

Virginia Tech's Innovation Campus to Spawn New Patent Ecosystem in Northern Virginia

by Philippe Signore



Innovation Campus conceptual rendering courtesy of Virginia Tech

In mid-November 2018, Amazon grabbed headlines when it announced it will build part of its new headquarters in Northern Virginia.¹ The site for HQ2 had been long-awaited after a national “beauty contest.” Amazon decided to place major new office complexes in the Crystal City section of Arlington, which is being renamed National Landing. This will rejuvenate an area filled with office buildings that were developed in the 1970s, and once housed the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and various patent law firms that have now relocated to Alexandria.

The HQ2 announcement almost entirely overshadowed another major report that Virginia Tech would be making a historic

commitment to build a one million-square-foot, technology-focused campus just down the road in Alexandria.² The \$1 billion project is part of a comprehensive higher-education package, called the Virginia Tech Innovation Campus, that will significantly bolster the technological talent pool in the area. As U.S. Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) stated, “[it] will transform Virginia’s high-tech economy while also providing a pipeline of talent to industry all over Virginia, including Amazon. Once fully launched, it will benefit educational institutions and regions across the commonwealth.”

This technological development will not start from scratch, but will benefit from Virginia Tech’s long-standing excellence in computer science, engineering, data analytics, and technology. The University ranks No. 8 in the nation for engineering research expenditures, according to the National Science Foundation Higher Education Research and Development Survey, and the College of Engineering ranks No. 13 for its undergradu-

ate program, according to *U.S. News & World Report's* 2019 rankings.

The vision for the Alexandria Innovation Campus is to “offer leading programs in computer science and software engineering. It is expected to be a global center of technology excellence and talent production, supporting graduate education, attracting top-tier faculty, sparking research and partnerships, and igniting the region’s innovation economy.”³ The program is part of Virginia’s “promise to Amazon that it would double the number of graduates with degrees in computer science and related fields, ensuring the tech giant will have a steady pipeline of talent for the 25,000-plus jobs it plans to bring to the area.”⁴ Virginia is also investing \$375 million for new master’s programs at George Mason University’s Arlington campus.

In 2019, we can expect to see the first 100 master’s degree students enroll at Virginia Tech’s Alexandria campus and 50 tenure-line and research faculty will join initially. Within five years, the campus will host about 500 master’s students and eventually enroll 750 master’s candidates, in addition to doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows.

Some of the largest IP law firms in the U.S. are located just minutes from the Innovation Campus and are prepared to assist with these developments. The new graduate school, which will focus on academics, research, and industry, will create an entirely new industrial eco-system in the area. It will provide a new talent pool of top-notch graduates who may want to enter the patent profession; business development opportunities for protecting the innovations emanating from this high-tech hub; and increased value in local real-estate assets. In fact, leasing rates are already increasing. Of the countless benefits Virginia Tech’s Innovation Campus will bring to the greater Alexandria area, the one the intellectual property community is most excited about is the potential influx of new patent work for protecting inventions generated from this high-tech, industrial hub.

The Campus should energize the local start-up culture and create a spawn of spin-off start-up companies that will require robust IP protection for their inventions. Since the institution is focused on research and development, it’s also very likely that

the Campus itself will need to secure patent rights. The Campus’ mix of research, business, and industry partners will create an entirely new patent ecosystem.

According to the Association of University Technology Managers, academic research fuels impressive economic gains. For example, in 2017, a record 1,080 start-ups were formed, and a record 7,459 US patents issued as research institutions invest and protect their IP from academic research.⁵ Combining such innovative energy with industry engines creates jobs, economic growth, and innovative new products and services. Such collaborations between academia and industry have repeatedly happened around the country and the world. Understanding the advantages, companies have placed R&D centers near major research universities for decades. Most famously, Silicon Valley, with its proximity to Stanford and University of California, Berkeley, has long been a prime model for an innovation ecosystem. Another example is the large medical-technology clusters in Minneapolis, with the University of Minnesota and its dedicated Medical Devices Center for research. Greater Boston, home to several world-class institutions of higher education, has attracted many health care companies and other industries. These various centers have grown to become patent generators.

As reported in the *Harvard Business Review* by Kenneth Lutchen, the dean of Boston University’s College of Engineering, one key to success in the collaborations between companies and universities is a flexible

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patent licensing program.⁶ Thus, each entity of the new industrial eco-system in Alexandria will need patent drafting and procuring services, advice regarding the scope and validity of patents, counseling on patent licensing and enforcement. The local IP law firms will be perfectly positioned to provide such services to these entities. ⚡

Endnotes:

- 1 www.washingtonpost.com/local/amazon-hq2-decision-amazon-splits-hq2-prize-between-crystal-city-and-new-york/2018/11/12/316d2a32-e2c9-11e8-8f5f-a55347f48762
- 2 <https://vt.edu/innovationcampus/for-the-media/release.html>
- 3 <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2019/01/univrel-deliveryteam.html>
- 4 [www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/economic-development/a-look-at](http://www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/economic-development/a-look-at-virginia-techs-planned-1b-potomac-yard-campus-94963)
- 5 https://autm.net/AUTM/media/About-AUTM/Documents/AUTM_2017_US-Licensing_Survey_PR.pdf
- 6 <https://hbr.org/2018/01/why-companies-and-universities-should-forge-long-term-collaborations>