



The Huntsville Times

UAH grads excel in business plans

Sunday, May 27, 2007

From staff reports
Huntsville Times

Their teams take 2nd, 3rd in new state competition

Two teams led by recent University of Alabama in Huntsville graduates finished in the top three of the inaugural Alabama Launchpad Initiative, a statewide business plan competition affiliated with state universities.

The teams won a total of \$75,000 to help them get their new businesses off the ground.

Halo Research, a team led by Chris Otto, a recent graduate of the UAH engineering graduate program, finished second and won \$50,000. Intelligent Cellular Systems, led by recent UAH business school graduates Aaron Hammons and Tod Opickka, was third.

OcuMedic, a startup led by an Auburn University alumnus, took first place and the \$100,000 grand prize.

"At its heart, this competition is an economic development catalyst," said James P. Hayes, president of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, a founding sponsor. "We know that the talent and expertise for innovative technologies can be found in our educational institutions. This competition is a driver to pull these technologies into the spotlight and to jump-start their funding, so we can support job creation in emerging technologies in this state at the base level."

Although UAH had only 14 of the original 61 teams that started the competition last fall, it had eight of the 26 semi-finalists and half of the eight finalists. Auburn and UAB each had two teams reach the final round.

"This tells us there are wonderful opportunities in science and engineering that are produced by UAH students and faculty," said Dr. David Berkowitz, UAH's campus coordinator for the Launchpad competition. "These teams clearly demonstrate that there is value in intellectual property created at our university."

"I think this points to the emergence of a new business model for the Huntsville area, where scientists and engineers form teams with people who have business expertise. Everything is kind of coming together."

At the finals in Auburn, each team presented its business plan to a panel of judges who have experience in venture capital and technology start-ups. The competition is sponsored by the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama and the six participating universities.

Halo Research has developed a wearable health monitoring system that uses wireless technology to constantly monitor the health and lifestyle of elderly clients. This team also includes Dr. Brent Wren, an associate professor of marketing at UAH.

Intelligent Cellular Systems has developed a compact, precision cell-culture system that provides greater experimental control while reducing costs and human error. This team also includes Dr. Amy Bishop, an assistant professor of biological sciences at UAH who first developed the technology.

The next Launchpad competition is scheduled to begin in the fall, and UAH is actively soliciting possible business teams, Berkowitz said.

Other universities participating in the business plan competition were the University of Alabama, Alabama A&M University and Alabama State University. Teams participating in the contest were required to have ties to at least one of the six universities, with one or more team members who were students, faculty, staff or recent graduates.

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