Bares' New Role Heralds Longer Days, Stronger Partnerships

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Steve Bares

The point man for building the Memphis biotechnology industry is now taking the top position of the academic program that feeds that industry with fresh engineers and new ideas.

Steve Bares, president of Memphis Bioworks Foundation, has been named interim director of the School of Biomedical Engineering & Imaging, a joint program between the University of Tennessee Health Science Center and the University of Memphis.

Bares expects to hold both jobs for up to 18 months, with the goal of beefing up the school to the point that it's an irresistible opportunity for a permanent academic director. He intends to do that by recruiting more faculty who have an eye on applying technology to new products and building deeper ties between the school and local industry.

"At Bioworks we want to grow the local industry, and the engine of that growth is coming out of the universities," Bares said. "We can't feed the growth unless we reach into the universities and help them grow."

Keeping them local

About half of the graduates of the UTHSC/U of M biomedical engineering program take jobs in Memphis, he said, while the rest are recruited across the nation.

The school had been a department within the UTHSC College of Medicine but earlier this month was elevated to separate-school status. It currently has nine faculty members and averages 25 graduate students a semester.

Nowhere else does the University of Tennessee operate a joint program with a Board of Regents school, reflecting both the significance and the depth of the biomedical industry in Memphis, Bares said. The joint program was created 12 years ago.

"UT has been trying to figure out the role of this department in the overall campus, and when they moved to a department status they realized that for us to achieve what we need, we've got to have a vibrant biomedical and engineering program," Bares said. "This step will enable both universities to serve the community more effectively."

Symbiosis

Since Bioworks was launched in 2001, Bares has worked to nurture local industry, in part by developing support programs for academic inventors whose research shows commercial promise. He's also enlisted hundreds of local business leaders in various efforts.

By becoming the interim director, Bares is in a position to unite both sides in the symbiotic relationship that leads to innovation, said Dick Tarr, president and executive director of the InMotion Musculoskeletal Institute. InMotion, a tenant in the Bioworks Building at 20 S. Dudley St., was created to provide essential services to scientists, such as the lab space, documentation and technical validation necessary to attract investors.

"Steve has a tremendous background in the area of innovation and commercializing technologies," Tarr said. "He will be able to fine tune that program around the entrepreneurial and capacity building aspects of the Bioworks mission."

A native of Silicone Valley, Bares went to high school with Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs, growing up in a culture that thrives on technical innovation and commercialization. He has a doctorate in physical chemistry, a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in chemistry.

Bares was on the Hewlett-Packard team that resolved the chemistry problems that make modern ink jet printers practical. He has started and sold several technology companies and originally came to Memphis in 1997 to work in new product development at International Paper Co. He previously had worked in the company's New York office.

In 2003 Bioworks started Tennessee's first charter school, the Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering, so that as new businesses form in the coming years, a work force is prepared.

The purpose of technology, Bares said, is to create new products that improve people's lives. UTHSC may be crawling with great ideas but needs ways of channeling that into the commercial arena. One way to help that is in persuading successful inventors to move their work to UTHSC.

The carrot for those in biomedical engineering, he said, is to be in close proximity to the talent at places like Smith & Nephew Orthopaedics, with easy access to facilities such as the Medical Education & Research Institute and InMotion.

"For InMotion, Steve's appointment means we have another close partner working with us at UT, which in turn helps us achieve our mission," Tarr said. "We're hoping this relationship will help strengthen our collaborations and partnerships with UT at all levels."

Longer days

While the primary emphasis locally is on orthopedics and other musculoskeletal innovation, imaging technology is essential to a healthy biomedical engineering program, Bares said. Research takes place in partnership with radiologists, but it's the engineering program that builds the machines and makes them function.

"When you get an MRI, that was developed in a biomedical engineering program," he said. "Everyone wants better pictures; imaging is the interface between life sciences and the daily practice of medicine."

As director, Bares will report directly to physician Steve J. Schwab, executive dean and Memphis campus dean for the UT College of Medicine. Since July the interim director of the program was UT professor Gary S. Keyes, who has become associate director; Bares anticipates working closely with Keyes as he assumes his new duties, on top of his projects at Bioworks.

"One of the challenges I'm trying to work is the time involved; I expect to have longer days," Bares said. "Fortunately, this is right in line with what I'm already doing and we couldn't strengthen Bioworks without doing this."