



Office of the  
Vice Provost  
for Research  
and Advanced  
Studies

Office of  
Biotechnology

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# What Authority Does “Your” Signature Have?

*All documents that obligate Iowa State University personnel, facilities, intellectual property, or other resources require signatures—some more than others. What do the various signatures represent?*

## The Authorized Signature

All documents that obligate Iowa State University personnel, facilities, intellectual property, or other resources in *any* way require an *authorized* ISU signature. This signature assures that appropriate policies, procedures, and legal requirements have been addressed. ISU faculty and staff members are *not considered* an authorized signature for contracts, grants, material transfer agreements, confidentiality agreements, or any other document that legally binds ISU.

For sponsored agreements, intellectual property management, and other collaborative arrangements, there are designated ISU signatories who are responsible for compliance. Thane Peterson, Director of the Office of Sponsored Programs Administration (OSPA), is the designated signatory for documents related to externally funded projects and other collaborative arrangements, such as confidentiality and material transfer agreements. Ken Kirkland, Director of the ISU Research Foundation (ISURF), is the designated signatory for documents related to intellectual property disclosed to that office, such as confidentiality, material transfer, research, and license agreements.

Some agreements are complex enough to require authorized signatures from both OSPA and ISURF. The two offices work together on these agreements.

## The Principal Investigator’s Signature

In addition to the authorized signature, it is appropriate to have the Principal Investigator (PI) sign agreements. The PI’s signature provides an acknowledgement that the PI has accepted the terms and conditions of the agreement and approves the scope of work. The terms and conditions include the terms of confidentiality, material transfer, reporting obligations, payment structures, etc.

## Additional Signatures

For some agreements, even more signatures are required. Department and college procedures govern whether the deans, directors, and/or department chairs also sign the agreements. Procedures differ greatly among colleges and departments. These offices should be consulted to determine the appropriate signatures.

## The Sponsor’s Signature

The Sponsor will also have an authorized signatory for the agreement. Usually, the authorized signatory is *not* the technical contact for the agreement.

## Consequences Of Inappropriately Signed Documents

The most common error in executing documents is not obtaining the authorized signature. It is *very* important to remember that ISU faculty and staff are not the only signatures necessary for a legally valid document that binds ISU. Documents executed without an ISU authorized signature may not be legally binding, or may make the individual who signed it *personally* liable (instead of the university). In addition, there may be unfavorable terms in the agreement that can lead to consequences such as loss of intellectual property rights, ability to publish, and ability to continue research. Additionally, this can cause damage to the relationship between ISU and the third party and lead to an uncomfortable situation for everyone involved.

Confidentiality agreements are the most frequently executed document without a proper authorized ISU signature. In the event that you are asked to sign a document, please forward it to OSPA for review. If this occurs last minute, it is recommended that no confidential information be disclosed and no work be performed until an agreement can be executed or you have contacted either Thane Peterson or Lisa Lorenzen. They will work with you to protect your interests.

If you have any questions, about this tip sheet or working with industry, please contact: Lisa Lorenzen, Director of Industry Relations & Biotechnology Liaison, (515) 294-0926, [llorenze@iastate.edu](mailto:llorenze@iastate.edu)

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