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Inventors of the Year

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They were administrators, not scientists. They were university people, not business people. Becoming inventors was the furthest thought from their minds.

And yet, a small team of current and former university administrators has become Virginia Commonwealth University's Inventors of the Year for 2009, collecting the prestigious "Billy R. Martin Innovation Award."



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In the process, they gave birth to a thriving business that has returned profits for both themselves and for the university. Their invention, an assessment and planning system called WEAVEOnline, also has made far less burdensome the once-onerous task of preparing for accreditation.

More than 130 colleges, universities and other institutions now employ the assessment system that was first developed and refined at VCU, and then commercialized through VCU Tech Transfer. Centrieva Corporation, which was formed in 2006 to exclusively market, license and further develop WEAVEOnline, hopes to add 40 to 50 institutions annually in the years ahead.

Jean Yerian, VCU's former director of assessment, said WEAVEOnline came into being for the same reason that has driven innovators for time immemorial – "Necessity."

It was 2001, and VCU was preparing for reaffirmation of accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Massive amounts of information needed to be pulled together, quickly.

Yerian had been on a yearlong leave of absence from VCU for an assignment in the United Arab Emirates, but returned in time to help with the accreditation effort.

She and other current and former VCU administrators began experimenting with ways to streamline the process. First, they put a word document on the Web that people could fill out and e-mail back.

Then, the team moved to a Web application rather than a Web form, and a database behind that. WEAVEOnline began taking shape.

Before WEAVEOnline, assessment management often involved burrowing through stacks of records in closets and file cabinets. That's what the VCU assessment team faced a decade ago.

It was a sure formula for frayed nerves and rising anxiety.

With the sophisticated software and programming that WEAVEOnline provides, assessment has evolved into a more convenient, more transparent process without all the closets and file cabinets, and without quite so much stress.

Among the questions involved in assessment, Yerian said, are, "What? So What? And then, Now What?" WEAVEOnline harnesses the information on the Internet that yields answers to those questions.

"I think people would say the process is easier, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Yerian said with a laugh.

She noted that people who hated assessment still have not warmed to it, no matter how much more convenient WEAVEOnline has made it for them.

"Others have seen a light bulb come on and say, 'Now, I can tell my story. There are people who literally have 'a-ha' moments when looking at what they have put into WEAVE,'" Yerian said.

The system offers real-time reporting options, shows linkages to institutional priorities and strategic plans and seamlessly tracks their implementation.

And critically, during a period of austerity in higher education, the system monitors the cost of program improvements.

Yerian left VCU to become Centrieva's vice president of assessment and development.

But others on the original WEAVEonline team stayed with the university, including Jim Yucha, VCU's director of Web Services.

Yerian emphasized that every member of the original WEAVEonline team played key roles in its development, and has shared in the proceeds from its commercialization.

Yucha said his role was to interpret the ideas of assessment team into a coherent Web application, with Donghai Huangfu, an application analyst for Web support, writing most of the coding. Donna Jovanovich, who first set the project in motion, and Kristine Downing also were original members of WEAVEonline.

"We essentially took a laborious task and automated it to a point that it was not so laborious," Yucha said.

Susan Weiner, Centrieva's president and chief financial officer, said the company will be adding to WEAVEonline's core product.

"We'll have specific modules for engineering, nursing, pharmacy accreditation. We're also looking outside education," she remarked.

Ivelina Metcheva, director of VCU Tech Transfer, believes that the success of the WEAVEonline team demonstrates that good ideas leading to invention can come from any point on the VCU campuses, and from any person.

"We celebrate and promote entrepreneurship throughout the university," Metcheva said.

Since Tech Transfer's inception 15 years ago, the office has generated \$13 million in gross licensing revenues, with more than half of that, \$7.1 million, coming during the past four years as its mission has become better known within the university.

Since fiscal year 2005-06, VCU inventors have received \$2.1 million in royalties, with \$286,000 going to various schools and departments at VCU.

But the spirit of entrepreneurship that thrives at the university goes far beyond monetary rewards.

"These inventions are contributing to making the world safer, happier and healthier, in profound ways," Metcheva said.

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