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## **VCU software evolves into commercial concern**

TECH BUZZ

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Sunday, October 1, 2006

Technology companies have a knack for finding ways to improve upon otherwise arduous or pricey procedures.

Apparently, so does Virginia Commonwealth University.

But a VCU researcher didn't make one of the school's latest discoveries.

"This is a case where a bunch of just regular folks invented a product and a viable business in the course of their everyday jobs," said Tom Blue, co-founder of Centrieva Corp. "It's genuine ingenuity on the part of the staff as opposed to research dollars."

Henrico County-based Centrieva is marketing and selling a Web-based software born out of VCU. The product helps make the normally lengthy academic-assessment process go by much easier.

Assessment is the continuous practice of a school tracking its academic programs, exams, grading scales and other data to make sure students are educated to the school's full ability.

Once that information is collected, the school can enhance or improve its academic programs, said Jean M. Yerian, VCU director of assessments.

Keeping track of all this educational data has typically involved a lot of paper, people-hours and money.

In 2001, Yerian and a group at VCU started developing Internet-based software to help the university's faculty and staff across all academic departments "get out from this mound of paper," as she puts it.

The product, WEAVEonline, was meant for internal use only.

VCU implemented the software in 2004 when it came time to go through its accreditation, or a regular academic quality review from an outside agency.

The massive amounts of educational data needed for accreditation is put onto WEAVEonline, where it then can be extracted by the agency for evaluation.

Yerian began talking about the product to others outside the school. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill got wind of WEAVE, and VCU granted it the first subscription for the product in fall 2004.

"Literally, the next thing you know, within a matter of months it had 20 subscribers to it," Centrieva's Blue said.

To name a few: Georgia State, Kent State and Old Dominion universities, and UNC-Greensboro.

But VCU wasn't built to serve other schools and realized the product could be put to better use in the hands of entrepreneurs, said Ivelina Metcheva, director of the VCU Office of Technology Transfer.

The office, set up for VCU researchers to help them turn inventions into commercial products or services, searched for business backers in 2005 before finding Blue and business associate James Farrelly, who would become CEO.

"We concluded that VCU had spontaneously created a legitimate, high-potential business," Blue said.

"What Centrieva is doing for us is being able to put resources into development and support that were beyond what VCU could do," said Yerian, who also holds a position at the firm. "This is now the focus of this business as opposed to being a small thing within a large university."

The company, which has nine employees, has signed 31 schools to the service.

It also has piqued the interest of early-stage investors, those involved say.

Blue is keeping an eye on Centrieva's closest competitor, Nuventive, which makes a similar product. He is also trying to sell WEAVEonline to schools that are in the middle of developing comparable assessment software.

The made-up name Centrieva "is intended to suggest the centralization and retrieval of information," Blue said.

The university remains an active partner in the firm and has given assurances to users that WEAVEonline will remain operational should 5-month-old Centrieva fail.

"It is a startup," Metcheva said. "It's a very important part of the deal, because the invention is so much associated with VCU."

However, "I think it's a very good example of good industry and university collaboration," she said. "For us, it's a poster child and an example of how to go about spinning off companies in the future."

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