How Do I Keep My Tenure While Launching a Startup?

A real-world guide to balancing academia and entrepreneurship

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You've put in the work—years of research, publishing, teaching, and climbing the academic ladder. You've earned your tenure (or you're on track), and now you're ready to take your ideas beyond the lab or classroom and into the market.

But here's the big question:
Can you build a startup *and* keep your tenured position at UVA?

The short answer: **Yes.**
The long answer: You'll need to navigate a few key university policies to make it work.

Let's break down what you need to know.

First Things First: You're Playing by a Different Set of Rules

As a faculty member at UVA, you're not just a researcher or educator—you're considered a **public official** under Virginia law. That means the standards for how you handle conflicts of interest are *way* stricter than they are in the private sector.

UVA has several core policies you'll need to be familiar with:

- **PROV-007** – Conflicts of Interest for Faculty
- **PRM-011** – Use of Time, Equipment, and University Resources
- **RES-005** – Financial Conflicts in Research
- **BEH-002** – Health System Conflicts (if you're in the medical school or hospital system)

Think of these as your **playbook**. If you stick to it, you can have both your startup and your tenure. If you ignore it... well, you could be risking both.

Six Types of Conflicts You'll Want to Keep on Your Radar

PROV-007 outlines six areas where things can get messy if you're not careful. Here's a quick overview:

1. Family Conflicts: Keep Work and Family Separate

You can't be in a position of authority over a family member at UVA.
Example: If your spouse works at UVA and your startup wants to collaborate with the university, that's something you *must* disclose and manage carefully.

2. Professional Conflicts: Keep Your Judgment Clean

If you're in a position to make decisions that could impact your startup—or your colleagues who might compete with you—you should recuse yourself.
Golden rule: When in doubt, step back.

3. Financial Conflicts: The State Is Watching

Virginia law is strict about public officials benefiting from government contracts.
If your company wants to do business with UVA (like via SBIR/STTR grants), you'll need a **formal COI plan** in place. UVA can help you work through it, but don't wing it. This plan will be laid out in detail during COI management negotiation with UVA. This topic is covered in depth by **RES-005**.

4. Research Conflicts: Keep Your Science Clean

If your research overlaps with your business, make sure there's a clear boundary.
Disclose any potential overlaps to your department, students, and co-authors. And be upfront in publications and proposals.

5. University Resources: Not Even a Laptop

Under **PRM-011**, you're not allowed to use *any* UVA resources—time, computers, office space—for your business.
Unless specifically approved, it's 100% separation. Your startup happens after hours, with your own gear.

(There are some narrow exceptions for SEAS faculty or if you get explicit approval from leadership.)

6. This Is Serious

Violating these rules can mean **civil or criminal penalties**, and tenure won't save you from that. So yeah—it's real. But manageable.

Want Peace of Mind? Create a "Separation Strategy"

The easiest way to stay out of trouble? Keep a clear line between your UVA work and your startup life.

Here's how:

- **Time:** Do your startup work outside university hours.
- **Resources:** Use your own laptop, internet, office space, and software.
- **Decisions:** Don't weigh in on UVA decisions that could affect your company.
- **Students:** If students help with your business, document everything, and make sure their academic and commercial work is clearly separated.

If You're in the Health System, Read This Twice

Medical faculty have even tighter rules under **BEH-002**. Since your work involves patient care, the standards are higher.

Some key points:

- **No perks from your own company** tied to your clinical role
- **Consulting agreements** must be time-limited and approved ahead of time
- **If your research involves human subjects** and you have a financial interest in the company, you may not be allowed to participate without special approval

Basically: extra eyes are on you, and rightfully so. Plan accordingly.

Your Step-by-Step Game Plan

Here's how to approach this without stepping on a landmine:

Step 1: Talk to Your Department Chair

Before doing anything, have a chat. They'll help you understand what's possible and what needs to be cleared in advance. (If *you're* the chair, talk to your dean.)

Step 2: Map Out Your Situation

Get in touch with these offices, depending on what you're planning:

- **Provost's Office** – For general faculty conflicts
- **VP for Research** – For research-related issues
- **UVA Licensing & Ventures Group** – For commercialization

- **Procurement** – For financial conflict questions
- **University Counsel** – For complex legal questions and formal agreements

Step 3: Fill Out the Paperwork

Yep, there's paperwork. You'll likely need to submit:

- Annual **Statement of Economic Interest (SOEI)**
- Research-related disclosures
- Faculty-specific conflict disclosures
- Outside activity approval forms

Step 4: Build a Conflict Management Plan

This might include:

- Recusal plans
- Disclosure procedures
- Oversight committees
- Notices for students and collaborators

The university will help you draft this.

Step 5: Keep Everything Up to Date

Disclose any changes within **30 days**. Re-file your forms annually (through the University's On-Line Disclosure System)
Document everything—emails, approvals, time logs, equipment use, etc. That paper trail can save you down the line.

The Big Picture: It *Is* Doable

Launching a startup while keeping your academic position is totally possible at UVA—but you've got to play by the rules.

It helps to think of the policies not as roadblocks, but as a **safety net**—they're here to protect your academic freedom, your research integrity, and the university's mission.

If you're transparent, proactive, and organized, you can absolutely thrive in both worlds.

Key takeaway: Your startup and your tenure *don't* have to be at odds. Just manage the boundaries like a pro.

Ready to Get Started?

Here's your immediate action list:

✅ Schedule a meeting with your department chair
✅ Read up on PROV-007, PRM-011, and (if applicable) BEH-002
✅ Reach out to the right university offices
✅ Set up separation between your UVA role and your startup
✅ Start the disclosure process *before* taking business actions

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UVA has supported *plenty* of successful faculty entrepreneurs. With the right approach, there's no reason you can't be next.

And if you ever have questions? Reach out to **Ask_RCOI@virginia.edu** — they're there to help.