

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI

THE FINE ART OF CREATING WEALTH

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and flourishing at an OU center where commercializing technology can strengthen Oklahoma's economy.



Photo provided

Students hone problem-solving skills in a group setting during an icebreaker at CCEW boot camp. Exercises like this are designed to get interns more comfortable with their peers while working toward a common goal.

The career course Blake Trippet charted for himself went pretty much like this: Earn a business degree at the University of Oklahoma, then join a Fortune 500 company. He would work hard, climb the corporate ladder and maybe someday ascend to an executive position. His life would be comfortable, his future pretty much assured. By the time he finished his junior year at OU, however, that plan had been turned on its head.

continued



Lynette Lobban

Oklahoma City entrepreneur Gene Rainbolt goes over a business plan with CCEW interns Tobin Olusola and Yunfei Li. The chairman of the board of BancFirst Corp. is a regular contributor to the program, which he helped found with the belief that commercializing technology is critical to the state's success.

What happened? Trippet experienced the thrill of entrepreneurship and technology commercialization at OU's Center for the Creation of Economic Wealth. Now, he says, after he graduates in May, he hopes to work at a start-up company.

Established in 2006, CCEW provides an interdisciplinary environment for researchers, entrepreneurs and students to

and mentors, the experience was heady and satisfying.

"As students, we are used to being talked *to*, but in this environment we really are able to contribute," Trippet says. "Honestly, CCEW has been the best thing I've done during my time at the University."

That is music to the ears of Daniel

appreciation for and understanding of science and technology, but they also acquire the capacity to link technical promise to business opportunity," Pullin says. "CCEW is a place for anyone with a kernel of the entrepreneurial spirit. Here, we embrace and nurture that spirit and provide the opportunity for it to prosper."

One of CCEW's founders, H.E. "Gene" Rainbolt, encourages every CCEW class to push the boundaries of conventional thinking and constantly explore new possibilities. "The best economy Oklahoma can have is one in which every person achieves his or her highest potential," says the serial entrepreneur and founder and chairman of the board of Oklahoma's BancFirst Corp. "We live in a very competitive world. Developing and commercializing technology is critical to our success."

"The program simultaneously grows and diversifies Oklahoma's economy today while grooming our leaders for tomorrow."

collaborate in growing, strengthening and diversifying Oklahoma's economy by commercializing emerging Oklahoma technologies to create wealth for Oklahoma and the nation.

Trippet read about CCEW as a high school student in the tiny Panhandle town of Beaver, Oklahoma, and knew he wanted to be a part of it when he got to OU. In spring 2009, he entered the center's internship program. From his first encounter with interns, inventors

Pullin, University vice president for Strategic Planning and Technology Development. Pullin, who directs the commercialization operations of OU's Office of Technology Development, also manages business development efforts for the University, which includes the administration of CCEW.

"CCEW strives to make the intern experience the most powerful endeavor our students undertake during their time at OU. Not only do they build on their

In just three years, CCEW already has provided more than 100 internships to OU undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of backgrounds and academic disciplines. To date, these students, with the assistance of more than two dozen private-sector mentors and inventors, have tackled 15 discrete projects that have resulted in two new start-up companies, four licensing agreements for the University, student-generated intellectual property,

and roughly \$4 million in funding for OU innovations.

THEY HAVE ONLY JUST BEGUN.

The fall 2009 class of CCEW interns faced three new challenges:

- Identifying the optimal method for taking to market a gas chromatography technology (method of separating and analyzing mixtures of chemicals) created by OU chemistry professor Robert White
- Exploring applications for nanotubes produced by OU spinoff company SouthWest NanoTechnologies Inc. and making recommendations to the company on how best to capitalize

on those market opportunities

- And determining the market potential for a phase contrast imaging technology developed by OU electrical engineering professor Hong Liu.

Each group of four to five CCEW interns is headed by a team leader, a former CCEW intern invited to return to the program in a slightly different capacity. The groups are paired with the technology's inventor, as well as a mentor from private industry.

Trippet is team leader for the nanotube group, which comprises students majoring in finance, economics, chemical engineering and industrial engineering. "Everybody brings something

unique to the table," he asserts. "As team leader, my role is to make sure they're on the right track and not overlooking a potential solution. Then I can sit back and watch all the pieces of the puzzle come together."

His counterpart in the digital imaging group is Samantha Ali, a junior psychology major with dual minors in zoology and chemistry who plans to one day open her own dental practice. "CCEW teaches you to think outside the box and provides a true hands-on, real-world, active-learning experience," she says. "It's almost like a think tank on campus."

That think tank atmosphere enticed Mariana Barrientos to apply for CCEW's first intern class in fall 2006, continue as a team leader in 2007 and return as program manager in 2008 after earning a master's degree in economics from New York's Fordham University.

