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INNOVATION

Research emphasis paying off in patents at URI



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN McDONALD

WALTER BESIO, URI engineering professor, who is launching CREMedical Corp., attaches electrodes to the scalp of Ph.D. candidate Xiang Lin.

By Rebecca Keister
PBN Staff Writer

Posted 3/18/13

Who couldn't use a little extra motivation to get moving?

Patricia Burbank, a nursing professor at the University of Rhode Island, sure thought her elderly aunt, who lives independently, would benefit from having a reminder to exercise that also would relay warm messages that would allow the woman to feel loved.

The result was AAGILE, a small device worn at a person's waist to monitor and analyze when that person is being physically active. Oral messages are given to the person at set times and when they are being inactive. Burbank came up with the idea about five years ago and now, thanks largely to resources at URI, including a collaboration with engineering professor Ying Sun, she's formed Burbank Industries in order to apply for a Small Business Technology Transfer research grant to produce more prototypes and hopefully bring the device into the marketplace.

"[URI has been] absolutely critical [to this]. We would not have been able to do a patent application [otherwise]. URI did that for us," Burbank said.

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Burbank Industries and AAGILE equal one of a record 22 United States patents received by URI faculty in 2011 and 2012, up from 25 patents received for the prior five years total.

Faculty also received two U.S. trademarks and filed 46 U.S. intellectual property applications.

The university's research and commercialization staff say the increase can be, at least partially, attributed to a 40 percent increase in research funding over the last six years.

"We're bringing in faculty [who] focus on research. We have two new research facilities that provide much more laboratory space and cutting-edge technologies," said Peter Alfonso, URI vice president for research and economic development. "We've made a lot of changes by elevating the focus on research in ways the institution has not had before."

For fiscal 2012 the university received a total of \$98.3 million in research awards, meaning grants and contracts.

It has averaged \$100 million in research grants over the past three years. In fiscal 2012, the university expended \$100.3 million for research.

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Comparatively, Brown University, which long has had a reputation as Providence's premier research institution, received \$166.7 million in awards in year 2012 and expended \$178.9 million. Those numbers are up from fiscal 2007, when the school received \$134.1 million and expended \$133.9 million, respectively, representing about a 24 percent increase in research funding over the last five years.

URI in late January held its inaugural Intellectual Property Awards Recognition ceremony, which it plans to hold annually, to celebrate the partnership between the URI Research Foundation and the school to commercialize inventions and innovations from faculty, staff and students.

Three faculty members, including Burbank, were recognized for their work.

Another was engineering professor Walt Besio, who has launched CREMedical, a medical-device company. Besio has been working since 1995, during research for his doctoral thesis, on refining an electrode system that monitors brainwave activity and could be used to detect life-threatening events and possibly to stop acute seizures.



In October 2011 Besio was one of the inaugural recipients of the National Science Foundation Innovation-Corps awards, which led him, through a Stanford University class

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taught by experienced entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley, to realize the product's commercial market value.

Jim Petell, the university's associate vice president for intellectual property, served as Besio's I-Corps mentor.

Petell works with URI faculty, students and staff who have intellectual property to assess the invention's potential value and, as a registered patent agent, guides them through the patent-application process and files on their behalf.

As executive director of the URI Research Foundation, he works with intellectual-property owners to move that property into the foundation to create companies that will allow company owners to receive research funding.

Petell came to URI in April 2011 and began looking at how the university's research operation was managed. Alfonso said at that point, the university had been stuck at receiving about \$65 million in annual research funding for the previous decade.

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URI created the division of research and economic development, reorganized its administration, rewrote its intellectual-property policy and began emphasizing research-focused staff in its hiring decisions.

The university also worked, Alfonso said, to “more tightly couple” itself to federal agencies and departments that fund research and to the Rhode Island congressional delegation.

These combined efforts, Petell said, have resulted in increased research funding and a higher-profile research reputation.

“As the university becomes more known for doing this, you tend to attract other people,” Petell said. “I think it’s been really under-recognized how much the University of Rhode Island is generating and how good the inventions are.”

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The January ceremony also recognized engineering professor Qing Yang, who formed VeloBit Inc., with business partner Duncan McCallum, to develop low-cost software to improve electronic storage.

The technology already is in use at 370 installations across five continents. The company so far has raised more than \$5 million in venture capital and has hired 15 people.

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Petell said there are three or four other companies the university is working on and that there is lots more talent in the pipeline, including a student who came up with an application to use a disposable syringe that would control fluid delivery more accurately and that potentially cut the cost of existing models from thousands to hundreds of dollars.

Petell said he feels there will be a time when it will be “critical” for the university to build a research facility to house these companies so that they, as startups, won’t be faced with unmanageable overhead.

“You have to develop a game plan where you are working with them to find resources and investment capital. I think it’s a great opportunity for Rhode Island to have,” Petell said. •

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