

New energy-saving technology

Inventors bring devices to business school

By LORA CUYKENDALL
Of the Emerald

The University business school's innovation center has been chosen by the federal government to help evaluate new energy-saving devices brought to it by private inventors and small businesses.

The Experimental Center for the Advancement of Invention and Innovation, which has been operating at the University since

1973 on funds provided by a five-year grant from the National Science Foundation, primarily will be involved in determining the marketability of new energy-related inventions.

"We're facing more than a crisis in technology in this country," says Gerald Udell, director of the innovation center. "Developing the technology to deal with the energy crisis is only part of the problem. We also have to find ways to transfer the new technol-

ogy to the marketplace — to get consumers to accept it."

Udell says the center is one of about a dozen other organizations which conduct feasibility studies of energy devices and technology for the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA). Private companies, including Research Corporation and Arthur D. Little, and some universities, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), also evaluate ideas,

but Udell says the Oregon center is the only non-eastern group involved in the project.

"We were chosen to do the work because we were the only non-private organization in the country that was doing the kind of studies that needed to be done," says Udell.

The innovation center conducts in-depth studies of inventions and innovative ideas for technological feasibility and market success. Charging only a \$25 fee for an initial evaluation, the center uses student researchers as part of a practicum marketing course. For particularly promising inventions, the center will advise its clients on marketing strategies and give other assistance in exchange for a small royalty agreement.

"With passage of the Federal Non-nuclear Energy Research and Development Act (in 1974), Congress committed itself to helping encourage the success of all promising energy-related inventions," explains Udell. "They realized that this country can't afford not to tap every available energy-related product."

Under the 1974 energy act, the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) is charged with evaluating energy-related ideas and making recommendations to ERDA about the kind of assistance it should give inventors. Congress has given ERDA the power to assist development and marketing of energy-saving inventions through grants, contracts, loans or financial awards.

Udell explains that the innovation center works under a contract agreement with the NBS and receives about \$5,000 for evaluating an idea. It has conducted two evaluations since last May. The

NBS can award only \$20,000 worth of contracts a year to any one organization or firm.

"When we receive an energy-related device to study, we conduct two evaluations," explains Udell. "If the results of a preliminary computer analysis are good, we assemble a team of evaluators, including faculty, graduate students and members of the community — anyone who has expertise in that particular area. Basically, we want to know 'Will it work?' and 'Will it sell?'"

Udell says highly technical energy devices are usually given to universities like MIT to evaluate. "Our focus is mainly on determining the marketability and consumer acceptance of consumer-related energy inventions," he says.

Udell says the center has been involved in studying energy-related devices for some time.

"Even before the NBS chose us to do feasibility studies, we had been getting referrals from members of Congress and other sources." The center receives referrals from patent attorneys and the National Science Foundation.

The main problems associated with evaluating most of the energy-saving devices, says Udell, are two market acceptance factors he calls "use pattern compatibility" and "learning." He says most new energy devices require consumers to make significant changes in their accepted use patterns and this lowers the device's chances for market success. He also says the amount of learning required to understand the product or use it effectively is often very high, another factor which hinders market success.

"Developing marketability of these products is something very important to society," says Udell. "That's why we aim at not only determining whether the product will be a commercial success, but we also conduct research to determine ways to insure and develop their marketability."

Udell says he sees the work the center is doing for the NBS and ERDA as one possible source of funding to keep the center afloat when its science foundation grant runs out in 1977.

"We're the only non-private organization around whose purpose is to assist private inventors," he says. "The private inventor has been crucial to the development of America's technology — it's a legitimate and important area for governmental support."

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