



## **Financial Frontera: Center leader seeks tech success**

By Michael Hissam \ Special to the Times  
Posted: 12/04/2011

Sooner or later that university student needs to get off mom and dad's payroll and make his or her mark in the U.S. economy. By the way, in case it hasn't been reported on campus, mom and dad would prefer sooner than later -- and on a permanent basis.

One critical lesson -- maybe an attitude so often overlooked in the university learning process -- is that it is OK to be a success. It is OK to be an entrepreneur and call your own shots and take your own risks in business.

Also not generally heard in the same sentence, especially from traditional-age students, are "technology" and "business."

UTEP through its Center for Research Entrepreneurship and Innovative Enterprises works to transform how faculty, staff, students and local entrepreneurs prepare themselves for success in the American economy.

This economy needs success.

Gary Williams directs the initiative. In last week's column, he spoke of potential when it comes to technology for a stronger El Paso economy. This week, he looks at the task of turning potential into success.

**Q** Can you tell us about CREIE's history with UTEP?

**A** I came onboard in April of 2009. CREIE was an outcome of a grant that UTEP had received from the Kauffman Foundation. The foundation challenged the university to sustain the investment. We felt one way to do that was to establish a center whose main focus would help faculty, students, staff and local entrepreneurs commercialize technology. They were looking for somebody who had a background of being in that activity, bringing new technologies to the marketplace. I was really attracted to the challenge that was provided by this opportunity.

**Q "Commercialization" and "technology" sometimes seems analogous to "oil and water." Yet you reject that; they need to be pretty much one in the same. Why?**

A The whole issue of sustainability and scalability can come from commercializing a technology. Take a look at companies that have started as a seed: Zuckerberg's, Bill Gates; technology-based ideas that turned into very successful, very big enterprises. One of the features of technology is that it does have some sustainability. It can have some sustainability behind it if there's rich intellectual property. So I believe if you have those conditions you can protect yourself in many cases from other people who might want to copy what you are doing.

**Q Why should entrepreneurs focus on and not fear success?**

A The upside is a lot bigger than the downside. One of the things that has really surprised me in a positive way is the number of people in this town that are willing to take risks -- that don't see all the reasons why things don't work. I think some of it is because they don't realize all the things that are out there.

More and more, I am dealing with people that want to succeed, who want to make a difference, who want to bring their ideas to the marketplace so other people can benefit from them. This is the thing that is fun for me every day when I am working with people like that.

**Q With how many people have you worked through the CREIE activities?**

A We've probably had discussions or meetings with between 150 and 200 people over the last two and one-half years. These are not people who come just to workshops; these are people that we have talked to about starting up companies or have an idea that, maybe, should be patented, followed by a business plan being developed.

In the last 18 months, CREIE has done more than 100 market research activities in various areas. There's a lot going on. We have access with faculty members on campus that are interested as well as staff members and students. We are seeing more and more students come to us for help. For ideas that are being considered to be patented, we do market research in that area to see just how big the opportunity might be.

**Q What about student participation?**

A One of the things we have done in the last year and a half is to establish an intern program. We now have three students -- all from the business school -- that are working on a part-time basis. We help train them to do the market research and some financial analysis. They show up every day with a great deal of enthusiasm and work very hard. The outcome of their work, I believe, is of very good quality that helps entrepreneurs and other people who want to start up companies get a better idea as to what is going on in the marketplace.

You know the single biggest reason why new products fail in the marketplace is lack of market information. It doesn't have to do with whether you can make the product or not, or whether it performs the way you thought. It all has to do with the marketplace.

Michael Hissam is president of Trans-National Executive Communications. He may be reached at michael.tnec@ymail.com