

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-127](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government spends about one-third of its annual \$145 billion research and development budget at hundreds of federal agency labs. Technology generated by this research may have application beyond agencies' immediate goals if commercialized by the private sector. For example, federal research has contributed to innovative products, including antibiotics and the Internet. FLC—a nationwide consortium of federal labs—helps labs transfer technology to the private sector. In recent years, FLC created new initiatives to provide a clearinghouse—a central point for collecting and disseminating information—for technology transfer opportunities.

GAO was asked to review FLC's efforts to provide information on technology transfer opportunities. This report assesses (1) the extent to which FLC has communicated with potential customers when designing and implementing its clearinghouse initiatives, and (2) how FLC measured the results of those initiatives. GAO reviewed relevant laws and FLC guidance, and interviewed a nonprobability sample of officials from four federal agencies with the highest research budgets, and a spectrum of eight customer groups, among others.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that FLC work collaboratively with agency and lab members to increase communication with potential customers to obtain feedback and improve its clearinghouse initiatives, and develop performance measures. FLC generally agreed with the report's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-15-127](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or neumannj@gao.gov.

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TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Federal Laboratory Consortium Should Increase Communication with Potential Customers to Improve Initiatives

What GAO Found

The Federal Laboratory Consortium for Technology Transfer (FLC) has taken steps to communicate with potential customers, including small businesses and entrepreneurs, but has not obtained feedback from them to assess their needs when designing and implementing technology transfer clearinghouse initiatives. This resulted in missed opportunities to better meet potential customer needs. For example, in 2012, when developing a web-based search tool to help potential customers identify relevant federal technology transfer opportunities across federal laboratories (labs), FLC discussed how to implement the tool with its federal member labs and agencies. However, FLC did not assess the information needs of potential customers to ensure the tool would provide relevant information in a format that customers consider useful, as called for by leading practices and federal internal control standards on communicating with and obtaining information from stakeholders. FLC officials said they conducted testing to ensure the new website functioned as intended before launching it, but did not involve potential customers in these tests. Moreover, after developing the tool, FLC did not communicate with potential customers to collect feedback from them consistent with leading practices regarding the extent to which the tool met their needs or how it might be improved before implementing it. Potential customers of FLC's initiatives expressed concerns about the extent to which FLC's recent web-based search tool would meet their needs, specifically noting that the tool:

- provides limited information to facilitate personal interaction between federal researchers and customers, despite the importance of spontaneous idea sharing to facilitate technology transfer;
- provides limited information on the full range of technology transfer opportunities, focusing instead on federally patented technologies;
- affords customers limited ability to compare technologies across labs; and
- provides limited information on the market relevance of a given technology.

FLC faces challenges in communicating with potential customers without also engaging its agency and lab members, given the relatively small size of FLC's annual budget and available staff. By working collaboratively with agency and lab members to collect feedback, FLC can enlist their help in enhancing the information provided through its initiatives.

FLC collects data on the use of its clearinghouse initiatives but has not developed and used performance goals and measures consistent with federal agency leading practices. For example, FLC collects data on the general use of its clearinghouse initiatives, such as the number of technology transfer inquiries it receives, the number of unique views of its web pages, and the average time spent on a web page. However, FLC has not developed performance goals or measures related to the key strategic goals to which its clearinghouse initiatives contribute. Without performance measures, FLC is unable to determine whether its initiatives are having their desired effect or how their performance might be improved. FLC also cannot fully demonstrate in its annual report to Congress its progress toward the achievement of its relevant strategic goals, limiting the information that the administration and Congress receive on the effectiveness of FLC's initiatives.