

## SUPPLIER DIVERSITY

### ACTiVATE spurs tech women to get out & do well on their own

*More than a hundred women have graduated from the program since it started in 2005. Better than thirty of them have gone on to form companies or develop new products*

By  
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ACTiVATE is currently captained by Julie Lenzler Kirk, standing, a self-described "IT geek" and former software entrepreneur.



Co-founder Renee Lewis, second from right, works with a group of ACTiVATE women at the Texas State program in Round Rock, TX.

Give a woman a fish and you feed her for a day. Teach a woman to fish and you feed her for a lifetime. But teach women to fish for technology and you just may be creating the next generation of tech entrepreneurs, and perhaps some of them will go on to help feed the nation!

At least, that's the idea of Achieving the Commercialization of Technologies in Ventures through Applied Training of Entrepreneurs (ACTiVATE), a program for mid-career professional women in the technology arena.

Fishing for technology transfer opportunities is one of the key concepts covered in ACTiVATE's year-long applied development curriculum, aimed at technology commercialization and business-plan development.

#### 100-plus grads, more than thirty successful entrepreneurs

More than a hundred women have graduated from the program since it began at the University of Maryland's Baltimore County campus (UMBC) in 2005. Better than 30 percent of them have gone on to form companies or develop new products for existing businesses. The program expanded to Texas last year; other programs in Michigan and Arizona are in the works.

ACTiVATE is currently captained by Julie Lenzler Kirk, a self-described IT geek and former software entrepreneur. Throughout her career, Kirk found that she was usu-

ally the only woman at the table. She took over the program in early 2010, naming her UMBC nonprofit spin-off the Path Forward Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship ([www.pathforwardcenter.org](http://www.pathforwardcenter.org)).

#### Call it a pre-incubator

Kirk describes ACTiVATE as a pre-incubator. "We're building the pipeline for the business incubators," she says.

The program was initially funded by the National Science Foundation to foster technology-transfer opportunities among mid-career women. Each year the program accepts between eighteen and twenty-five women, typically with five to ten years of experience in a technical field. "But not everyone has a technical background," Kirk notes. "One of our grads has an MA in linguistics and she just commercialized a medical technology. The biggest thing is the desire to be in business for yourself!"

Participants meet one evening a week and one Saturday a month. They're mentored by real-world entrepreneurs as they work through a two-phase curriculum.

#### Here's how it goes

The eager students learn how to fish: for tech-transfer opportunities at universities and labs, in fields that are compatible with their interests and backgrounds. Later sessions go on to market assessment. By the end of the first semester teams can put out a report on a product's commercial feasibility.

The second semester explores the business planning process, preparing teams to present their business opportunities to a panel of investors who offer constructive feedback. For some of the students, the business plan document that is presented will actually be implemented. For others it's an exercise in assessing commercial viability and making financial projections that may be useful for a later project.

"One of our grads came in with an MBA and twenty-five years of experience in the pharmaceutical industry," Kirk recalls. "She knew how to run a company, but she didn't know how to start one until we showed her. Other women who came through realized that entrepreneurship was not for them, and learning that in time is a good thing, too."

#### Kim Brown and Amethyst Tech

Kimberly Brown was already in the process of buying out her former employer at Cell Systems Inc when she heard about the ACTiVATE program at a biotech networking event. Brown had a clear sense of the product and of her own technical capability, but she knew she could use help with marketing and business finance, so she put in her application to join ACTiVATE.

Her first big lesson came early, during her ACTiVATE interview. As she described her ongoing negotiation, the interview team showed her ways to get a much better price for contract rights and equipment.



Tonya Taylor: "Because of ACTIVATE I now have a sorority of very talented women."

In 2007 Brown launched Amethyst Technologies ([www.amethysttech.com](http://www.amethysttech.com), Baltimore, MD) as a solo entrepreneur with a single client. Today the company employs eighteen people and offers its fifteen U.S. and international clients validation, compliance and calibration services in biotech, pharma, hospital, blood bank and veterinary medicine sectors.

"I knew nothing but science," says Brown. "ACTIVATE helped me learn that the key to any business is intellectual property protection, and the most important investment you make is in a good attorney! Knowing those things has made all the difference for me."

#### Richelle Burnett's Madison Assessment

Richelle Burnett's company is a classic example of commercializing a university-grown technology. Burnett, who has an engineering degree and an MBA, was collaborating with Aberdeen Proving Ground to commercialize a military technology. But after intense research under ACTIVATE guidance she saw that there was no real market for the proposed product.

Eventually she began working with the department of assessment and management at James Madison University (Harrisonburg, VA) to help expand some of the school's test procedures for engineering students. Her Madison Assessment company (Washington, DC), providing in-depth assessment testing services, was



Kim Brown launched Amethyst Technologies all by herself; today she employs fifteen.

launched in June 2009 and began making a profit five months later.

"I originally said that work in higher ed was not for me; I'm an engineer," Burnett says. "But I learned not to discount something just because it's not in my comfort zone." Madison Assessment now has more than fifty international clients and is licensing several technologies from other universities.

"The program helped me learn the business skills and discipline I needed to succeed," Burnett explains. "It validated that I have what it takes to be an entrepreneur. But the best takeaways of all are the professional friendships I've developed in the program!"

#### Tonya Taylor's Rising Star Ideas helps entrepreneurs leverage technology

Tonya R. Taylor worked in IT for Bell Atlantic, T. Rowe Price, the Social Security Admin and Lockheed Martin. When she left in 2000 to start her first company she intended to leave IT behind.

But the product she was marketing never got traction. She wound up in the "guinea pig" class of 2005 and credits ACTIVATE with helping her revisit technology as a business. "I found that my commitment grew throughout the program. I'd been out of college for twenty years and the class helped me go back to the vision I've always had and get me where I want to be," she says.



Richelle Burnett's Madison Assessment provides in-depth testing for colleges.

Taylor found that the all-woman atmosphere "really helped me with my presentation skills. I'm basically a shy person, and while you don't want to brag you do need to be a self-promoter.

"Also, when the subject is technology people tend to gravitate toward men; the men get an instant pass. At ACTIVATE we let go of that barrier!"

Taylor's Rising Star Ideas (Columbia, MD) helps solo entrepreneurs, particularly women, leverage technology in the core areas of management, marketing, financial management, website and social media. "You are in business for yourself but not by yourself," she says.

Although she's a solo entrepreneur, Taylor doesn't feel alone. "Because of ACTIVATE I now have a sorority of very talented professional women, and I really look to them when I need advice," she declares. *D/C*

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— Julie Lenzer Kirk, ACTIVATE