

Business incubators

Opportunity and collaboration for entrepreneurial students

By Nancy Menefee Jackson
Contributing Writer

A university's business incubator harnesses the next generation of ideas, which emerge as start-up companies, and pairs it with the experience and wisdom of faculty and staff.

Plus, a university is just an energetic place, which again creates an ideal atmosphere for an incubator.

"As with chicks, you generate a lot of heat in an incubator," says Jim Kucher, executive director of entrepreneurial programs for the University of Baltimore Merrick School of Business.

University incubators typically provide office and research space at reduced rates, along with amenities such as conference rooms and white boards. But beyond square footage, a key for fledgling businesses is the counseling, mentoring and guidance they receive.

"We provide services and facilities that will help a young company be professional," says Clay Hickson, director of Towson University's TowsonGlobal Business Globalization Center and International Incubator. "We don't provide financing, but we're there as a partner to help them find support. We have a high-level advisory board that also has a wide variety of expertise. A tremendous collaboration with faculty and staff is a part of it."

University incubators tend to find a niche, often one that dovetails with the university's mission.

TowsonGlobal, which opened in 2007, offers 5,100 square feet, but plans call for it to grow to 35,000 square feet. Right now, six companies are housed in the incubator "and we're regularly evaluating prospects," Hickson says.

"It's a mixed-use incubator, and our niche is that word global," Hickson adds. "Our purpose is to help domestic companies succeed in a global economy and to help international companies with a landing place."

At first it may seem ambitious for a start-up company to think globally, but Hickson points out that a videogame company may be using a programmer in Korea and marketing its product on the Internet.

Baltimore County is also a partner in the incubator, which dovetails with the university's mission to be involved in the broader community. In

addition to the six companies on site, young companies in the community can pay dues and become associate members of the incubator, which entitles them to tap into the incubator's workshops and expertise.

"Growing companies creates jobs and tax revenues," Hickson says.

Universities also might make a bit of money; after all they might be incubating a future Fortune 500 company. But the real value lies in what students learn.

Towson has instituted an entrepreneurial track, which has 12 students in it. They're assigned to companies in the incubator, where they work on feasibility studies, global marketing, market analysis and presentations.

"One student did a presentation on the South African market, identified a specialist in South Africa, and the company contacted him and made a business relationship," Hickson says.

Fifteen students will be working at TowsonGlobal next semester.

The University of Baltimore's incubator, the Entrepreneurial Opportunity Center, has 2,500 square feet on the first floor of the Thumel Business Center and will be adding another 400 square feet, named the Attman Hatchery. It's devoted to companies that come out UB's program, such as those founded by students.

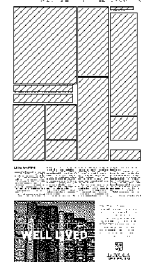
"UB is a place where people come with an agenda," Kucher says. "Students come here to get something done." He notes that he founded a company when he was a student, and it lasted four years, until financing dried up in the wake of 9-11. Today, the incubator puts the program and the facility together in one place to provide support.

"Now we've got it all prepackaged," he says. "That's a huge, huge difference." About 40 ventures in various stages are working with the incubator.

"Some of those are just vague ideas," Kucher says. He notes that sometimes the space allotted is tiny, akin to a study carrel, but the entire university is incubating that company.

The companies tend to be "nuts and bolts" type businesses, such as a bookkeeping company, rather than focusing on, say, an engineering innovation.

"Our philosophy is that if we can raise busi-



nesses that are feeding families, putting kids through college, out of that the bigger companies will come," Kucher says. "It doesn't need to be the idea that ends up as an IPO."

It's no surprise that the University of Maryland nurtures entrepreneurs; after all, it's where Kevin Plank was selling t-shirts out of the trunk of his car, a venture that grew into Under Armour.

The university boasts a number of initiatives to support student and faculty ventures, such as a technology licensing office, a venture accelerator program and the Technology Advancement Program (TAP), an incubator that offers furnished office space and lab space, including wet labs, flex labs and bio scale-up facilities, as well as conference rooms and a receptionist.

Asher Epstein, director of the Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship, says, "We try to be one of the more hands-on incubators. We don't have a lot of space; we have a small basket of eggs but we try to watch it very carefully."

Most of the companies in the incubator come from faculty research or a student idea.

The university regularly holds what's known as "Pitch Dingman," where students pitch an idea, and the winning idea gets \$2,500.

"Anybody can come in and pitch an idea," Epstein says, "but you can't just say 'I have an idea for a flying car.' You have to have an idea of how to get it to the marketplace. We set it up with expectations – if the students win, they have to come back and work with us."

Although the business, engineering, computer science and life sciences students contribute plenty of ideas, "some of the most energetic and aggressive are the liberal arts students," Epstein says.

Encouraging entrepreneurship through incubators also provides great educational opportunities.

"They're in there as interns, as employees – to do start-up work as an intern is an invaluable experience," Epstein says, adding that incubators are also crucial in attracting top faculty. •

Hands-on learning with the Handy Jamm

When Patrick Hurley was touring with his band Bloo for a couple of years, he used to think how great it would be if the band could practice their electric instruments while stuck on buses.

