Venu Govindaraju, UB's interim vice president for research, says the region has made a smart bet on medical research. Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

**Veteran researcher leads UB's efforts to boost local economy**

BY: Stephen T. Watson  
Published: March 29, 2015, 12:01 AM  
Updated: March 26, 2015, 01:42 PM

In the mid-1980s, Venu Govindaraju was a computer science and engineering student at a competitive college in his native India, who like all of his classmates, was applying to graduate schools in America.

He picked the University at Buffalo because the school gave him the most generous scholarship – “I didn’t even know where Buffalo was located on a map,” he recalled. He earned master’s and doctoral degrees while saving money to send home to his mother.

Govindaraju had planned to return to India, but he never left America – or UB. Beginning in the early 1990s, he held a series of posts at high-tech research centers on campus and before earning tenure and winning recognition as a SUNY distinguished professor.

He studies how people interact with computers and is an internationally recognized expert in helping computers read handwriting and other texts. His work helping Postal Service machines read addresses on envelopes has saved the agency hundreds of millions of dollars.

Govindaraju received his latest promotion in September, when he was named UB’s interim vice president of research and economic development. Under the two-year appointment, he is charged with bringing more federal and industry funding for research to campus, and ensuring more of that research is brought to the marketplace.

UB reported $388 million in research spending in 2013, ranking the university 57th in the country, according to the National Science Foundation. UB estimates the university’s entire annual economic impact is $2.8 billion.

Govindaraju hopes to build off the momentum generated by the Buffalo Billion economic-development fund, the Start-Up NY tax-incentive program, the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and investments in
Q: What is the job of the vice president of research and economic development?

A: I think, maybe a few years back, this office was a lot to do with compliance. Are we in compliance with all of the federal regulations? Is the money being spent properly? Are we following all of the protocols when we are looking at human subjects?

But today, given the environment we are in and how difficult it is to get research funding, I think this position has truly evolved into a chief research strategist officer position.

So a lot of our time in this office is coming up with new strategies to increase our research expenditures, because that is what is going to keep our university vibrant.

Q: Every midsize city in America is trying to be the next life-sciences hub, the next Boston or San Diego. How is Buffalo separating itself from the pack?

A: You’re absolutely right. All communities are trying. All good, comprehensive universities are trying to improve and be more effective and have a bigger impact on the economy.

So there are two models that we talk about, right? One is, well, let’s somehow land some big company to come and set up over here, and that will create jobs and then there will be other small industries coming around it.

The approach that most universities are probably taking, and UB for sure, is let us look at our strengths. So we have the life sciences strength, OK? And so we look at the strength and then see how we can grow around that.

And in any case, whenever you’re talking about coming up with new companies, startup companies, you know you want to bring in ideas together. So I have one company in the life sciences, which is doing certain things, and a slightly different product from a slightly different company. You put them together, then there is an exchange of ideas and new things start emerging.

Q: Government research funding is shrinking. How worried are you that it’s harder to attract the money to support the research that drives the new breakthroughs?

A: Well, when the going gets tough, the tough get going, right? So, I’m not concerned because it is the same for everybody out there. So we are competing, we are fighting, we are recruiting top-notch faculty.

So, getting the right people in and having that competitive spirit, and the innovation spark. Yes, it is getting tough. But that’s OK. We want to play in this, right?

Q: As a scientist, what do you think is the hardest part about translating research into commercial products?

A: If my mindset is, all that I’m going to do is write a paper and count that in my CV and then move on, then it’s not going to [happen]. And then if it happens, it’s just by sheer luck, right?

But if the mindset is, how can I make a difference – what are the real challenges society is facing and how can I address those – and you start with that mindset, I think you’re already halfway there.

And then when you have good ideas, essentially partnering with the right industry people, [you’re] making it happen.

Q: The Albany area caught lightning in a bottle with nanotechnology, which spurred billions of dollars in private sector investments there. Can the life sciences steer the same benefits to this area?

A: Hindsight is always 20-20, and you don’t have foresight to see those things. But I would say, yes, we’re betting on these things. We’re betting on the genomics research, the personalized medicine, and all those areas to work out to be something really big.

How big? That remains to be seen. And do we compare it with the kind of growth that has taken place in Albany? That also remains to be seen.

But these are good bets, very intelligently made bets. And our optimism is based, not just on some luck that will come along, but on good science and good expertise. And a lot of faculty who are very good at
what they do.

email: swatson@buffnews.com