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University of Utah celebrates its 5,000th invention

January 26th, 2011 @ 8:01am

By Paul Koepp

SALT LAKE CITY — Richard Brown was an undergraduate at BYU when he started his first company, working with microwave engineers on a device that could cut knot-free lumber.

Thirty-five years later, the University of Utah's engineering dean is still collaborating and inventing, and has moved on to his fourth company. The University of Utah on Tuesday celebrated his latest idea, a "smart food tray," as the school's 5,000th invention since it started keeping records in 1965.

Back then, it was another Dean Brown, engineering dean Wayne Brown — founder of the Wayne Brown Institute that fosters entrepreneurship — who logged the first invention, a "continuous electroplating process and apparatus" used to purify metals.

Richard Brown developed the food tray, which measures carbohydrate, fat, protein and calorie consumption in real time, along with Joel Ehrenkranz, an Intermountain Healthcare endocrinologist who stops by Brown's office for weekly brainstorming sessions.

"It's not a question of having ideas," Ehrenkranz said. "It's knowing which ones to back."

U of U 2009

- 19 startup companies
- 79 executed licenses
- 108 patent applications

Neither will take credit for having the idea first. The tray could help diabetes sufferers precisely monitor the amount of insulin they need; it could also track calories for dieters, sodium and cholesterol for those with heart problems or potassium for people with kidney failure.

An initial trial is planned at Intermountain Medical Center now that Brown and Ehrenkranz have filed an "invention disclosure," an official notice to the

school that they believe they have a novel idea. It will be at least four years until they know their chances at securing a patent.

Researchers affiliated with universities keep a one-third interest in their work; their department and the school each get a third, as well. The U. has long boasted of its success in commercializing research, and overtook MIT last year for number of spinoff companies.

Speaking of faculty in general, Brown said, "We want to see that the results of our research make a difference in the world. There's no better form of disseminating research results than creating a product."

In 2009, the school had 19 startup companies, 79 executed licenses and 108 patent applications, according to a survey by the Association of University Technology Managers. It took in \$12.4 million in licensing income, 25th in the country, while spending \$354 million on research.

The university on Tuesday also recognized five of its most prolific inventors, including Glenn Prestwich, a medicinal chemistry professor who serves as a special presidential assistant for faculty entrepreneurship. The latest of his 52 inventions — No. 4,999 for the U. — is a new use for a therapeutic gel he helped develop that could now be used to treat skin diseases through cell therapy.

There's often a tension in academia between basic and applied research. Is basic research too purely scholarly, and is applied research selling out? Those are the wrong questions, Prestwich said.

"What are we trying to do with our scholarly research?" asked Prestwich. "We need to take what we've discovered and bring it to everybody else."

U. President Michael Young said he has tried to work with Utah's business community during his tenure, encouraging faculty to move their ideas from the lab to the marketplace. In that time, the university has spun off 185 companies, creating 7,000 jobs with a total payroll of \$300 million, he said.

He noted that both the engineering school and health sciences have applied for nearly 200 patents in the last 18 months. Young said he hopes legislators — now mulling a 7 percent cut to higher education — realize that research funding is an investment in economic development.

Other inventors recognized Tuesday were engineering and pharmacy professor Joseph Andrade; mechanical

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engineering professor Stephen Jacobsen, who has helped design the robotic dinosaurs of Jurassic Park, military exoskeletons and the fountains at the Bellagio hotel and casino in Las Vegas; metallurgical engineering professor Jan Miller; and biology professor Baldomero Olivera.

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