMARY MISSION

Is the goal to increase startup formation, improve commercialization outcomes, mentor founders, attract investors, or all of the above?

ORGANIZATIONAL HOME

Will the program sit within the technology transfer office, an innovation center, or run as an independent unit?

ELIGIBILITY

Is it for faculty only, or does it include undergraduates, graduate students, and postdocs?

SIZE

Do you want one EIR, a small cohort of three to five, or a large network of specialists?

RECRUITMENT

Will you draw from successful alumni, former founders, industry executives, or serial entrepreneurs?

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Will EIRs be employees, contractors, volunteers, or visiting fellows?

TERM AND TIME COMMITMENT

Will they serve six months, a year, or an ongoing advisory role, and will they work one day a week, hold office hours, or come in by project?

SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITIES

What should the EIR actually do, whether that is building companies, sizing and validating markets, mentoring founders, or helping shape business models?

Once those core pieces are set, the team can turn to how success will be measured, how to match founders with EIRs, how to fund and sustain the program, and how it might evolve.

Understanding How EIR Programs and Technology Transfer Offices Can Work Together

At both UC Berkeley and UVA, EIRs and technology transfer staff work closely, but their roles are distinct. Technology transfer handles intellectual property, patents, licensing, conflict-of-interest questions, and compliance. Its job is to protect the university's innovations and move commercialization forward at the institutional level.

EIRs handle the questions that fall outside that scope: whether a startup is even the right path, how to recruit an executive team, what investors expect, and how to build an early commercialization strategy. Some end up deciding they want to help run the company they're building.

In practice, Cooke said, a technology transfer office (TTO) may point EIRs toward promising inventions with startup potential and connect them with the researcher. An EIR, in turn, may help a faculty founder refine a business strategy, then send them back to the TTO to work through IP protection or licensing.

Regular communication between the two strengthens the partnership, Cherukuri said. Shared referral processes and coordinated programming keep both groups current on promising technologies and on what faculty and student founders need. Whatever the structure, he said, the strongest programs set clear roles from the start.

Fostering Buy-In From Faculty, Graduate Students, and Postdocs

Most researchers want their discoveries to leave the lab and reach the world, but few have the skill set to become an entrepreneur on their own. Early skepticism about EIRs tends to fade, Cherukuri said, once would-be founders hit challenges they've never faced.

At that point they're open to outside help, he said. Buy-in comes through relationships and mentorship, not formal presentations or promotional materials. Faculty founders who have launched companies become some of the strongest advocates, he said, because they understand what translating research into a business plan actually takes. "They listen to others and know their pain because they've lived it."

That peer credibility extends beyond faculty. At UVA, successful alumni, including startup founders and industry executives, regularly return to mentor students and researchers. Their willingness to share what they learned builds a kind of trust that traditional advising rarely reaches, Cherukuri said.

Universities can also boost participation by making clear that EIRs are advisors and potential partners, not people brought in to take over. Their role is to help academic founders avoid common mistakes, weigh opportunities objectively, and build the structure their science needs to advance, he said.

What Berkeley and UVA Learned Building Their Programs

Beyond the structural decisions, running these programs taught Cooke and Cherukuri a few tips worth passing on.

- 1 Assess your current setup and your university's overarching goals, then work out how an EIR program would support and advance them
- 2 Recruit entrepreneurs who genuinely want to mentor, teach, and help others work through the hard problems of commercialization, not just those with the right resume
- 3 Make sure the support on offer covers fundraising, hiring, regulatory strategy, customer discovery, and early growth
- 4 Stay open to reworking the program as you learn what your researchers need



Both universities have reshaped their programs as they learned what researchers actually need. Neither counts success in EIRs recruited or startups launched. What matters to them is whether a researcher who couldn't have built a company alone ends up running one.

Contact us

Email: index@cureexperience.com
345 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10010

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Report by Sherri Gordon, CLC
Mura Dominko, Managing Editor, Cure
Rachel Berman, Chief Content Officer, Cure
Seema Kumar, CEO, Cure

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