

U students win grand prize in technology competition

By: Parker Williams

Posted: 4/24/07

A team of U students and faculty walked away with a \$5,000 grand prize in a new statewide technology competition last week.

Seven students and two professors composed the nFocus team, which won the grand prize for its development of a silicon-based micro-camera for use in cell phones and digital cameras.

The size of the new auto focus system is 1.3 millimeters; the lens is slightly larger than mechanical pencil lead.

"Essentially, we created a system that can stretch the lens like the human eye," said Ronnie Boutte, a graduate student in mechanical engineering and member of nFocus.

The design of the lens is similar to the Hoberman arch, which is on display south of Rice-Eccles Stadium.

The nFocus team also recently competed in the Utah Entrepreneur Challenge, where it qualified for the semi-finals.

Started by the U's Technology Commercialization Office, the Technology Titans Innovation Challenge is an idea competition organized by U students from the School of Business and the College of Engineering. The competition aims to help students develop and share new inventions that have the potential to become important, state-of-the-art technologies.

More than 100 entries were submitted in this year's competition, most of which dealt with engineering or computer science.

Now with \$5,000, nFocus is working toward a finished product.

"I don't foresee a (finished product) in the next year or two," Boutte said. "We still have quite a way to go in the research and development phase."

Several other U students also received awards in the competition.

Dolly Holt, a graduate student in bioengineering, was awarded a \$1,000 prize for potential humanitarian impact. Holt developed a hydrogel-coated tampon. Hydrogel is a substance often used with burn victims. A layer of hydrogel is put on the skin and acts as a barrier to sensitive areas when the cotton bandage is removed.

After receiving encouragement from several professors, Holt entered the competition. "When I first

submitted it, I didn't think I had a good chance of winning," Holt said.

Brad Stoker, student chairman and co-founder of the challenge, said the competition is a great experience for students. "The real value of the competition is not necessarily the prize money," Stoker said.

Regardless of what field students end up in, Stoker said the skills learned through the competition are invaluable.

© Copyright 2007 The Daily Utah Chronicle