DREAM Will Help Engineering Students Achieve Goals

If you can dream it, you can do it,” Walt Disney once said.

And Rick Brown (BS mechanical engineering ’71) is hoping that his DREAM will help future engineering students achieve their dreams.

Brown recently established the DREAM Endowed Scholarship in Engineering (Dedicated to Recruiting Engineers for America and Michigan). He says that he has merely planted the seed; his intent is that the endowment will grow into a substantial scholarship as other alumni contribute, thus nurturing the project.

He places a high value on ensuring that future generations of students who are genuinely interested in — and show promise in — this field of study are given the opportunity to pursue an engineering education at MSU, regardless of their financial means.

“Technical education is my passion,” Brown says. And he speaks from experience.

Brown served for two years in the Army, then returned to MSU to pursue an education in engineering. “When I decided to get into engineering, I had already earned quite a few credits — most of them in the area of arts and letters. I went to talk to the assistant dean in the College of Engineering, George Van Dusen.”

Van Dusen reviewed his credentials, which, Brown admits, were not all that impressive. Although it was obvious that Brown had more of an aptitude in the humanities (which he had been pursuing), rather than in technical areas, Van Dusen told him: “I’ve seen some veterans do some amazing things. I’ll let you give it a shot.”

“I realized then it was going to be a stiff challenge,” says Brown. “But he motivated me; it was the fear that I might fail.”

Not only did Brown not fail, he graduated with high honors. He has since told Van Dusen, “I got a lot from the university. It’s a privilege, an honor, and a responsibility to give back because I received so much. I hope others will do the same.”

“Engineering studies and technical experience are the basis for a country’s economic growth and well-being,” Brown says. “The underpinning of a strong economy is technical expertise.

“I certainly hope this scholarship will encourage students to pursue a technical education, earn a degree, and go out and contribute to society. I hope they will recognize the importance of this scholarship and in turn support the university or another technical area of their choice.”

The intent of this endowed scholarship is to provide a permanent and reliable source of funding to help recruit and retain outstanding students — particularly domestic students.

Tom Wolff, associate dean for undergraduate studies in the College of Engineering, says, “From 2001 to 2005, we saw a 35 percent decline in freshmen declaring engineering as a major. Other schools in the country have also seen declines, but the greatest have been at schools that draw students from the state of Michigan and nearby.

“While scholarships have been readily available for MSU students in general,” Wolff continues, “other engineering schools have been able to make better offers than we have. Engineering-
based scholarships will help us draw some of these students to MSU.”

DREAM scholarships, which are renewable for up to two years, are available to incoming freshmen and transfer students who are either U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

Scholarship recipients are normally selected during the spring semester, with awards going into effect the following fall. The number of awards and the amounts are based upon available expendable amounts for that year.

Designating the fund as an endowment means that the principal of the gift will be invested and only a portion of the investment earnings will be spent annually to distribute the awards. This allows the fund to be reinvested for growth and eventually helps many more students over time, as opposed to an expendable fund, which is depleted once the original gift is spent.

“I had a desire to help seed and set up a program to attract others to contribute, so we can grow this into a fairly substantial scholarship,” Brown says.

“I don’t think of charitable giving to the College as ‘giving,’ . . . I think of it as ‘returning,’” Brown says. “I got a lot from the university. It’s a privilege, an honor, and a responsibility to give back because I received so much. I hope others will do the same.”

Thus he encourages scholarship recipients to, in turn, pass their DREAM along to other future engineers.

— Laura Luptowski Seeley

To find out how you can contribute to the DREAM Endowed Scholarship fund, please contact the Office of Development & Alumni Relations at (517) 355-8339 or egrdevel@egr.msu.edu.

The Richard H. Brown File

- BS Mechanical Engineering, High Honors, MSU, 1971; MA Business Administration, University of Illinois, 1977
- While attending college from 1960–1964, he worked in various entry-level positions — including office boy, janitor, press operator, welder, bodyman, and assembly line worker. He says he “learned a lot and made some money.”
- He worked part-time as a computer programming tutor and consultant to manufacturers from 1968–1971.
- From 1971–1979, he was promoted through various management positions to manufacturing manager for Allis-Chalmers (subsequently Fiat-Allis Construction Machinery, Inc.).
- In 1979, he joined The Brown Corporation, an automotive parts manufacturing business in Ionia, Michigan, started by his father and uncle in 1948. He served as president and chairman until 1997. While there, he led the change from $6.7 million in sales and serious debt to $100 million in sales and substantial cash reserves, and increased the operation from one facility to five in three states and Mexico.
- He currently volunteers as a business consultant to nonprofit organizations. Past volunteer services have included serving as: president of the Ionia Area Chamber of Commerce and of the Ionia Rotary Club; board member of the Ionia County Planning Commission, the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, and the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council; and chairman of the Precision Metalforming Association and the Precision Metalforming Association Educational Foundation. He also served as a member of the MSU College of Engineering Alumni Board and as president of the Department of Mechanical Engineering Visitors Board.
- His many accomplishments and honors include: varsity letters in gymnastics from Central Michigan University (where he attended for two years), membership in the Phi Kappa Phi All University Honor Society and the Pi Tau Sigma Mechanical Engineering Honor Society, and selection by the Ionia Chamber of Commerce as Member of the Year (1982). In 2001, he received the MSU College of Engineering Claud R. Erickson Distinguished Alumnus Award.
- Most recently, the Richard H. Brown Foundation provided a lead gift to name an energy laboratory in the college’s new energy and automotive research facilities.
- He has three children, four stepchildren, and three grandchildren. He and his wife, Nancy, live in Belmont, Michigan.