IPROs & Intellectual Property

The Situation

IPRO 399 has come to a successful end and received high marks from both the presentation and exhibit judges on IPRO day. The goal of the IPRO was to come up with a set of recommendations for how commercial office buildings could conserve water. While half of the team focused on methods for getting individuals to use less water, your group was in charge of testing a number of existing methods for the collecting of rain and waste water for irrigation purposes. Using computer simulations and models your group built, your group came up with a strong set of design recommendations for architects to consider. During the semester, you and two of your friends had also spent some time outside of class sketching out an idea for a radical new roof design for commercial buildings that may potentially allow a building to collect 40% more rain water than any other design your IPRO had tested. With the permission of your faculty advisor, you and your friends tested your design using IIT-owned software, and the results seemed promising. A model of your design was displayed as part of the IPRO 399 exhibit, and it drew interest from a number of judges, one of whom urged you to continue working on the design, even after the IPRO had finished.

The spring semester has now passed and you and one of your friends from IPRO 323 who worked with you on the design are enjoying a lazy evening after finals discussing your future plans. The two of you are going to be graduating in a few weeks, and you begin talking about that office roof design…what is that chance that you might be able to patent it? The judge who was interested in your design had given you his card all those months ago, should you contact him? And if by some long-shot chance you do have a patentable idea, what should your next steps be?

Questions to Consider:
1. What makes an idea patentable?
2. What should you do about your friend who is not graduating, but who participated in coming up with the design?
3. How do patents help or hinder innovation? How does openness in research help or hinder innovation?
4. What are the ethical uses that students can make of ideas developed through IPROs? What are some of the constraints that do (or should) exist on how students use ideas developed in the IPRO experience?
5. What about this scenario might change if your IPRO had a company sponsoring your research?
6. What responsibilities do students have to IPRO faculty advisors, fellow students, and corporate sponsors when pursuing ideas developed in IPROs?