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Fla. college turns academics into business venture



By CHRISTINE ARMARIO, Associated Press Writer

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When Travis Watkins was asked a few years ago to devise a college engineering project that would help people with disabilities, the first person who came to mind was his father, who once cherished walks along the beach.

The deadly illness known as Lou Gehrig's disease has left his father in a wheelchair, watching sailboats bob up and down along the Gulf Coast from a distance.

But with the ingenuity of Watkins, 28, and the help of a southwest Florida university and fellow students, wheelchairs have a new way to roam across uneven, rocky and sandy terrain. The sturdy, two-wheeled platform that attaches to a wheelchair will soon be available for purchase through Rehab Ideas, a University of South Florida spinoff.

The fledgling company has embraced a handful of innovative projects that professor Stephen Sundarrao believes have mainstream potential. Rather than have student ideas remain on the sketchpad, collecting dust, or purchased by someone else, Rehab Ideas is striving to put university-born inventions into working use.

"The measure of success used to be how many papers were published," Sundarrao said. "Now it's how much of what is produced at the university is in the community."

The products Sundarrao's students have created include:

- An aluminum crutch that folds up neatly to fit into a purse.
- A device with an extra set of wheels that, once attached to a wheelchair, enables side-to-side movement — good for navigating narrow spaces between tables at a restaurant.
- A mechanical retriever that can grab a backpack resting behind a wheelchair.

Rehab Ideas' products add to a commercial field that includes advanced prosthetics, swimming fins for amputees and equipment for hunting and fishing. And while there are other beach wheelchairs on the market, Rehab Ideas' products are designed so that users don't have to buy a separate wheelchair, they simply board the platform and ride into the sand.

Prices for the products will range from \$695 for a tray that can be attached and folded into the side of a wheelchair for the off-road wheelchair kit. Sundarrao said students will get a cut — about 5 percent — of the profit.

The business incubator at the University of South Florida is one of many around the country where students, faculty and community members pay a lease and have access to the school's resources and guidance on topics like intellectual property issues.

Across North America, more than 1,400 business incubators were in operation as of October 2006, up from 12 in 1990. Twenty percent of those are sponsored by academic institutions, according to a study published by the National Business Incubation Association.

"I think what universities recognized several years ago is, if you want to attract, retain and keep good faculty members and bring new students in, you have to do what you can to support their research and ideas," said Mike Shipp, director of rehabilitation services at Louisiana Tech University. "Everyone gains from that."

Sundarrao, the head of Rehab Ideas, is an Indian-born son of a doctor and a nurse. He decided to pursue rehabilit engineering after working on a prosthetics research project at a hospital and at a manufacturing company run by d employees in India.

He later enrolled as a graduate student at the University of South Florida in Tampa and has taught there for about

Students meet people with disabilities and help find solutions in Sundarrao's class, which typically has a waiting lis

One of the clients Sundarrao brought into his class is Christopher Rhoades, a 19-year-old freshman who has a prc form of muscular dystrophy. On a recent summer day at the Rehab Ideas lab, Rhoades' mother, Tracie Wiechman as Sundarrao lifted her son into the tall, off-road chair that was inspired by Watkins' father.

The teen adjusted his seat, put on a pair of shades and drove out of the lab and into the sun, somewhat hesitantly the sidewalk and into the grass. Slowly, he increased his speed, the chair's powerful wheels easily gliding over the

When Rhoades came back into the lab, he showed his mother how to use the backpack retriever. She cried as he hardcover textbook out of his bag.

"I did not expect to feel so emotional," Wiechmann said. "It goes back to that dream, as a parent, to have your child independent as possible. It just seems so simple but yet its such a huge thing. One less thing that he has to ask sc to do for him."

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