Article published Mar 14, 2007

UNCG, N.C. A&T convert research into businesses

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GREENSBORO — John W. Allen has spent about 15 years studying Protein V, but the molecular biologist at N.C. A&T never really considered the potential of his research beyond the laboratory.

"I had always been headed toward academia," Allen said. "We tend to think about asking questions and figuring out ways to answer them."

That's where the university's Office of Outreach and Technology Transfer entered the picture. Allen presented his findings; the technology transfer office helped identify ways the research could be pursued as a business enterprise.

Provagen, a biotechnology firm that will produce and market the protein for medical research, is the result. It's the university's first spin off company.

A&T and UNCG both ventured into technology transfer at the beginning of the decade, trying to find ways to use scholarly research as a driver for economic development and to provide revenue for the schools and their inventors. Although the programs are still in their infancy, both schools have experienced steady growth.

UNCG, which created its first spin off company in 2002, recently announced its fourth startup company, Prevention Strategies.

The company, whose president and principal developer is UNCG assistant professor David Wyrick , produces a web-based alcohol abuse prevention course called College Alc. The course is already being used by nine colleges and universities as well as the UNCG athletic department. Now the NCAA is considering College Alc for use in member schools' athletic programs.
The new comp
any is an example of how scholarly innovation can be leveraged into economic growth and the generation of wealth, said Jerry McGuire , the director of UNCG's Office of Technology Transfer.

"It's not like this company will become the next Dell," McGuire said, "but 20 to 30 jobs over the next two to three years is not far-fetched at all."
"There's only one or two Dells. You need a whole lot of things around it to build an infrastructure," he added.

Building a profitable invention portfolio takes time, patience and a focus on leveraging an institution's strengths, said McGuire and Doug Speight , the director of A&T's Office of Outreach and Technology Transfer.

The lion's share of revenue at A&T comes from food safety and food science research, which produces

about 80 percent of the university's licensing revenue, Speight said. Other key areas are nanoscience, information technology and aerospace technology.

UNCG has had success translating educational research into businesses and also has strong points in nanoscience, information technology, social sciences and the arts.

Neither school is making a profit from its investment portfolios yet. The expectation of a quick return is a common misconception, Speight said.

"Actually you're making very long investments in intellectual property portfolio before you ever see the first dollar, much less a profit," he said.

But over time, technology transfer pays off because institutions are able to build a cadre of businesses around an area of research, McGuire said, using California's Silicon Valley as an example.

Time also allows for a region to build a reputation, Speight said.

"The greater the number of technology-based companies within a certain locale, the higher that raises your visibility, so it draws more investment capital to that region," he said.

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