NOTE THE FIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE HEW IPA AND THE GSA IPA.

Patent Policy Changes Stir Concern

Acting on recommendations that date as far back as 1971, the General Services Administration (GSA) has amended federal procurement regulations to permit universities to get a larger share of the commercial benefits of federally financed research.

The new regulations were based primarily on suggestions by a subcommittee of the Federal Council for Science and Technology that greater incentives are needed for universities to pursue commercialization of their research. The GSA regulations would provide this incentive by encouraging federal agencies to allow universities to retain possession and control of their federally financed discoveries; universities, in turn, would be encouraged to license these discoveries to private industry.

Specifically, the regulations provide for a standard agreement between federal agencies and universities, known as an Institutional Patent Agreement (IPA). "The agreements permit . . . institutions, subject to certain conditions, to retain the entire right, title, and interest in inventions made in the course of their contracts" with the federal government.

Such agreements are in common use by federal agencies now, but each may have a slightly different form. The GSA regulations require that all new IPA's, meaning any written or rewritten after the effective date of 20 March, must follow a single standard.

Moreover, the standard specified in the regulations is different from the IPA's being used now in several respects, according to several federal patent officials.

1) The new IPA can be used to cover research funded through contracts as well as grants.

2) The new IPA increases the period of exclusive control that a university can give to a licensee from 3 years after the initial marketing of a product to 5 years after the initial marketing.

3) The time that a licensee spends trying to get a federal regulatory agency to approve the product will be exempted from the time limits on exclusive marketing.

4) It permits universities to affiliate with for-profit patent management companies, which are organized to promote the licensing of university discoveries to private industry.

5) It removes the ceiling on the amount of royalties from a discovery that can be returned to the researcher who invented it, essentially allowing each university to set its own policy on the amounts.

Although this patent policy is intended to facilitate the transfer of research results from laboratory to marketplace, there is some concern on Capitol Hill that it goes too far in the direction of allowing profit-making firms to benefit from federally funded research. Also of concern is a provision that could pressure researchers to withhold publication pending patent filings. Senator Gaylord Nelson (D–Wis.), chairman of the Small Business Committee, hopes to hold hearings before the policy goes into effect next week. If that cannot be done, he intends to ask the Office of Management and Budget to delay implementation until hearings can be scheduled.—R. JEFFREY SMITH

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