Take a walk around the UW-Madison campus and you'll hear a palpable excitement in the voices of students and faculty members when they talk about their ideas. It will quickly become clear to you that there is no shortage of smart, innovative people in Madison.

But while UW produces inventors and innovators in large quantities, only some of those people have the business savvy necessary to create and grow start-up ventures.

The desire to harness the potential of the great ideas that exist in Madison and turn them into businesses that can help make the world a better place led to the creation of MERLIN Mentors.

What is MERLIN?

MERLIN is an acronym for the Madison Entrepreneur Resource, Learning and Innovation Network. It functions as a free local mentoring service that fosters growth in the number and quality of Madison area start-ups by matching new entrepreneurs with experienced business people.

The mentors are locally based and well-established, which means they have an acute understanding of how to grow a successful company in Wisconsin. These mentors provide aspiring entrepreneurs with the help they need to overcome the hurdles that come with starting a new business.

The goals of the program are to create a larger pool of viable entrepreneurs within the Madison community and to strengthen the university’s role as a leader in innovation.

An aspiring entrepreneur with a well-developed idea must first apply to the program by appearing in front of some of the mentors and selling his concept. The intake committee of mentors screens the applicant and then collectively decides which mentors are best suited to coach that particular candidate.

Once accepted to the program, a mentee then meets with his or her assigned mentors on a monthly basis. The mentors help the budding entrepreneur convert ideas into action.

Playing ‘copycat’

The idea to start a program like MERLIN Mentors in Madison was born when Allen Dines, the assistant director of the UW-Madison Office of Corporate Relations, learned about a similar program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

The MIT program connected inventors with business people and had become quite successful by the time Dines began looking closely at it in November 2006.
Dines considered the similar ways in which both UW and MIT churn out innovators, and he began thinking of how he could model MIT’s program in a way that best served the Madison area.

Two years later, in the fall of 2008, MERLIN Mentors was launched.

Dines says the successful adaptation of a program from another school to UW-Madison is a reminder that it is not always necessary to reinvent the proverbial wheel.

**Collaborating with partners**

But getting MERLIN Mentors off the ground was no easy task. Dines needed to find organizations willing to partner with the Office of Corporate Relations to help create the program.

He got the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) to jump on board.

While the mentors would volunteer their time and expertise, the program’s operations still had to be funded.

With the help of former chancellor Biddy Martin, MERLIN Mentors was able to secure a grant from the University Research Park. This money goes towards the cost of lunch meetings between the mentors and their respective mentees as well as the services of an operations manager.

The Wisconsin School of Business is the fourth and final partner.

**Building an army of mentors**

While the consortium of university entities was necessary to create MERLIN Mentors, the heart of the program is made up of the mentors themselves. Dines says their commitment and leadership are responsible for the success and growth of the program.

From an outsider’s perspective, it might seem as though persuading entrepreneurs from outside the university to volunteer their time with MERLIN Mentors would be a monumental challenge.

But Dines says that hasn’t been the case.

Six enthusiastic mentors started with the program three years ago. That number has since ballooned to over 100.

Dines cites three reasons why successful area entrepreneurs serve as mentors. The first is that many of them genuinely believe that it is good to help young companies develop and prosper. The second is that many of them want to be a part of the University of Wisconsin in some way. Lastly, the 100-plus mentors have formed somewhat of a social network through their participation in the program. Dines compares it to an informal rotary club that enhances the professional development of the entrepreneurs themselves.

**Where MERLIN stands today**

The group of mentors has expanded to include angel investors, entrepreneurs, investment bankers, CEOs, faculty members and engineers. The population they serve includes students, faculty, staff, Madison residents and recent UW-Madison alumni.

More than 30 active teams of mentors coach up-and-coming entrepreneurs in a variety of business sectors, including energy, information technology, biotech and healthcare, food and beverage, and retail.

Seven entrepreneurs have “graduated” from the program and two have secured follow-on investment.

And, as you read this, future MERLIN Mentors success stories are being written.
To learn more about MERLIN Mentors, visit www.merlinmentors.org or contact Allen Dines at (608) 263-2840 or ajdines@wisc.edu.

For more features in the Showcase Spotlight Series and for information on Showcase 2012, visit http://quality.wisc.edu/showcase.htm.

SAVE THE DATE!
Showcase 2012 will be held Tuesday, March 27, 2012 at the Memorial Union.