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Program aims to be film school of the future

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By B. J. Reyes, Associated Press

HONOLULU — With an ever growing number of computers and video game systems creating a demand for his software development company's products, Mark Loughridge has no shortage of jobs to fill.

He needs talented workers, and as he looks to establish a main office for his Backbone Entertainment in Hawaii, he'd like to find them here.

Now the University of Hawaii's new Academy for Creative Media is helping Loughridge and other employers in media and software businesses fulfill that goal.

The program — which began in the fall and was given final approval by the university's Board of Regents last month — has 70 students working on projects in everything from digital film, television and video game production to content creation, screenwriting, storytelling and computer science.

As the program gets going, lawmakers have before them this session a supplemental budget request from the university seeking about \$750,000 for the academy in the upcoming fiscal year.

Loughridge was among those who last week briefed lawmakers on the benefits of developing a talent pool in Hawaii.

"To say yes to all the projects that are coming our way, we'd have to double in size," Loughridge said. "I want to staff up here and I'm able to do that because of a program like this, where I can be in touch with who's the best talent in what all across the system."

Backbone, which creates educational and entertainment software under the Digital Eclipse, ImaginEngine and Games2Learn names, was among several Hawaii companies identified in a study by private economic development organization Enterprise Honolulu as one that would benefit from the products and talent being developed by the academy.

Loughridge — whose company has about 100 employees working in production offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Vancouver and Honolulu — has been working with the academy on various projects that allow students to get a taste of real-world applications for their talents.

As the digital media program grows, organizers hope to establish similar partnerships with other local companies to grow the industry in the islands.

"It can't just be an incubator for the mainland," said academy co-director Chris Lee, former president of production for TriStar Pictures and Columbia Pictures. "The more we get these homegrown companies, the more we know they're going to stay here."

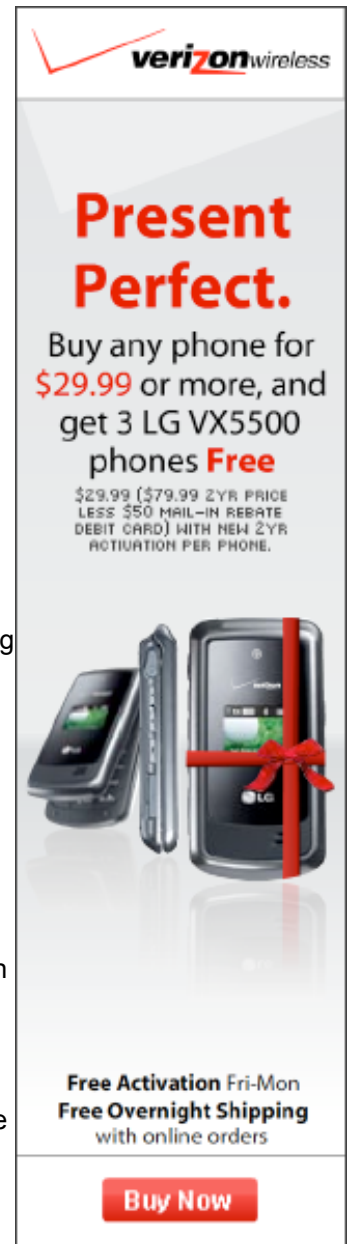
Lee's vision has the support of one key lawmaker.

"We're going to try our very best to support that (budget request) because we think that under his leadership the film industry is a really viable one," said House Economic Development Chairman Brian Schatz, D-Tantalus-Makiki. "Because of the increasing focus on digital technology, our geographic isolation is not a significant barrier anymore.

"We can really take advantage of our multicultural workforce, our trained film workers and, of course, our beautiful environment, so we're going to be as supportive as we can."

Lee has big plans for the academy, noting that the digital age gives students more freedom.

With the help of a \$100,000 private donation, students have been outfitted with "digital




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toolbelts," including wireless laptop computers, digital cameras and editing software, Lee said.

"This is the film school of the future," he said. "You don't have to have a big building where everyone has to go edit."

But the program is about more than filmmaking, he said.

"If we're just going to make movies, we might as well go to USC because they've got a great film school there," he said. "This is really about branching out our economy here in Hawaii."

Loughridge agreed.

His company hopes to develop products not only using Hawaii talent, but created by local talent as well, he said. For example, his company has plans for creating educational software that incorporates stories written by Hawaii authors.


"We'll be seeking to pull talent from throughout the community," he said. "We can do great products here."

The Academy for Creative Media has a Web site at hawaii.edu/acm.

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