

Photo: Bonnie Robinson



Taking Care of Business

When Jon Liao came to IIT to teach entrepreneurship in 2006, he saw an opportunity to build a program that wouldn't just compete well with its peers, but that would truly stand out. He factored in the Stuart School of Business focus on innovation, but the real key to his vision was to recruit IIT's non-business students—the engineers and designers who Liao figured would come up with smart ideas and products. Liao wanted to get those students to think like businesspeople, and to pair them with business students at Stuart.

It wasn't a stretch, considering that Liao himself had co-founded a biotech company, HumanZyme, and successfully steered that company through several rounds of funding. He had seen firsthand what can happen when an entrepreneur and a new idea come together. Liao is convinced that by joining IIT students from different fields to work together on entrepreneurial projects, great ideas will result.

"We have an ideal platform at IIT to promote cross-disciplinary education because we can combine entrepreneurship with great programs in engineering, design, and the sciences," says Liao. "We add a new dimension to an already high-quality education, and we equip these technically competent students to choose a career where they can build a business, not just be someone's employee."

To that end, IIT formed an Entrepreneurship and Leadership Committee, composed of Liao and the university's deans, to make curricular recommendations and focus on advancing cross-disciplinary entrepreneurship training; the committee is chaired by Stuart Dean Harvey Kahalas.

Any IIT undergraduate can minor in entrepreneurship, learning principles ranging from market research to business plan creation to how to seek and secure funding. In fact, 70 percent of IIT entrepreneurship students aren't business majors. This fall, the school will launch the Kern Innovation and Entrepreneurship Academy (KIEA), which will enroll 25 top engineering students per year in a special entrepreneurship program that provides them access to successful area entrepreneurs. Selected students may earn up to \$4,500 each in scholarships through the program. (KIEA is funded by a \$1.3 million grant from the Kern Family Foundation of Waukesha, Wis.)

Beyond the coursework, there's a student entrepreneurship organization, which brings in successful entrepreneurs as guest speakers. In competitions such as the IIT-hosted Chicago Innovation Chase, students compete against peers from other universities in a unique one-day entrepreneurship scavenger hunt in which they search for clues and then develop a business from scratch.

But it's the off-campus competitions where IIT is really making its mark. IIT teams have excelled in national and regional competitions: in 2008, an IIT team took first prize in a regional Idea to Product competition in St. Louis. Also in 2008, a team of IIT graduate students won a Microsoft Emerging Technology Award for a business based on a fiber-optic blood sensor at the University of San Francisco's International Business Plan Competition. The winning plan was developed during one of Liao's courses. This year, an IIT entrepreneur finished second at the San Francisco competition.

Successes like that reinforce the vision of Liao and Kahalas.

"Creativity and strategically competitive thinking are hallmarks of IIT's student body, and they're exactly what the marketplace will demand," says Kahalas. "We're bringing these students together and teaching them to develop their ideas into viable business strategies, and it's very exciting to watch them learn and grow."

For Liao, the program itself is an entrepreneurial venture. He was drawn to IIT by the chance to build an entrepreneurship program from scratch. "With a clean slate, you can make such a difference," says Liao, who works with David Pistrui to run the Entrepreneurship Program at IIT. The clincher was IIT's undergraduate programs in business-friendly disciplines. "I could see the opportunities to leverage our strengths, and it really was a no-brainer," Liao says.

— STEVE HENDERSHOT

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Hamid Arastoopour

Hamid Arastoopour (M.S. GE '75, Ph.D. '78), director of the Wanger Institute for Sustainable Energy Research, was invested as the Henry R. Linden Endowed Chair in Engineering at a ceremony held on April 30.

Alan Cramb

Alan Cramb, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, has been named an honorary member of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers (AIME). An AIME past-president, Cramb was recognized for being a member who is outstanding in his respective field and/or who has performed unusual service to the institute. Cramb was also named a 2009 fellow of the American Society for Metals International for his efforts in advancing the science and technology of modern steelmaking.

