Breeding grounds for entrepreneurship

By Union-Tribune

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The Zuckerberg syndrome has spread. Young, brilliant scientists are not patiently waiting until they graduate to get a job or start a company. Instead, they are using college and graduate school as an incubator, and innovation is the result.

While he was working toward his doctorate in computer science at University of California San Diego, Kian Wi Ong had an idea that he thought had commercial potential, so he entered a contest at UC San Diego to try to win a $50,000 grant. “Mary Zoeller, our adviser from the von Liebig Center, gave us invaluable pointers as were preparing and helped us hone the presentation to deliver a clear value proposition for our ideas and technology,” Ong said.

The result: Ong and his team won a $50,000 seed funding award from the von Liebig Entrepreneurism Center at UC San Diego’s Jacobs School of Engineering. They went on to form App2you, which has raised subsequent capital from angel investors and Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants. Their product enables IT departments to rapidly create and evolve custom database-driven Web applications.

Innovation is the engine of the economy, and UC San Diego is turbocharging the RPMs. That’s why the von Liebig Entrepreneurism Center was formed 10 years ago in the Jacobs School of Engineering. The center offers classes, mentorship and grants to all graduate students at UC San Diego, and it also has collaborations with other universities in the region. It has a satellite office at Scripps Institution of Oceanography and works closely with the UC San Diego Medical School and the Rady School of Management.

“Our major accomplishment of the last 10 years is changing the culture and mindset so that faculty and students think about commercialization and entrepreneurship,” said Rosbel Ochoa, executive director of von Liebig. “In the beginning, faculty and students were reluctant to go beyond basic research and engage in technology transfer.”

Here are some data: More than 1,000 students have taken von Liebig courses (many of them hoping to commercialize their research and/or start companies), more than 30 students have received grants and 32 companies have been created so far. Two companies — Mushroom Networks and Photometria — have won CONNECT’s Most Innovative New Products Awards.

Over the next three to five years, Ochoa’s ambitious plans include the establishment of a technology accelerator for undergraduate students, becoming a more fully integrated part of the technology transfer process, and helping to facilitate an externally managed venture fund that will provide capital to von Liebig participants. This money is essential. We have written a lot about the lack of capital in San Diego. Establishing a venture fund that is closely aligned with von Liebig could catalyze innovation more quickly.

We teach a class in entrepreneurship at von Liebig, and we can tell you that the students are brilliant and passionate. They are thinking big, and their research can create high-paying jobs for the region’s future.

“Because Steve Bennett (a Scripps researcher) had gone through the process to get a grant helped ferret out his idea, and this was another level of assurance of the potential,” said John Pleven, now CEO of EarthRisk Technologies, the company that he formed with Bennett, who is the president and chief science and products officer. EarthRisk is a software company that provides software for analysts who link weather to business decisions such as energy resource planning and commodity investments.

Von Liebig operates with an annual budget of about $1 million, about 10 percent of which comes from the Jacobs School and the balance from grants and donations. Von Liebig today is a shining example of how a small amount of seed money can be leveraged and exponentially increase value and jobs. They are an outstanding steward of the money. Imagine if they had more.

Neil Senturia and Barbara Bry, serial entrepreneurs who invest in early-stage technology companies, write this weekly column about entrepreneurship in San Diego. Please email ideas to Barbara at bbry@blackbirdv.com

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