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New UW-Madison startup census seeks community input

From educational software to embryonic stem cells, UW-Madison faculty, students and staff are well-known for creating new knowledge and businesses – and an ongoing count of university-related startups bears that out.

The campus-based project is soliciting university colleagues and experts across Wisconsin to contribute to refining and building the list of business start-ups – now numbered at more than 250 – founded by university faculty, students and staff.

"UW-Madison start-ups create artistic visions and help solve day-to-day hassles. Of course, the university continues to encourage the creation of businesses related to new technologies created by UW-Madison faculty, staff and students. High visibility university-linked firms include Promega, Third Wave and TomoTherapy – all of which contribute to health and society as well as to the creation of knowledge-based jobs," says Anne Miner, a business professor and director of the Initiative for Studies in Transformational Entrepreneurship (INSITE).

Miner and INSITE associate director John Surdyk have worked with a doctoral research team to build the census and welcome suggestions about additional firms that may have sprung from work at the university or better data on the firm that are listed.

The new Web site features a visualization of firms created during the past four decades and beyond. The Web site lists more than 250 direct startups – firms launched by university faculty, staff and students within a year of their formal UW-Madison affiliation and/or created around university technology. It also pilots a new list of indirect start-ups created by students, faculty or staff who are no longer formally affiliated with UW-Madison.

Graphics and lists on the Web site reveal interesting statistics discovered about UW-Madison startups, including:

- * Student-founded startups represent an important source of startups, with more than 90 student-directed startups listed. Due to the challenges in identifying such firms, researchers predict this number may be understated.

- * Some startups generate families of new firms themselves, or genealogies of startups that arise from direct UW-Madison startups. The graphic history

indicates more than 35 potential members of such families. The research team expects to confirm more firms through work in progress.

Recent start-ups include a Web site to find local slang terms and resources for travelers, and an artistic apparel firm with Wisconsin themes. New tech firms will tackle biomarkers for use in drug testing and human health, and apply organo-silicon compounds and nanotechnology to build key energy storage devices.

"The historical breadth of the startup companies included in the census underscores the university's role in nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit and helping to create lasting value in Wisconsin communities," says Wisconsin School of Business Dean Michael Knetter, who serves as special assistant to the chancellor on long-term strategy and development and is lead dean for INSITE.

In the last two years, faculty and staff members have founded about five new firms, while known student startups include another 25, according to Miner.

"At UW-Madison, we make a practice of encouraging students to deepen their abilities to identify opportunities and make them real in all domains, including their academic programs and nonprofits, not just the creation of new businesses," says Miner.

Student-led startups show wide variety, ranging from personal finance software products and a device that allows farmers to precisely monitor chemicals to more recent efforts to create "greener" vending machines or design creative T-shirts that reflect Wisconsin values.

The Web site's current data reconcile records from more than 12 independent databases and ongoing consultation with campus officials, faculty, staff, students and business leaders. It builds on important work by Philip Sobocinski and the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) but is not restricted to technology links or to formal licensing ties.

Support for recent activity on the census comes from UW-Madison's Office of Corporate Relations, led by Charles Hoslet.

INSITE also co-leads the Wisconsin Entrepreneurial Bootcamp (WEB), an experimental summer program for UW-Madison graduate students in the physical and life sciences, and it spearheads both the G. Steven Burrill Business Plan Competition and the new freshman entrepreneurship learning community. INSITE faculty create seminars, conferences and courses in the Law School, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, School of Human Ecology and the Wisconsin School of Business.

In separate work under way, INSITE researchers are seeking additional data on a subsample of local firms concerning growth and long-term outcomes.

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