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## Turning inventions into new ventures

Hopkins debuts tech commercialization program

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Kris Appel doesn't fit the stereotype of a technology entrepreneur. She earned a master's degree in linguistics and spent 17 years working for the **National Security Agency**. But in recent years, the desire to launch her own company began to nag at her with increasing urgency. She started taking small steps toward her goal in 2003, quitting her government job and joining a local technology firm to gain experience in the private sector. Simultaneously, she looked to buy a franchise but found nothing she could get excited about owning. Then, in 2005, while attending an event hosted by the Greater Baltimore Technology Council, Appel picked up a brochure promoting a local program focused on turning mid-level career women into technology entrepreneurs. Called Activate, the program eventually put her on the fast-track to realizing her long-harbored professional dream. Started in 2005, the grant-funded Activate developed by **University of Maryland Baltimore County** has spawned more than 30 startups throughout the region, including Appel's medical device company **Encore Path Inc.**, which holds an exclusive license to market Tailwind. That device was designed by University of Maryland, Baltimore researchers to help stroke patients recover use of their arms. On the heels of Activate success stories like Appel's, the **Johns Hopkins University Carey School of Business** this March launched a technology commercialization program, Innovate. Modeled in part after the UMBC prototype, led by serial entrepreneurs, and housed at the university's Montgomery County campus, the program will help cohorts of business professionals and postdoctoral students turn local inventions into business ventures. It's an idea industry experts say is long overdue. "We as a nation invest north of \$50 billion on research each year. In 2006, royalties [from laboratory inventions] barely exceeded \$1 billion. That's not much return on investment," said Yash P. Gupta, dean of JHU's Carey School of Business, who acknowledges that universities have long been good at producing findings but generally aren't equipped for commercialization. With Innovate, Gupta hopes to change this paradigm.

The idea behind Innovate is to bring together both business professionals and scientists, all of whom are interested in commercializing an invention, and teach them how to realize this potential.

"If you are a business student, you are to learn about the lingo and culture of scientists. If you are to run a company as a scientist, you must know what's behind it," Gupta said.

The first of Innovate's 30-week program, which launched March 4, comprises 13 business professionals and 16 postdoctoral researchers.

In pairs, students first will select a technology they would like to commercialize and conduct a market assessment of its viability. Next, they will develop a business plan to support their invention, which they eventually will present to venture capitalists, who will critique but not actually fund it. Throughout the program, serial entrepreneurs acting as instructors, plus a host of experts — including venture capitalists, scientists, and patent attorneys — will advise students on various perspectives of initiating a successful business.

Though Innovate stems from a three-year \$599,625 grant from the **National Science Foundation**, JHU plans eventually to integrate it into the curriculum of its global master's in business administration program, which launches this fall. Initially, a mandatory course in the MBA curriculum called "Discovery and Market: will draw on the principles of Innovate.

Cherie Nichols, Innovate's program manager, said that JHU's business school is "very committed" to getting more Hopkins' technologies transferred.

Gupta also has high hopes for the program. "We expect to have a very significant number of students starting their own organizations," he said.

Gupta's expectations for Innovate may be based in part by the success of UMBC's entrepreneurship program. Stephen Auvil, assistant vice president for research at UMBC, wrote the initial grant for Activate in 2004. At the time, he anticipated that each class of 30 participants would reap one or two startups. Instead, the program has been churning out four to five per year.

Auvil measures Activate's success beyond businesses started by graduates of the program. "We've got over a hundred women who are trained to go into a university or a federal lab, assess a technology, and do a business plan around it," he said. Acting on the entrepreneurial spirit they impart to their students, Activate instructors and serial entrepreneurs Julie Lenzer Kirk and Renee Lewis have decided to license the program and take it national. Already, Texas State University has adopted it. Closer to home, both university-based entrepreneurship programs boast strong support.

Sally Sternbach, executive director of **Rockville Economic Development Inc.**, was instrumental in bringing Innovate to JHU's Montgomery County campus after having been a long-term proponent of Activate. "I think it is one of the most successful entrepreneurship programs to marry the academic and the practical that I have seen," she said.

Driving Sternbach's staunch support is what she considers a glaring hole in the area's economic potential.

"The National Institutes of Health, which is at my back door, has an annual research budget of \$3 billion. I look at how many companies based on NIH's intellectual property have started in this area in the seven years I've been here; there isn't one," she said.

The Rockville organization plans to support students in third phase of Innovate, as they attempt to launch their businesses. REDI is currently looking for funding for this purpose, and while it hasn't secured any yet, Sternbach expresses confidence that Montgomery County will come through.



Cherie Nichols is the program manager for Johns Hopkins University's new Innovate



Kris Appel was able to commercialize technology to help stroke patients