Martin Felsen

Martin Felsen, studio associate professor at IIT College of Architecture, was awarded the 2009 Latrobe Prize from the American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows.

Judith Gregory

Judith Gregory, assistant professor at IIT Institute of Design, was appointed to a multi-year visiting scholar position at the University of Denmark.

faculty honors & awards

Taking Sustainability on the Road

IIT and Chicago are natural partners who share a strong commitment to serving the city's people and communities. Now the university hopes to build upon those shared goals by focusing its unique resources—including architecture, engineering, and design—on projects that will benefit IIT's neighbors, further strengthening the university's ties with the city.

As a collaboration between IIT College of Architecture and the Chicago Park District shows, the results can be stunning.

Project Nomad, a mobile learning center, is serving as a testament to the possibilities of eco-friendly living and modern architecture. Specifically, it's an interactive exhibit that takes cues from Mies van der Rohe's iconic Farnsworth House and showcases green technologies ranging from photovoltaic solar panels (a set of them is mounted on Project Nomad's roof, providing the exhibit's electricity) to recycling. Nomad will rotate among city parks, educating Chicagoans on the benefits of sustainability.

"The primary goal is to reach low-income urban families who aren't really thinking about living green or experiencing nature," says Alan Bell, the Chicago attorney whose company, The Elements Group, is spearheading the project. "Some of the areas where these people live aren't the most beautiful, architecturally. We want to bring them something modern, innovative, and exciting that will brighten up their communities and get them thinking about experiencing nature and the environment in a whole new way."

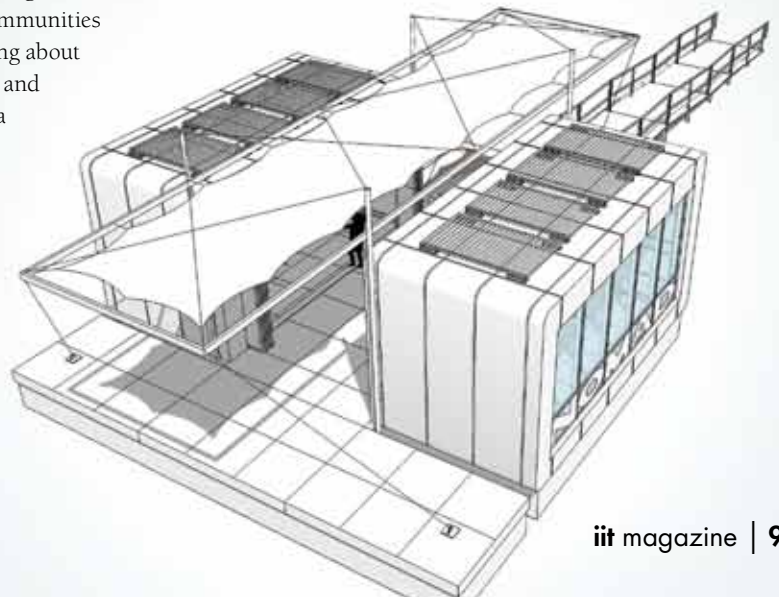
Bell explained his vision to Eva Kultermann, assistant professor of architecture, who loved the idea and suggested making it a student project. Bell agreed, and during the 2008–09 school year teams of students worked on developing and refining a design that would be striking, functional, and portable. In addition to the solar panels, the design incorporates recycled, Earth-friendly materials.

The students' design was a hit with Bell, the Chicago Park District, and the audience at Modern Earth, the Earth Day 2009 event where the project was unveiled. Project Nomad then moved to Krueck + Sexton Architects, which will oversee the exhibit's final design and construction. The firm hired one of the IIT student leaders for a summer internship to work on the project.

"The project provided our students with experience in the complete process of building design and construction in a more comprehensive and real-world setting than is possible in traditional academic studios," says Kultermann. "Additionally, it provided an educational platform for the ethical practice of architecture by serving the needs of the local community."

Construction should be complete in late 2009, and Project Nomad is on track to begin its tour of Chicago's parks in spring 2010.

—Steve Hendershot



RESEARCH AND CHICAGO