New WSU center to focus on innovation, entrepreneurship

By Roy Wenzl
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After manufacturing went overseas, then after the economy staggered into recession, some university presidents argued that two things should not be cut: research and development.

Now engineers, faculty and students from WSU’s College of Engineering are prepping a new idea that has attracted close to $8 million in grants. The idea has a long academic name: “Center for Innovation and Enterprise Engagement.”

What they hope to accomplish in the next few years is send WSU engineers, faculty and students to work directly with at least 40 or more local and regional businesses and entrepreneurs. They hope to create new jobs, new manufacturing, and prove that jobs and manufacturing in America have not gone away.

WSU will provide a direct injection of intellect and expertise to businesses that have ideas for new technology, and need a little help getting them launched. Some of the advice WSU will offer might be how to make a product better; some might involve how to better market it.

Zulma Toro-Ramos, the dean of engineering, said she has lofty ambitions for this idea, most of which has been hers.

She said companies that outsourced work over the past few years have saved money in the short term, but learned that there is no good substitute for American workers and their quality standards and their know-how.

“I am convinced that manufacturing will come back someday,” Toro-Ramos said. “Many of the companies that moved manufacturing to other countries have encountered quality problems.

She said manufacturing is going to make a comeback and she wants WSU to help spur that.

“What we want to try to do here is get the world to look at us in Wichita as a center of excellence in manufacturing,” she said.

Toro-Ramos and her staff solicited ideas for developing new products from local and regional businesses and entrepreneurs. She said she can’t talk publicly about most of what’s going on, because a lot the ideas and products are just being developed. Some of the companies she’s talked with are in aviation. Some involve the development of wind energy.

David McDonald, the associate vice president for academic affairs and research, said Toro-Ramos developed the center idea more than a year ago, and encountered some resistance. University leaders wondered aloud whether this was something that WSU’s National Institute for Aviation Research was already doing: working directly with local industry.

Much of what NIAR does is test aviation products.

“She had to explain to us that her idea was to get WSU engineers and experts working directly with industry to do what NIAR does not do; NIAR doesn’t work with companies to develop new products and new product lines,” McDonald said.

NIAR also doesn’t concentrate heavily in working directly with smaller companies, as the center will do.

The university is backing the center now, McDonald said. "It’s got far-reaching implications; it’s quite forward-
looking."

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