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'Operation Mousetrap' is all about innovation

by Christi Mathis

CARBONDALE, Ill. -- Operation Mousetrap isn't about finding a better way to capture a furry rodent; rather, it focuses on ways to help commercialize the research and innovation technologies developed by Southern Illinois University Carbondale faculty and staff.

The inaugural sessions of the entrepreneurial technology transfer program draw to a close this week with nine special presentations highlighting a small fraction of the technology, research and innovation that exists at SIUC. Participants will demonstrate their projects, offering PowerPoint presentations and discussing their business plans while honing their "pitches" for funding.

Media Advisory

Reporters, photographers and camera crews are welcome to cover the Operation Mousetrap entrepreneurial technology transfer program presentations set for Friday, April 9, in Room 241 at the Dunn-Richmond Economic Development Center. Presentations begin at 12:30 p.m. with graduation set for 2:30 p.m. John Koropchak, vice chancellor for research and graduate dean, will present certificates of achievement to participants completing the program.

Since early 2010, participants have been meeting each week to hear a variety of experts discuss topics of interest. They've learned about testing their innovations and business concepts, exploring entrepreneurship, identifying funding and working with investors, protecting their business and intellectual property, planning for financial success and much more. Curt Jones, founder and CEO of Dippin' Dots and an alumnus of SIUC, spoke about defining a target market. Jack Goecken, founder of MCI, addressed entering and capturing the market. Participants also heard about testing their business concepts from Curtis Baird, chairman of the board of the School Center in Carbondale.

"In addition to the weekly training and speakers, participants have been meeting with their business coaches to further develop their business plans and investor pitches. This one-on-one assistance gives each faculty or staff member the opportunity to focus on the stage of business development that is most important and applicable to them at this time," said Kyle Harfst, director of technology and enterprise development at SIUC.

Harfst and Maryon King, director of the College of Business Center for Innovation and associate professor of marketing, both served as business coaches for Operation Mousetrap participants. Operation Mousetrap uses FastTrac TechVenture, an entrepreneurship and business program provided by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The foundation fosters entrepreneurship through such programs all over the U.S., giving people the tools they need to develop or hone their skills to better utilize and market technology.

Essentially, the program works with technology and life science researchers and developers in bringing their innovations from the concept stage to the marketplace. There is an emphasis on intellectual property and some of those participating in the current program are already seeking patents for their work. The participants received scholarships, valued at about \$1,500, to be part of the program.

Harfst's desire to establish an entrepreneurship program for faculty and staff researchers and scientists at the University led Lynn Andersen Lindberg, director of business innovation and research, to approach Mark Petrilli. Petrilli, state director of the Illinois Small Business Development Center, was enthusiastic about the concept and provided partial funding for the inaugural session, according to Andersen Lindberg. The University's Technology Transfer staff helped identify faculty and staff who had technologies that were ready to take the next step toward commercialization and they received invitations to the program.

Partnering to provide the SIUC program are the College of Business Center for Innovation, Illinois Small Business Development Center, Small Business Incubator Program and the Southern Illinois Research Park.

Operation Mousetrap participants successfully completing the intensive 12 sessions will get certificates of achievement on Friday, April 9, from John Koropchak, vice chancellor for research and graduate dean. The graduates are eligible for three months of free rent at the Dunn-Richmond Economic Development Center through the Small Business Incubator Program and can also apply for \$5,000 to \$10,000 in challenge grant funds from the Southern Illinois Entrepreneurship Center.

The ultimate goal of the program is increasing the number of technology-based companies emerging from SIUC research and locating in Southern Illinois, Andersen Lindberg said.

"The program has been so successful that plans are already under way for the second Operation Mousetrap program, set to begin in August," said Andersen Lindberg. "In addition, the program staff will continue to work with this first group of participants to assist them in the next phases of their entrepreneurial tech transfer activities. We'll be offering them business coaching, follow-up workshops and seminars throughout the year."

Participants in the inaugural Operation Mousetrap include:

- Ken Anderson, professor, geology.
- Bakul Dave, associate professor, chemistry and biochemistry.
- Peter Fadde, associate professor, curriculum and instruction.
- Thad Heckman, assistant instructor, architecture school.
- Yuqing Hou, assistant scientist, graduate school.
- David Lightfoot, professor, plant, soil and agricultural systems.
- Sebastian Loh, assistant professor, curriculum and instruction.
- Luke Tolley, associate professor, chemistry and biochemistry.
- Tom Upton, associate professor, Rehabilitation Institute.