

Professor's expertise in technology transfer leads to top faculty honor

Donald Siegel, economist in the School of Public Affairs, named a 2026 Regents Professor

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Universities spend billions of dollars on research, and the process of transforming that work into goods and services for the public is more important than ever.

ASU Professor [Donald Siegel](#) is an international expert in the field of technology transfer — the complex, multifaceted movement of discoveries and intellectual property from universities or federal labs to the public and private sectors. The goal is to take basic research and create new products to benefit the economy and society.

Siegel, an economist and Foundation Professor of public policy and management in the [School of Public Affairs](#), said that Arizona State University has been instrumental in his success, thanks to interdisciplinary collaboration and an embrace of entrepreneurship — two hallmarks at ASU.

Siegel is so excellent in his field that he has been named one of [four ASU Regents Professors for 2026](#) — the highest faculty honor, which is achieved by only 3% of faculty members.

“I’m really excited about the Regents Professor because it confirms the importance of the topics I’ve done research on — technology transfer and corporate social responsibility,” said Siegel, who served as director of the School of Public Affairs from 2017 to 2022.

“Those were not considered mainstream when I was in grad school. Colleagues came to me and said, ‘What kind of weird topics are you working on?’”

Siegel was interested in innovation — a subject that was being pioneered in economics in the 1980s.

“Anyone who studies innovation ultimately studies two things: universities, because they are a major source of innovation, and entrepreneurship, which is a natural extension of innovation.”

Siegel was at ASU from 1994 to 2000 and returned in 2017. In the 1990s, he was analyzing data, publishing papers “and doing all the kinds of esoteric studies that economists do,” mostly based on data supplied by the government.

He had been getting support from the Sloan Foundation, which at that time urged economists to go into the field, do qualitative research and collect their own data.

“That’s not what economists did — they were not trained in qualitative research,” Siegel said.

Unfamiliar with field interviewing, he decided to partner with David Waldman, a management expert who is now the Dean's Council Distinguished Professor of Management in the W. P. Carey School of Business, on a research project to explain why some universities had better success in transferring their innovations to the marketplace.

They interviewed scientists, university administrators, company executives and entrepreneurs. And it was eye-opening.

“We found out a lot of things that we couldn’t model statistically,” he said.

“I’m an economist, so I think that people respond to incentives. If you pay people more, it will make them more likely to engage in technology transfer. It’s about money and rewards, is what I thought.

“But when I went out into the field, I realized it was much more complicated. It wasn’t just money, it was the culture of the organization, how the faculty member is treated by the university. Do they perceive that they’re being treated fairly?

“It was about a whole series of workplace issues that really matter.”

University tech is everywhere

All of the technologies that have transformed our lives — computers, the internet, pharmaceuticals, energy, AI — started at universities or federal labs, Siegel said.

The internet was a Department of Defense idea to see if computers could network in the event of a nuclear disaster.

Another significant example comes from the pandemic, when the vaccines were rapidly developed thanks to partnerships between universities and pharmaceutical companies, he said.

“It’s a timely and important issue,” he said.

“A lot of people are questioning the value of university research right now. Why should the federal government be funding this research? What does the taxpayer get out of it?”

Siegel is working with Maribel Guerrero, associate professor of public policy and management in the School of Public Affairs, on trying to quantify the social value of research at universities.

In 2019, Siegel was asked by the first Trump administration to co-chair a committee for the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine](#) to find out how to maximize innovations created in the federally funded national labs. That work produced several recommendations to help speed the process of converting research results into goods and services for Americans.

Siegel has continued collaborating with Waldman, and the two are co-executive directors of the [Global Center for Technology Transfer](#), a premier research institution created in 2022. The center, based at [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#), takes a multidisciplinary approach. The five senior academics study the private sector, universities and federal labs at multiple levels — including individual, organization, regional and national.

With their sensitive research, it's difficult to get access to federal labs, Siegel said, but the Global Center for Technology Transfer has done it, starting ongoing studies into more efficient technology transfer.

Ahead of the curve

Siegel said that ASU's emphasis on engaging faculty in technology transfer is uncommon among universities.

"One of the biggest challenges to efficient technology transfer is the nature of academia," he said.

"It's a very conservative profession, and promotion and tenure guidelines haven't changed much. You should be rewarded for patenting, starting a company or working toward commercialization of your innovations.

"ASU has one of the most sophisticated and well-developed innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems in any university in the world. ASU originally focused on patenting and licensing, and now it's become much more about entrepreneurship and trying to help startups emerge and grow."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Professor Donald Siegel, former director of the School of Public Affairs and co-executive director of the Global Center for Technology Transfer at ASU, has been named a Regents Professor. Photo by Charlie Leight