What's the Value of Partnership?

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Ask Dr. Darren Lawless, Dean of Undergraduate Research at Sheridan College, and he'll tell you "partnership enhances learning for students and often spurs innovation for industry." Part facilitator, matchmaker and R&D project manager, Lawless spends his days bringing varied groups of people together to achieve a common goal.

"There are countless small and medium-sized enterprises in the communities we serve that are faced with very real and sometimes very expensive challenges, such as the need for a prototype, feasibility study, commercialization strategy, training or skills upgrading for employees," observes Lawless. "We also have hundreds of students who are eager to apply the latest knowledge, theories and techniques that they've learned in the classroom to a real-life setting."

That's where Lawless steps in.

"Ultimately, we are here to help," he says. "And if we can't help, we won't take on the job." Step one for Lawless is to clarify the problem or identify the needs of the client. From there, he draws on a deep understanding of the academic programs available at Sheridan to see if there's a fit and an opportunity to advance the curriculum or enhance the student experience as a result of the effort.

Partnerships can come from many sources. Sheridan has built a strong working relationship with organizations such as HalTech, a Regional Innovation Centre (RIC) in Ontario that exists to help entrepreneurs and technology companies develop and grow their ideas, products and businesses. "Haltech was instrumental in bringing an opportunity that a local company, Javelin Reality, needed help with to the attention of faculty and students at Sheridan," says Lawless.

For Javelin Reality, an Oakville-based digital media company, partnership with Sheridan has resulted in a prototype for a 3D, pre-visualization software program. The programs helps video game developers and filmmakers to construct their scenes, arrange characters and sets, and select their camera angles before the time consuming and costly work of development begins.

"Sheridan College was a great fit," says Javelin Reality producer Ben Sainsbury. "We didn't have this expertise in house but Sheridan has an international reputation as one of the world's best animation schools. And the FedDev program definitely helped offset some of the risk of pursuing this new business venture."

FedDev is short for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, which runs a number of programs including one that makes matching funds available for companies that involve students in projects that promote innovation or commercialization.

Sheridan assigned three programmers and a project manager from its Faculty of Applied Science and Technology (FAST) to work with Javelin Reality on the project. One developed a motion capture tool that records body movements which can be applied to animating characters within the program. The second worked on creating realistic virtual cameras within the program, so designers could get a preview of a scene from a camera on the ground, or perhaps from a crane. And the third ensured the cameras behaved properly inside the program and developed editing options to tie all of these tools together.

"This was really an opportunity for the students to get involved in what they would do if they worked for a game company," said Kevin Forest, a Sheridan professor with FAST. Wanting to work side-by-side with the students, staff from Javelin Reality even moved into Sheridan's Applied Research and Collaboration Centre so that they could offer immediate feedback and maximize this partnership. That partnership included a bonus – going beyond the project scope, the students also created a mobile application that turns an iPad into a virtual camera.

Javelin Reality has since demonstrated their prototype to a large online software distributor that intends to carry the company's software tools. With a distribution channel in place, the company has hired a Masters level programmer to help take the project from the prototype stage to a finished sellable product called CinemaSuite that's expected to be on the market later this year. Late last year, Javelin Reality was informed that the prototype Sheridan students helped to build contributed to an investment by the Canada Media Fund (CMF) to commercialize the platform.

This successful collaboration between Javelin Reality and Sheridan also led to a second phase to the project, involving the development of stereoscopic 3D tools that could be integrated into the existing prototype. The tools include a user-friendly interface appropriate for both creative and technical professionals, and a set of real-world camera tools that accurately reflect the distinct choices that are present in stereoscopic 3D capture and post production work.

"By starting with one small problem, we were able to create a great learning opportunity for our students, assemble a variety of partners and resources, and create a robust product that serves an unmet need and has the potential to generate new jobs" Lawless says.

At the end of the day, that is the true value of partnership.