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Illinois researcher wins \$500G Lemelson-MIT Prize

By Donna Goodison

Monday, June 13, 2011 - Added 7 hours ago



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A University of Illinois researcher is the winner of this year's \$500,000 Lemelson-MIT Prize for outstanding mid-career inventors who've developed a patented product or process of significant societal value.

The inventions of John A. Rogers, a materials scientist and applied physicist, have included flexible bio-integrated electronics for medical, military and consumer uses, electronic eye cameras and micro-concentrator photovoltaics. He has 80 patents or applications, and 50 of them are licensed or in active use.

"It's a huge honor," Rogers said of the award from his alma mater, where he received master's degrees in physics and chemistry and a Ph.D. in physical chemistry. "There's a long history now of really accomplished mid-career inventors who have been recognized with this award. It's overwhelming to be put in that group of folks."

Rogers plans to fold the money into his Rogers Research Group at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, where he is engineering chairman. He also directs the National Science Foundation-funded Nanoscale Science and Engineering Center.

“For some of the wilder ideas and exploratory concepts, it’s kind of a luxury to have something like this,” Rogers, 43, said. “We’ll be able to do a lot of things that would have been impossible without it.”

Rogers also is cofounder of mc10, a Cambridge company that’s partnered with Reebok International to develop electronic sportswear with monitoring functions scheduled for release next year.

“Some of the ideas are proven out in prototype form, and they’ve passed initial tests,” he said.

Both the sportswear and Rogers’ electric eye cameras, which are similar in size and shape to a human eye, incorporate his flexible silicon-based electronics and sensors. The camera also is under commercial development by mc10, initially for night-vision systems.

“It represents a more aggressive embodiment of the ideas that we’ve come up with through our research at the university,” he said. “It’s a few years out in the future due to the sophisticated nature of the camera.”

While Rogers has tackled a diverse range of research in the last 15 years, electronics and optical systems are the common threads.

Rogers’ best advice to other entrepreneurs is to be persistent.

“There’s nothing more rewarding than inventing something new and seeing it launched off into commercial implementation that can have social benefits,” he said. “It requires a single-minded goal and teams of people working together collaboratively.”

Rogers’ current work on technology that addresses human health problems and photovoltaics are the most exciting to him because they have the potential for the broadest impact, he said.

“Those are big societal challenges that demand solutions,” he said.

Rogers’ time at MIT was “huge” in shaping him as an inventor and scientist, he said. He attended knowing that he wanted to do physical sciences work, but didn’t appreciate that he was an inventor and engineer until halfway through his college career. The turning point was his participation in the then-\$10,000 business plan competition, where he realized the appeal of converting science into commercial products.

He spun Active Impulse Systems out of the contest in 1995, a company that built sophisticated tools for measuring the thickness of thin metal films used in computer chips. It was acquired by the Philips electronics company in 1998.

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“I think the real competition was launching the company and seeing it be successful,” he said. “It was a very transformative part of my experience at MIT. These tools that we developed are still on the market and in worldwide use.”

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