

Philadelphia Business Journal - May 11, 2009

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PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, May 8, 2009

Building on Rowan's innovation

Philadelphia Business Journal - by [Bernard Dagenais](#)

Universities, at their best, go beyond educating people for future employment. They use innovation to create jobs for their surrounding communities and graduates.

It's with that philosophy in mind that **Rowan University** of Glassboro is operating a business incubator at the budding South Jersey Technology Park in neighboring Mullica Hill. There are now six companies in the space that was opened in October 2008. One of the companies is already on track to soon move out for larger space. A seventh company appears ready to sign an agreement that could lead it to eventually move into the incubator. And the hunt for new tenants is on.

This move-them-in, move-them-out approach is central to the strategy, as is the connection to Rowan.

One of the companies — medical device designer FocalCool — is run by a Rowan professor and employs engineering students. Two other companies in the space are run by Rowan graduates.

"The great part is that our students can learn from these companies and our students can help these companies by working together," said Niranjana Pati, dean of Rowan's Rohrer College of Business.

Sarah Piddington, interim director of the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the person responsible for filling the incubator, is looking for technology companies with strong job growth potential.

"That's what we're trying to do — grow tech businesses in South Jersey," Piddington said.

Tenants who locate in the topnotch space get conference room facilities and receptionist support, along with access to training and mentoring. Piddington is close to signing her first virtual tenant, someone working from home who can tap into similar services in hopes of growing into the incubator space. The program could grow to as many as 10 offsite clients.

For now, the incubator effort is only a small beginning, totalling 3,000 square feet. But it's part of a huge plan to grow technology companies at the tech park at routes 55 and 322. Right now, the park consists of the 45,000-square-foot Samuel H. Jones Innovation Center, which contains the incubator and Rowan's College of Engineering research facilities.

Thomas Drury, executive director and CEO of the nonprofit, university--owned tech park, believes he is weeks away from finalizing lease agreements for the second floor of the first

building. Those will clear the way to start construction on a second building toward the end of this year with 75,000 square feet.

Eventually the park's backers aim to build 25 buildings on 180 acres being leased from the university.

Potential tenants have continued to show interest in the tech park, which Drury attributes to its location in the Philadelphia region and an attractive pricing structure. Some technology companies continue to grow despite the recession, he said.

"The Rowan Connection" is key to the sales pitch. Tenants get access to researchers, equipment and faculty-led student teams who can provide low-cost business consulting — and even the library and gym.

One company that was attracted to the tech park and the incubator is SocialReach. A year-old entity with a technology that brings advertising to social networking applications appears poised to outgrow the incubator, where it's now using about six of 16 available spaces, with 12 employees on site. CEO and co-founder Stephen Gill is a Rowan graduate who is looking to move to the building's second floor. The hope is there's more where Gill and his team came from.

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