

Creativity from the Inside Out

The Austin Entrepreneurship Program at OSU

By Bridget Lynch

College is a busy time in the life of a student. It's often the first time spent away from home and the first time young people are faced with complete power over what to eat, wear and possibly most importantly, what to do with their time. Add to that potent mixture the sheer number of courses listed in a university catalog and suddenly things can look overwhelming to even the most focused of freshman. And of course, one must not forget, the ever-present and attractive matter of the College Social Life. When these issues pile up on top of a course load and sometimes even a part-time job, it becomes clear why college students are notorious for arriving on their parents' doorstep with several months' worth of dirty laundry—there simply, isn't time to do it at school.

Nearly 20,000 such busy students roam the halls of Oregon State University in Corvallis. However, located near the center of campus in the newly remodeled Weatherford Hall, about 300 of those students take their busy schedules a step further. On top of their crammed academic and social calendars, they have a third demand on their time: a start-up company.

Those 289 students are part of the new Austin Entrepreneurship Program at OSU and are part of one of the largest residential colleges focusing on entrepreneurship in the country.

The Return of an Icon

Weatherford Hall was built in 1928 as a men's dormitory and was used as a residence hall for 66 years until the University closed it in 1994. Though it was dilapidated and in disrepair, university officials knew that the iconic building would eventually be used again in a way befitting its stately history.

“Ever since it closed in 1994, people had been discussing how to effectively use Weatherford Hall,” says Ilene Kleinsorge, Sara Hart Kimball Dean of the OSU College of Business. “We always wanted to make it into a residential college and do something special with this icon building.”

Weatherford houses students from a broad range of majors from across campus, though a large percentage represent business and engineering colleges. The glue that binds these students together is their quest to learn more about starting their own business. To gain a spot in the dorm, students needed to fill out a housing application and express an interest in entrepreneurship, says Jon Down, Director of the Austin Entrepreneurship Program. Initially it was fairly easy to get into Weatherford, Down says. However, as the program gains prestige and popularity, he expects it to become a much more competitive process.

There are three levels of involvement in the program that determine where a student resides in the building: *Affiliates* have interest in entrepreneurship but are still at the

beginning of their education, *Associates* have taken the Introduction to Entrepreneurship course and have a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship, and finally, a student reaches the *Academy* level after review by an advisory board. Academy students live on the fourth floor and are encouraged to network with other students and professionals to turn their dreams of starting a business into a reality.

“There are 25 students in the Academy right now,” Down says. “Some of them are really doing a lot in terms of the informal curriculum and working on their own businesses. Some are not as involved but we are at the beginning stages and we’re sorting through things and trying to make our expectations clear.”

The informal curriculum at Weatherford includes discussion sessions with visiting entrepreneurs, mentor relationships, business plan competitions and pitch sessions, Down says. Visiting entrepreneurs are invited to stay at Weatherford in a special two-room suite—the proximity is intended to provide as much access to students as possible.

“I met Dean Kleinsorge on a plane,” says Dan Moffat, NewEdge Networks CEO and Weatherford visitor. “We started talking about the program and I said I was interested. When I was there, I met with four sets of students: we did a question and answer session, dinner, a fireside chat and breakfast in the morning. All of them were interested in entrepreneurship and had various ideas—some big, some small. It was a neat environment in terms of creativity. It’s a special place—really amazing to have that much energy in one place. Staying there was a little like being back in college, but in the most palatial dorm room you’ll ever see.”

Starting a Start-Up – The AEP Program is Born

The Austin Entrepreneurship Program (AEP) at Weatherford Hall is a joint venture between the College of Business, the College of Engineering, and University Housing and Dining Services. The program’s name comes from alumnus Ken Austin and his wife Joan who donated \$4 million toward the project. The Austins founded A-Dec, a dental equipment company based in Newberg. The \$20 million renovation project began in January 2003 and was completed just before students arrived in September 2004.

