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Microsoft deal 'a great win for UW'

New data lab will open in downtown Madison

Todd Finkelmeyer — 4/23/2008 8:43 am

Ask Guri Sohi why Microsoft, the world's largest computer software company, is opening a lab on West Main Street, and the chair of the UW-Madison computer science department slowly shakes his head from side to side as a wry grin creases across his face.

To him, the answer is obvious.

"The high-tech companies don't go where all the different incentives are," Sohi states matter-of-factly. "They go where the talent and the brains are. And that's why Microsoft is coming here."

In a unique partnership with UW-Madison's highly regarded computer science department, Microsoft announced today it plans to open an advanced development laboratory downtown.

"And to me, the really big deal is that for the first time a major company is willing to create a presence in Madison to specifically tie into the talent we have here at the university," said Sohi.

The talent Microsoft targeted is David DeWitt, one of the world leaders in database research. The UW-Madison emeritus computer scientist and founder of its database group will direct Microsoft's Jim Gray Systems Lab. It marks the first time Microsoft has created a facility of this kind to tap into the talents of a faculty member and a research group at a university.

"Maybe it'll really jump-start high tech in Madison," said DeWitt, who hopes to have the lab staffed and running by Sept. 1. "The goal is to make this highly successful so we can expand this from the initial staffing to a large number and have it be something that puts Madison on the map. The East Coast and West Coast get all the attention, and this is a great win for the UW and a great opportunity for Microsoft."

At first, the operation will be relatively small, with six full-time Microsoft employees working under DeWitt's direction. The real bonus to UW-Madison is that Microsoft will support a number of graduate research assistantships in the computer science department beginning in the fall.

"The reason Microsoft was interested in doing this was to establish a vehicle for graduate students to be more closely involved in problems that Microsoft has and that the field has in general," said DeWitt, who is now employed by Microsoft as a teaching fellow. "So the vision is, there will be full-time staff members from Microsoft working under my direction. And there will be faculty members from the UW consulting in the lab, and there will be a number of graduate students funded by Microsoft through normal UW channels."

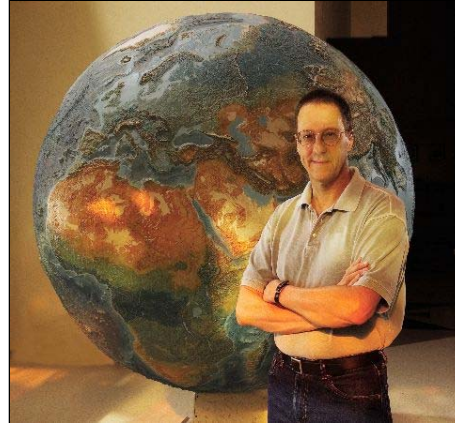
To become a part of the project, graduate students will have to go through an application process set up by the computer science department. Those graduate positions are to function like any other on campus, with a major professor overseeing the student's research, but with Microsoft fully supporting the costs.

Planting the flag

Gary Sandefur, dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, will create a committee that will ensure a student's academic goals are completed.

The intellectual property derived directly from the lab will belong to Microsoft, but the students involved will retain the right to freely use the research results in an academic setting.

Down the road, DeWitt said he hopes the lab will expand to 10 or 20 Ph.D.-level scientists, which would allow the UW to keep more talent in Madison and potentially attract other high tech companies.



Submitted photo

David DeWitt, the UW-Madison emeritus computer scientist who is one of the world leaders in database research, was tabbed by Microsoft to run the computer software giant's Jim Gray Systems Lab on West Main Street.

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"I do think this is a pretty big deal, although originally I don't know that it will result in larger numbers of jobs," said Tom Still, president of the Wisconsin Technology Council. "But the significance for me is Microsoft has taken notice of the talent base and resources that we have here in the Madison area and, more broadly, Wisconsin.

"There has long been a pipeline between the department of computer sciences here and Microsoft. People, graduates, ideas and all these sorts of things have gone back and forth over time. So they are well aware at Microsoft that this is one of the top computer science departments in the country. What this does, I think, is it plants a Microsoft flag here and it will probably lead to other relationships over time."

DeWitt said that at the core of Microsoft's vision is the ability to give users real-time access to the most up-to-date data -- even going beyond facts and figures, but including new data types such as X-rays, videos and even spatial content.

The lab's primary focus in Madison will be to explore novel database system architectures that will be able to support massive data centers, which DeWitt believes could make research in domains like medicine and large-scale research more productive. New database technology could also dramatically reduce the cost of analyzing data.

"It's a major feather in our cap," Sohi said of being associated with Microsoft. "I don't think the public realizes how important information technology is going to be to the future of the Wisconsin economy."

Jim Gray, the lab's namesake, was a mentor to DeWitt early on in his career as an assistant professor. Gray, considered to be a founding father of the database industry, was a longtime Microsoft executive and benefactor to the UW who was lost at sea a little more than a year ago. Gray set sail from San Francisco on Jan. 28, 2007 aboard his 40-foot sailboat, Tenacious, to scatter his mother's ashes in the ocean. He planned to return that day but never returned. Despite extensive searches, no signs of Gray or his boat were ever found.

DeWitt said the Jim Gray Systems Lab in Madison is the first Microsoft facility ever named for a person.

"This is very exciting news for Madison, especially for our downtown," Mayor Dave Cieslewicz said in a statement. "Microsoft is one of the most dynamic and fast-growing companies in the world, and their presence in our downtown has the potential to become an anchor that attracts more high-tech jobs and companies."

The Jim Gray Systems Lab is the second major impact locally by Microsoft since the fall of 2007, when Microsoft purchased Middleton-based Jellyfish, a comparison shopping search engine. Terms of that sale were not released, but the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel cited sources familiar with the deal who estimated it was worth \$50 million.

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