He kicked the idea around for a decade and eventually came up with the idea of the Handy Jamm, a pocket-sized, battery-operated device that would let up to four musicians do that. It's also useful for music teachers, or just for teenaged girls dreaming of being the next Hannah Montana.

Now the 32-year-old Hurley is a senior at the University of Baltimore, and he's developing his product and his company with the help of the university's incubator.

"In 2002, I was working at a sound company and studying electrical engineering, and I started building a device, but I just didn't know what to do next," Hurley explains. "That's what I came to UB with – an idea."

When Jim Kucher, executive director of entrepreneurial programs for the University of Baltimore Merrick School of Business, spoke to one of Hurley's classes, that convinced him to become involved in the incubator.

There, Hurley gets not only office space and access to conference and work rooms, but he also taps into the advice and coaching of seasoned business professionals.

"It's just a tremendous resource; it's like 50 years of business experience available to you," Hurley says. "It's really a powerful network of everyone you would need to start a business."

Prototypes for the Handy Jamm are almost complete and will be out within the next four months, and Hurley is already thinking about other music-related ideas.

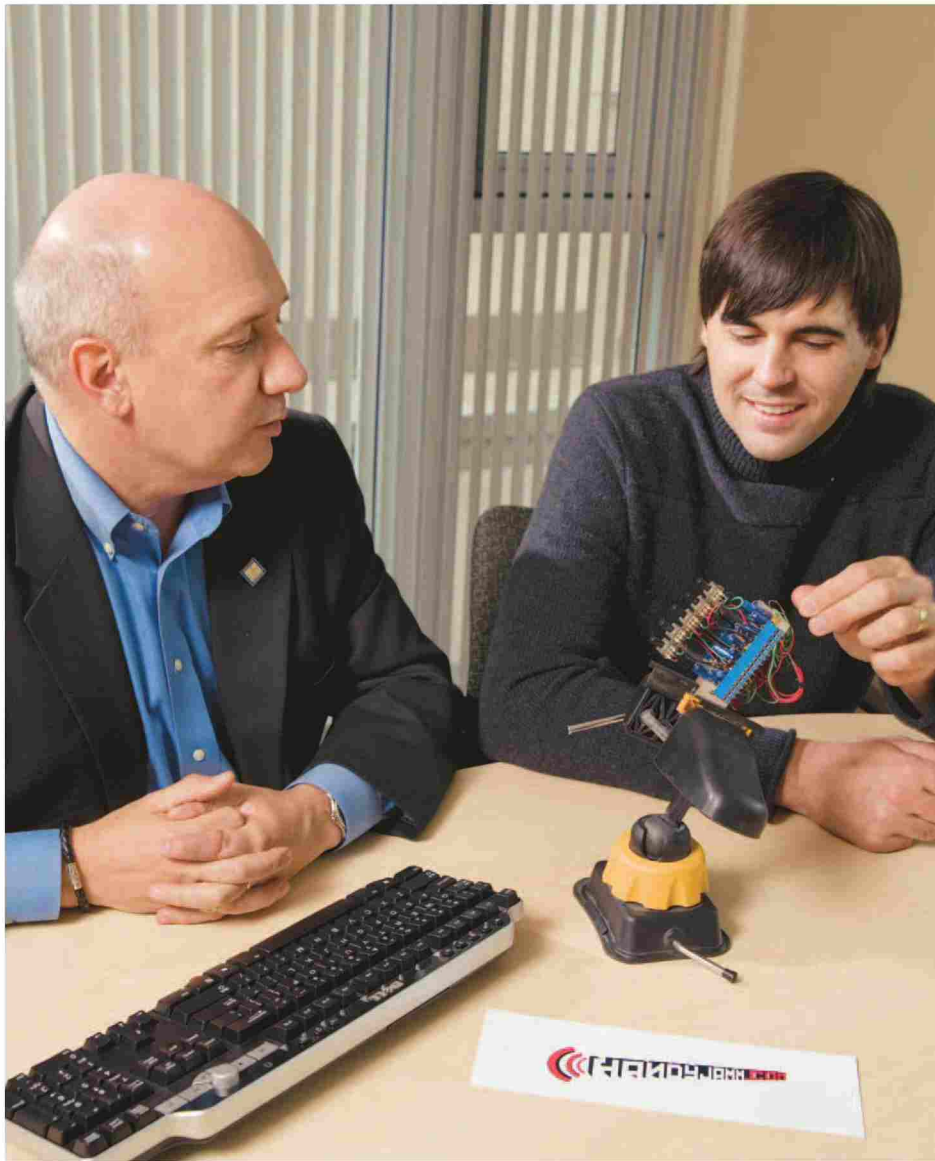
Hurley has taken all night classes at UB, earning his degree while raising a family and working

in real estate.

"I've never enjoyed going to school so much," he says, adding with a laugh that he knows it's the right program, "when you're getting in your car at 11 at night and still feel good about that."

Hurley's next step will be to garner the necessary financing for Handy Jamm to become a main-stream product. He doesn't know if it will be a success, but either way it's been an education. •

top left: Jim Kucher, executive director of entrepreneurial programs at the University of Baltimore Merrick School of Business collaborates with student Patrick Hurley. Hurley is in the process of completing prototypes for his product, the Handy Jamm. For more information on Hurley's project, visit his Web site www.handyjamm.com.



John Dean, Contributing Photographer