“There was a demand to do more to bring the colleges of business and engineering together, and in many cases throughout the country those schools have not worked well together so it was important to move away from the silo mentality and work together,” Kleinsorge says. “Couple that with the addition of Housing and Dining to the equation and this is a unique partnership.”

Engineering Dean Ron Adams agrees, noting that when he talks about the partnership to Deans at other colleges they are amazed because no one has a partnership quite like this one.

“From the start, it felt like working on a start-up company,” says Kleinsorge. “Just like in business, people are suddenly partnering together to do more than they could do on their own.”

Faculty Member in Residence, Justin Craig, sees many similarities between the Weatherford project and his real-world start-up experience.

“Beginning this project was a lot like doing a start-up—that was the big attraction,” says Craig. “What we are doing here is a brave task—there is no template to follow. It wouldn’t be fun if there weren’t any kinks. You have to find out what works and what doesn’t.”

As the Faculty Member in Residence, Craig’s roll is to serve as the facilitator of the informal curriculum at Weatherford in addition to his duties as an Assistant Professor for Entrepreneurship. Australian-born Craig and his wife live in an apartment in Weatherford and he tries to be available to the students as much as possible.

“I try to give the students confidence and challenge them,” Craig says. “They tell me, ‘I’m thinking about this idea; what do you think?’ Just recently, a student told me about his idea and I told him ‘You’re better than that, keep trying.’ I see them in the elevator and ask them ‘Did you ring that guy about the plan?’ and they say ‘I’m on it!’ They all have dreams and I try to nurture them all. I want to learn about their aspirations, help them build networks—you don’t know where it will pay off.”

“We haven’t had the big breakthrough yet, but I feel it coming,” Kleinsorge says.

Weatherford’s remodel includes specialized incubator rooms equipped with phone and Internet hookups, office furnishings and lockable cabinets for students’ materials. Down hopes to find additional space on campus for students to use for manufacturing.

“When I need to build my amplifiers, I just clear off my desk,” says electrical engineering and biochemistry sophomore Tyler Morita. “There is a lot going on here (in Weatherford) and it’s great to be close to so many people who have a passion for business. It’s easy to find people to talk to and network.”

Morita’s business, z-audio.com, has been up and running for about a year.

“I build headphone amplifiers and do consulting for the best quality sound,” Morita says. “I never really imagined doing a business but it turned into that and I’m along for the ride. My roommates told me about this new building and I thought it sounded cool—it kind of fell into my lap. Since I moved in, I’ve been talking with people in the building about the marketing side of business and I’m trying to find someone to help me with a business plan and to help me navigate tax laws.”

Balancing Act

Everyone associated with the program strives to keep one key element in focus—all of these entrepreneurs remain first, students.

“We need the program to be consistent with education and scholarship and provide experiential learning but not lose the soul of education,” Kleinsorge says. “The energy is wonderful and the students are benefiting. They are very excited to be a part of this and have this wonderful can-do spirit. My husband and I—we are both in education—often say we have found the fountain of youth because we forget how old we are being around the energy of these young people.”

In her speech at the Weatherford Grand Opening, Joan Austin encouraged the University to be mindful of the students’ schedules.

“I know from experience that it is a challenge to balance the entrepreneurship role with academics,” Joan Austin said. “Entrepreneurs, by definition, work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I hope OSU will acknowledge this and offer flexible options so our student entrepreneurs can stay in school.”

Craig, whose degrees include business, psychology and a PhD in behavioral science, understands the stress that students are under trying to balance life as a student with life as business people.

“There is lots to juggle, and I try to be conscious of that,” Craig says. “That is why partnering with Housing and Dining on this project was such a great idea. They know student life and they can help us understand what living on campus and in a new environment is like for students. They understand the demands on students and collaborate with us to help us understand how things like midterms will change their schedules.”

Senior Michael Todd Backus juggles his plan to open a production company with his plan to earn a B.A. in theater and a B.S. in film production.

