

# Larta Institute: Binding the Elements of Biomedical Success



**Rohit K. Shukla**

Rohit K. Shukla, Larta Institute's chief executive officer, has worked in the high technology industry since 1983, first as an entrepreneur and founder of a database and communications solutions and devices company and, later, as the executive director of The Presidents' Roundtable, a mentor group of CEOs from defense and aerospace companies throughout the United States. Prior to founding Larta in 1993, Shukla served as director of aerospace and high technology business at the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation. Shukla holds a master's degree in social and political sciences from Cambridge University and a master's degree in communications arts from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.



**Carlos E. Gutierrez**

Carlos E. Gutierrez is the Chief Strategy Officer at Larta Institute, overseeing all aspects of the organization's strategic focus and business development efforts with clients, including U.S. federal agencies, universities, industry partners, and regional economies around the world. Prior to joining Larta, Gutierrez served on the management team of FirstLook.com, an Idealab company and venture-backed startup.

Larta Institute is a leading "innovation hub" and commercialization services firm based in Los Angeles and working globally to improve the transition of scientific and technological breakthroughs from the laboratory to the marketplace. The institute offers a range of services for states, government agencies, and regional partners in innovation policy and consultation, technology and commercial assessments, and hands-on commercialization programs with entrepreneurs under sponsored client programs.

## Q. How did Larta Institute get started?

A. With the downsizing of California aerospace industry in the early 1990s,

and the consequent job losses and loss of talent, we were convinced that there was a role for an organizational infrastructure to bring California's diverse talents to bear on behalf of emerging entrepreneurs—to mentor them and to nurture their ideas with market-oriented practices. We helped to write legislation that received bipartisan support for a wide-ranging private-public partnership to build entrepreneurial companies in a challenging environment. The motivation was simple: the desire to corral bright innovations and to let no innovation go undiscovered.

As a key participant in CalTIP (California Technology Innovation Program), Larta Institute served as the State of California's commercialization

agent in the vast six-county Southern California geography (including Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Santa Barbara counties). In that capacity, Larta identified and nurtured hundreds of early-stage life science and high technology companies that were recipients of state grants. In addition, Larta Institute offered a well-regarded entrepreneurial training platform, which came to be known as Larta University (and which the Wall Street Journal referred to as a "mini MBA for entrepreneurs").

Keen to establish the primacy of California's position at the center of innovation, the organization also established links with global locations interested in partnering with

entrepreneurs in California, including Finland (biotech and medical devices), Sweden (biotech and information technology) and many countries in Asia. The partially state-funded program ended in 2002. Since that time, we've expanded our core commercialization work to include national and international client partners.

## Q. What does Larta Institute mean by the term "innovation hub"?

A. We saw the concept of the hub as a good visual image to describe our role and value proposition to entrepreneurs and entities that support innovation programs. In short, it means that Larta has a unique access and relationships to connect the various parts of the innovation ecosystem—capital providers, industry, government, professional services, academia, and private enterprise—for our client partners. It is driven by transactional need, to service specific innovations that we address through our various client engagements. All of our programs incorporate elements that engage entrepreneurs to the spokes of the hub. We surround ourselves with some of the best subject matter and domain experts in the world who coach and mentor companies in our programs, working through a system and a methodology we have honed over 15 years.

Among our activities, we have sought out and partnered with Fortune 1000 firms that are seeking disruptive technologies and solutions to some of their toughest customer challenges. We also convene a national commercialization training workshop in Los Angeles every year for National Institutes of Health (NIH) grantees, bringing entrepreneurs, industry professionals and advisors from around the country to the region, and invite local experts to participate as well. We also hold "feedback sessions" for the entrepreneurs in the program in Los Angeles every year, and seek to introduce them to potential partners in the region.

## Q. What do you see as the key components of Larta's successful technology transfer agreements?

A. Given the shifting landscapes, diverse motivations, and incentives that are in place for the various players, it would be somewhat foolhardy for us to pretend that we can structure technology transfer agreements. So, in fact, Larta itself does not structure such agreements. However, we have designed and launched initiatives to help support university technology transfer efforts to address some of the gaps and focus areas that prevent more robust technology transfer activity.

The important principle we have been exploring for many years (and to be frank, this is a difficult problem to solve) is fostering collaboration between technology transfer offices and to pool their intellectual property (IP). Such pooled IP would be focused on specific industry needs, where the sum of the parts is of greater benefit to industry buyers than the individual pieces of IP. After many years of such explorations, in partnership with the Kauffman Foundation and Southern California Edison, we have now established a program with Loma Linda University with support from the National Science Foundation focused on bringing stronger industry inputs and needs requirements to researchers, so they can better orient their work early on to meet real-world technical challenges and address market segments of keen interest to those same large companies.

## Q. What attributes of the Los Angeles region have made it a significant biomedical cluster?

A. One of the best assets of the greater Southern California region is the array of intellectual assets spread throughout its large geography: a world-class collection of research institutes and universities like City of Hope; Cedars-Sinai; the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Southern California; and the California Institute of Technology. We have been privileged to work with all of them, and with entrepreneurs, investors and industry in this extraordinary region.

The region is not accepted widely as a center of innovation, in part because it suffers from the tyranny of size. So-called "clusters" are said to flourish in relatively small geographical areas. However, we believe that given the wide distribution of technology, of ideas, of talent and of money in the global economy, the size of the greater Los Angeles region is actually a proxy for the way things are, and will be. In short, the biomedical and biotech attributes of the region should be seen as an embarrassment of riches, and given its outward-facing orientation, it will continue to be a hub of economically productive, profitable activity, even as the center of gravity moves to Asia.

## Q. Is there anything you would like to share with California legislators and policymakers?

A. In order to maintain a commitment to higher standards of living, greater engagement with the world (via talent, money, brainpower and commerce), more stable revenues less dependent on the vagaries of capital gains, find the money, float a bond, stake your reputation as the center of gravity in the world of innovation. Most importantly, build a program that touches on maintaining a commitment to science, to both research and to commercialization, an integrated program of skills training, entrepreneurial development and incentives to attract, retain and grow our dynamic industry. It's not just about jobs, it's about high-value jobs.

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**Rohit K. Shukla, CEO,  
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