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## Growing entrepreneurs

### Workshop readies academics for market

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Staff Writer

For a day, George Ferguson was a high-tech entrepreneur. He stood before a packed audience of entrepreneur wannabes and venture capitalists as the pitchman for a startup company called Intelligent Medical.

"The mission is to develop decision support systems that help people manage their health care and improve their quality of life," he said, swiftly clicking through a PowerPoint show before a panel of investors Friday in The Powers Building.

If the 39-year-old seemed relaxed, it was because he was making a sales pitch for a fictional company. In real life, he's a scientist at the University of Rochester's computer science department, working on, among other projects, personalized medication-scheduling technology that was the basis for Intelligent Medical.

But he took the Pre-Seed Workshop, a hands-on class that teaches scientists, engineers, academics and students how to be high-tech entrepreneurs.

Economic development specialists see the commercialization of research as one way to boost the area's economy, so it's no coincidence that the workshop was sponsored by such organizations as Greater Rochester Enterprise, High Tech Rochester, the University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology.

The latest workshop in the program that started last year attracted 35 people from UR and RIT.

They came armed with a whirlwind of inventions and ideas. Some wanted to start companies; others wanted to know whether their ideas would fly. For example, there was a company selling a retina imager.

Although workshops for startups are nothing new, the workshop's coordinators said the pre-seed program is different because it's hands-on.

If Rochester is to cultivate an entrepreneurial culture, people need to learn how to commercialize ideas, said Paul Wetenhall, executive director of High Tech Rochester and a workshop instructor.

He pointed to the Internet search engine Google that was spawned by two Stanford University graduate student dropouts.

"That is an extreme case, but that is exactly what we're trying to do, ... help take the brilliant research and turn it into companies," he said.

The participating academics said that they were more motivated to launch their companies as a way of sharing their inventions with the public than by dreams of Google-like success.

"I like my research program, it keeps me more than busy; but I'm intrigued by the notion of getting out there and

making a bit of a difference, and hopefully we could make a little money doing it," George Ferguson said. For now, though, he has no plans to be a full-time entrepreneur.

The idea for the workshop started two years ago, when Mark Coburn, UR's director of technology transfer, tapped Mark Wilson, an entrepreneur-in-residence at UR, to help launch an intense hands-on startup workshop. Wilson said he already had a similar idea in mind, and sought out his friend Judith Albers, vice president of the venture capital firm Trillium Group, to co-design a curriculum.

Attendees are divided into six teams headed by coaches that include high-tech experts. Between short lectures, the teams brainstorm ideas and tackle assignments. By the time they complete the 23-hour workshop, a company plan is completed.

While it is too early to say whether the Pre-Seed Workshop has a successful formula, four of the six teams from the first workshop in September are building companies — and one has officially launched.

Ali Ogut, professor of electrical engineering at RIT, said the workshop gave him the push to launch Environmental Energy Technologies Inc. in November.

"We don't get much exposure to those kind of things. It's helped me think more like an entrepreneur," the seasoned engineer said.

The workshop's coordinators hope to bring the workshop to more colleges and universities in upstate New York. The workshop is to be held in Cortland on Thursday, with teams from Cornell University and State University of New York at Binghamton.

"We think there's great potential with the universities. Rochester is ready for a new generation of entrepreneurs," Albers said.

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