“In the Academy the energy and attitude is really high,” Backus says. “The program is brand new and we all have a lot of ideas. We’ve been doing a lot of groundwork so I haven’t been able to focus as much on my business yet. But once the groundwork is laid, we’ll be able to access the wide-ranging expertise of the people in the Academy. It is exciting to be starting something with the potential for such major benefits down the road.”

Backus said he always knew he would want the degree of freedom in filmmaking that would only come from owning his own business and that making the choice to pursue his dream was the hardest part.

“I have a strong business background but I don’t really like that side,” Backus says. “I’m hoping to create a company that does some ad agency work and expand into film later. I hope I’ll be able to find some people in the Academy who can help.”

When business sophomore Roshan Khemlani heard about Weatherford last year, he knew it was the place for him.

“I spent all summer bragging about Weatherford and how great it was going to be,” Khemlani says. “I live on the fourth floor and I’m really enjoying the networking. I need a graphic designer for my custom clothing line and I hope I’ll be able to find someone who wants to work on that.”

His participation in the informal curriculum has already netted Khemlani some important business contacts for his business, Roach Wear.

“I met someone from University Printing Services when I was presenting my business in one of the incubator rooms,” Khemlani says. “It was a great contact because I found out how to get permission from the University to use Beaver logos on my t-shirts. Now I’m working on a Civil War shirt and I hope to be able to take it to fraternities and sororities and offer them the opportunity to customize it with their Greek letters.”

As the son of an entrepreneurial father, Khemlani knows growing his business will take a lot of hard work.

“My father is a Hong Kong tailor based in Portland,” Khemlani says. “My idea to start my own clothing line came from there. I did some job shadowing with him and learned a lot about things like customer relationships and customer service. Now his website links to mine and my site links to his.”

Building Relationships

In his speech at the Weatherford Grand Opening in October, OSU President, Edward J. Ray, noted that entrepreneurship is not something new to the OSU family. Among the entrepreneurial alumni Ray pointed to as examples were Bernie Newcomb, one of the founders of eTrade, Ken and Joan Austin, and Randy Conrads, founder of Classmates.com. Ray went on to add that he believed that among the audience, which included the residents of Weatherford Hall, were some of OSU’s great future entrepreneurs.

Garret Rysko, sophomore in electrical engineering and mechanical engineering, and Aaron Moore, sophomore in electrical engineering and computer science, were listening and they are hopeful that their industrial helicopter project might rank them with those prestigious alums.

“I looked at the dorm and I thought it looked cool,” Rysko says. “But when I found out more about the program, I got much more serious about living there.”

Rysko and Moore are working on an autonomous helicopter control system that could eventually be used in a variety of types of vehicles in a variety of industries. Presently,

the prototype helicopter carries a camera, and possible applications for their technology include news and media, travel companies, aerial surveillance, and search and rescue operations, Moore says.

With ideas from students like Morita, Backus, Khemlani, Rysko and Moore, OSU hopes to build long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with industry and spur economic development in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

“We want to have as much value from the outside in as from the inside out,” Kleinsorge says.

Though it is just the beginning of the program, everyone involved is confident in its success.

“Our vision is simple,” says Kleinsorge. “Moving from discovery to market, creating a dynamic learning community that fosters creativity and innovation and establishes models for collaboration, allowing OSU to make an economic impact on Oregon.”

Kleinsorge says that eventually the University would like to establish a Weatherford Ventures Fund that would provide seed money to worthy entrepreneurial ideas.

“We want our students to be prepared to compete with anyone, anywhere, and this program helps immeasurably in realizing that aspiration,” Ray says. “Oregon needs to have a globally competitive, diverse economy and OSU, because of its programs, people and statewide reach, is uniquely positioned to help create that economy. We are making huge steps ahead with AEP and Weatherford and they are tangible signs of our commitment. Economic success will arise from innovation and creativity, whether it is in engineering, science, apparel, neutraceuticals, or the arts.”