

FEATURE

Innovation at GIX

UW, China hope innovation will soar at Bellevue's GIX

Founders expect students to tackle some of world's pressing problems like health and climate change.

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Excerpted from <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/SeattleTimes/default.aspx>

In the event space of the UW's Global Innovation Exchange (GIX) in Bellevue, a giant screen rotates images of Washington state scenes and those from China, many from Beijing, where Tsinghua University is located.

The new UW campus called the Global Innovation Exchange is named for Steve Ballmer, innovator and longtime force with Microsoft.

A grand experiment in educating entrepreneurs, to be run by two universities on opposite sides of the Pacific, launched Thursday when the University of Washington and China's Tsinghua University opened the doors to a graduate institute in Bellevue.

The Global Innovation Exchange, or GIX, marks the first time a Chinese research university has established a physical presence in the United States.

The building, in the nascent Spring District of Bellevue, was funded through a \$40 million donation from Microsoft, and it features one of the largest and most advanced "maker spaces" in the region for prototyping new technologies. Its founders expect the new students to tackle some of the world's most pressing problems in areas like health and climate change.

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And they marveled at how quickly the institute came into being. It is opening a little more than two years after it was announced in June 2015 — a reflection of how fast change is

happening both in industry and in higher education, UW President Ana Mari Cauce said.

"Our institutions have to be more nimble and more agile, and so do our students, and that is exactly what we're going to be preparing them for." UW PRESIDENT ANA MARI CAUCE

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The building was designed around the curriculum, said Shwetak Patel, the chief technology officer of GIX. Its "maker space" is a cavernous room filled with industry-caliber laser cutters, 3-D printers and machines that can rapidly create printed circuit boards.

It's a space that's designed to allow students to quickly spin out prototypes of new devices, and "make those things no one's thought of yet," said Nicholas Ames, who will direct the space.

"This is going to be a big, big deal," Cauce said. In about two weeks, 43 students will start taking classes in the master's program, classes that are hands-on and project-based. Many of the students are from China; about a dozen are from the United States. The program hasn't been advertised or promoted in this country, and it's ramping up slowly on purpose, to make it easier to work out the bugs, Patel said.

GIX is the first building to be completed in Bellevue's Spring District development, which is very much a work-in progress. To the north of the site on Thursday, bulldozers were busy



University of Washington president Ana Mari Cauce rises to high-five Qiu Yong, president of Tsinghua University, as he returns to his seat Thursday after remarks at the opening of the UW's new graduate institute... (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times)

tearing down a huge Safeway warehouse, and to the south, construction crews were at work on half-built apartment buildings. Eventually, the Eastside's light-rail line will run through this development on its way to Redmond.

The Chinese students selected for the program were among the school's top-tier but also had to prove they were adept at problem-solving, said Yang Bin, vice president and provost of Tsinghua. He said the program and its project-based, team-oriented approach is being closely watched in China, where colleges and universities have been more traditional in their teaching methods.

Students will pay \$54,000 for the 15-month master's program, or \$77,000 for a 21-month pro-gram to complete two degrees — one from the UW, and one from Tsinghua.

Maksim Surguy, one member of the incoming class, walked around the maker space Thursday, admiring the equipment and offering to help unpack it. Surguy, originally from Ukraine, went to college in California and has

already done a few startup businesses. He's interested in being part of a team, and in learning how manufacturing is done in other countries, especially China. "I have lots of ideas," he said.

In addition to Tsinghua, the UW has added eight other partner universities, including the University of British Columbia, and is also partnering with five companies along with Microsoft for financial and instructional support.

"Literally, we are bringing the world together," said Microsoft President Brad Smith, who helped come up with the vision for GIX five years ago.

In 10 years, the UW expects to have about 3,000 students, but not all of them will be master's degree students studying in this building. Some might be doing short refresher courses, or be using distance learning or virtual reality to take classes, Patel said.

Along with Inslee, Gregoire and top executives from Microsoft — including Smith, CEO Satya Nadella and former CEO Steve

Ballmer, for whom the building is named — the opening also attracted many Chinese officials, including the consul general from San Francisco and Tsinghua's president, Qiu Yong.

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“China’s in the soup on climate change, just like us,” Inslee said. “Isn’t it going to be cool when a student at GIX invents a solution to climate change?”