New seminar to train entrepreneurs

By Paul Schindler

The seminar is aimed at stimulating the self-employment ideas of students with a diverse background - from all places of interest to entrepreneurs in business or international activities. Prof. Li, a long-time member of the department of Aeronautics and Astronautics, received his Ph.D. here in 1971. His ideas of things in terms of "syntaxes," as a result of his experience as one of the originators of the systems concept in his department.

The idea for the seminar which he will be giving this term is based on his own experience as an inventor and entrepreneur. During the early 40's, Li was doing work with Charles Stark Draper which led to a patent of the two of them shared. The process involved in carrying its ideas from the lab to real-world production and some struck him at that time of being both interesting and important. Since then Li has devoted a great deal of time and thought to developing its concepts, which center around a key problem: there is really no formal method at the Institute now for instructing a student in "idea system operation." These are certain useful skills and techniques which take an idea out of a person's head and put it into 100 million living noses.

Li illustrated his concept with an idea he has been working on recently. One of the frequent meetings which he was attending in connection with a small firm he owns revealed that there was a need for a device to measure ground tilt, to be used in earthquake prediction. He took a look at the device now used by the US Geological Survey (the current major customer for such devices) and realized that a better design could be made.

A weekend of work in his company's lab produced a working model which Li stored in a peanut butter jar. This event occurred over Labor Day weekend, and inspired the professor. The seminar will try to teach people how to take a worthwhile idea and develop it commercially for real-world use. But I realize that it will be hard for people to come up with good ideas right away. This provides the first idea. The students in the seminar this fall will witness the setting up of a new company to handle this product, in addition to learning how to get the licenses and manufacturing techniques which will be needed.

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Li has his own thoughts on the matter, a few of which are set down here. One of the most imaginative innovators and entrepreneurs of our time is Dr. Land of the Polaroid Corporation. He left college at Harvard in order to pursue his first innovation, the polaroid lens, which led to a great enterprise, the Polaroid Corporation. Although this is an extreme case, it does emphasize what little college education is needed to be an innovative and entrepreneur. Indeed, the "I and E" are queen bees of society, while colleges and trade schools provide the workers and are designed primarily for that purpose.

Ever since the industrial revolution, the Western world has enjoyed three major endowments, namely: (1) Riding on the crest of a general breakthrough in natural sciences; (2) An abundance of the world's natural resources; (3) A tremendous world market. This is an ideal environment to breed "I and E." and each "I and E" can provide thousands of jobs for his followers. Times change. Our future society will have more constraints than ever. The natural breeding ground for the "I and E" shrinks, while at the same time society needs an increase in the ratio of the number of "I and E" to the number of workers, because the carrying power of each "I and E" is reduced. Maybe it is time to consider a place for the "I and E" in college. If "I and E" cannot be developed by drilling, then every sign of self-motivation should be encouraged. Our future Dr. Land need not wait for the honorary degree if moon-light operations in college receive proper recognition.

The first function of this seminar is a forum or club for those students with a strong desire to promote things to satisfy a possible need of society while submitting to the drudgery of regular courses to fulfill a degree requirement. This forum will consider their situation and make recommendations.

The second function of this seminar is to provide a place for the student to gain encouragement and to share experiences with others who have a flair for "I and E" activities.

Finally, it is hoped to establish financial independence of operation for the group and provide adequate manpower and reward for the individual members.

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