"As an OU economics major, I was very interested in innovation and its implications on economic growth. At CCEW I found much more than an answer to a question; I had the opportunity to be an active participant of the entrepreneurial process," explains the Cochabamba, Bolivia, native.

"I had opportunities in New York City to intern at a variety of places, among them the one where I had always dreamed of working. While these were great experiences, I did not learn nearly as much as I did while working with CCEW, where I witnessed the impact of my work in the University and Oklahoma's economy in as little as one



Daniel Pullin, University vice president for Strategic Planning and Technology Development, listens to reports during a team meeting and illustrates for CCEW interns how to process the information in order to evaluate the attractiveness and feasibility of a potential product in the marketplace.

semester. No other job was able to offer me that. Every day, I continue to learn what it takes to start and maintain a new business.”

Barrientos plans to return someday to Bolivia to apply what she has learned. “I consider myself a Bolivian citizen of the world, so while I am young and independent, I will go wherever I find the best developing opportunity. Once I have amassed substantial experience, I will actively start looking for opportunities to go back and contribute to the development of entre-

Robert Taylor



Students in the CCEW program learn how to take a product from inception to marketplace. TJ Moen, left, asks a question during a brainstorming session with team members Ben West, Taylor Krebs and Brittany Ryan.

“I am continually surprised and impressed by what the student teams accomplish in a semester.”

preneurship in Bolivia,” she declares.

The inventors and mentors are just as enthralled as the students. These leaders in Oklahoma science and technology, business and industry carry some impressive titles: venture capitalist, Internet service provider founder, inventor of a process for manufacturing nanotubes, leader of a national law firm, creator of a water-repellent cotton fabric, major health care corporation executive, co-developer of a life-saving vaccine, oil refining company CEO, inventor of a retinal disease prevention

technology, creator of an educational software company. Several mentors have stayed for consecutive semesters or returned for multiple ones.

Rod Foster, a 30-plus-year veteran of manufacturing and research in the corporate world, has been mentoring CCEW interns since summer 2007 and currently serves as the center’s entrepreneur-in-residence.

“I am continually surprised and impressed by what the student teams accomplish in a semester,” Foster explains. “Early on I suggested that it might not be

reasonable to expect them to draft clinical trial plans for medical technologies or write state and national grants—only to be surprised when they completed both tasks. These students are smart, motivated and eager to learn. The opportunity to work with and be energized by them is what brings mentors like myself coming back for more.”

For Pullin, a graduate of the OU Michael F. Price College of Business who earned an MBA at Harvard University, returning to his undergraduate alma mater in 2006 to run CCEW was an



Robert Taylor

CCEW intern Barron Ryan, piano performance major and CCEW intern from team Digital Native Learning, gives a presentation on a revolutionary educational video game, McLarin Adventures, developed at OU's K20 Center.

Merit Scholar from Chicago who remained in Oklahoma to build a nanotechnology company, and the psychology major who will be entering Harvard Business School in 2011.

“One of my favorite transformations is the piano performance major who joined CCEW and left with an enhanced appreciation of the role of entrepreneurship in his budding career. He now has the tools and confidence to build his personal brand, manage the intellectual property he creates, and conduct the business side of his ob-

enormously attractive career option.

“Like our interns, I credit CCEW as a personally transformational experience. Prior to my return to OU, I had the good fortune to pursue a variety of business opportunities that were largely focused on maximizing profitability,” he relates. “While wealth creation is a prominent goal, I believe CCEW generates a true ‘double bottom-line.’ The program simultaneously grows and diversifies Oklahoma’s economy today while grooming our leaders for tomorrow. Participating in this combination is terribly satisfying, and I can’t imagine a better way to contribute my energy to serve our state and nation.”

CCEW alumnus Kris Vermelis parlayed his CCEW internship into a career as director of business development at an Oklahoma City-based bioscience compa-

ny that develops effective, non-toxic therapeutics that kill the dormant cancer cells responsible for disease recurrence.

“I wanted to be a serial entrepreneur, and I believe I am on my way. The real surprise is not the career choice but the industry. Biotechnology was completely off my radar before CCEW,” says the Norman native, who graduated from OU’s Price College. “Being able to plant a seed early in an emerging economy is what keeps me motivated. You can live comfortably becoming part of something great, but making something great is even better.”

Many other CCEW alumni have chosen surprising post-collegiate opportunities. Pullin recalls the computer engineer turned venture capitalist, the economics major who now serves in Google’s business development group, the National

vious talent in an enhanced way.

“Regardless of the interns’ immediate step upon graduation,” Pullin adds, “CCEW works diligently to instill a sense of pride and awareness of commercial opportunity in Oklahoma, both now and in the future. Cultivating the next generation of Oklahoma entrepreneurial leadership is a responsibility the program takes quite seriously.”

As for Trippet, he cannot wait to enter that entrepreneurial world. “I’m not the idea guy, but I can work on the business side,” he says. “Maybe I could be the CFO. That would be extremely cool.”

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