

# Podcast Interview



Julie Lenzer Kirk, Co-Founder, Path Forward  
Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship  
Interviewed by: Rob Ksiazkiewicz, SSTI

*2011 Excellence in TBED Award Winner:  
Commercializing Research*

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: Hello this is Rob Ksiazkiewicz with SSTI, and this is the SSTI Podcast. Today I will be speaking with Julie Lenzer Kirk, co-founder of the Path Forward Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Path Forward's ACTiVATE program was the winner of the 2011 SSTI Excellence in TBED Award in the category of Commercializing Research. ACTiVATE is a catalyst for economic and cultural transformation helping mid-career women build business by leveraging their existing skills sets to commercialize technology. The program was recognized by a national panel of experts in technology-based economic development for its compelling results and replicable model.

Hi Julie, thanks for joining us today.

First I would like to just give our listeners a brief history and background of the ACTiVATE program, and how it fits into the Path Forward Center's overall mission.

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: Sure. ACTiVATE has actually been around for a number of years. It was the brainchild of some folks at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). It was originally funded with a grant from the National Science Foundation through their Partnerships for Innovation Program. That grant was awarded in 2004. The program had its first year in 2005. I was one of the inaugural program instructors in that program. The program was originally established to move more technologies out of the universities and federal labs in our area. We've focused on mid-career women because it seemed to be there was a real untapped opportunity of potential to drive not only diversity into the pipeline of businesses, but then also as I said there was just a lot of availability in something that nobody was really focused on. We had a lot of programs for the university students, for the academics that were in the institutions, but nothing that was really aimed at taking these mid-career experienced women and teaching them how to do tech transfer to leverage their corporate or independent consulting careers to start technology-based businesses. So the Path Forward Center is really focused on being a catalyst for economic change. We call it 'activating women to build their businesses beyond one'. What better way to build a scalable, fundable business than to leverage it using technology.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: You had mentioned the fact that obviously it goes after female potential entrepreneurs; could you describe a little bit more about the Path

Forward Center's process in selecting participants for the program, and also technologies. How is that process done?

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: Sure. For women, we look for some experience, either a technical experience or business experience. A lot of our successes have actually been women who have managerial or business level, business development sales experience in a somewhat technical capacity so they get technology. But they are not technologists themselves. I think that's something that is really unique to what ACTIVATE does. Rather than trying to make the technologist into business people, we bring the business people to the technologists and try to partner them together to start businesses.

Women come into the program in one of three ways. They either come in with no ideas at all for business, just a strong desire to start a business and to be entrepreneurial. The second one is sometimes they come in having a technology. They might be the inventor, or they might have already found an inventor that they think they want to work with or a technology they think they want to work with. The third way that they come in is that they maybe have a domain problem or an area they want to focus on. Maybe it's an industry specialty. Maybe it's a consulting business and they want to add technology to the company so that they can have a product and drive larger value in their company. So they have a problem they want to solve or an industry they're looking into, like clean energy, or they are really interested in medical device, or they're really interested in cancer support. Then we help them to develop those ideas and farm intellectual property out of various institutions and federal labs. We don't actually necessarily pick the technologies for them, or give them. We started out in the program giving them a list of these technologies, but what we realized after a while was that even better than giving them a list and helping them pick, is we teach them how to fish. We teach them how to go out and look for technologies, how do you engage with a tech transfer office, what questions do you ask, what should you be prepared to discuss, where can you find these little gems of potential research that you can leverage in creating your own company.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: Very interesting. Once these people have been selected, what's the next step for them? If you could please describe briefly the two phase pre-incubation curriculum that ACTIVATE is so well known for?

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: I'm glad that you mentioned the pre-incubation because that's an important process distinction between what we do. It's really before they have this solid business plan. We get them before they're ready to perhaps move into an incubator somewhere. The first phase is actually selecting the right idea and building feasibility. It's asking the question: should I do this as a business, and helping them to find that idea. We go through a lot ideation and matching with personal passion, skills, problems, and then validating that indeed there is a market here, that this is feasible.

Also, talking to customers and doing a rough 'back of the napkin' feasibility analysis from a financial prospective. Once they have that – yep I think this is feasible, and then we go into the business planning process. I call it the business planning process, and not the business plan for a very important reason. the 30 page document that is a business plan certainly has its place in the business life cycle. If you're trying to raise funds, you might need to do a business plan, or win a competition. But if you're not going to do any of those things, many entrepreneurs are intimidated by sitting down and writing a 30 page business plan when they're not quite sure why they're doing it. We really focus on the business planning process, and what are the questions they need to ask. Whether it ever makes it into a document, we don't really care. But understanding when it should make it into a document, but making sure that you ask all of the relevant questions about this idea, and this business, and how you're going to do it.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: After they've went through this process, one of the things that our judges talked about was how impressed they were about the ACTiVATE's program participants ability to commercialize technologies and how successful they were. Could you please describe what you think makes those participants so successful?

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: Well it's interesting you mention that, because success is something that we really help them to spell out in the very beginning of the program of what success means to them. What you see then is what they've come out with at the end, but what you don't see is this bailing fast process that we teach them that has to do with why at the end they are successful. Because we're teaching them the process and we're teaching them how to get through a particular technology and figure out quickly whether or not it has legs, if you will. Whether this idea is truly an opportunity, I think that that whole process is what leads to eventual

success. They realize that their first baby may not be the one they go to market with, and to very quickly figure out if it's something that makes sense. I think that the other thing is that we work very keenly on their mindset from the very beginning is that so much of entrepreneurship is a mindset. Making sure that they have the right persistence, the right vision, the ability to build a team, understanding that you need a team and then also introducing them to those networks. Who you work with and who you have access to is a huge part of success in commercializing a technology. Those are the really three things that we work hard to make sure are part of the program.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: Now that they've been through the program and they've either went through the success or the bail fast method and moved on to a new technology, what metrics do you look at? How often do you request the information from your participants, and typically how you publicize them?

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: Well we actually do a pre-program. When they first come into the program we do a pre-program attitude and skills survey to really give us that base line of okay where are you mentally? It ranges from everything from I know how to pitch for funding, I know how to find an investor, to I'm confident that I can start this business. We get that when we start in the program. We touch base mid-term to find out how things are going, where they are, and we expect a small amount – well not always small, sometimes large – amount of discomfort going through the process.

Because one of the unique things about the program is that we are dealing with experienced professionals, and they are used to being at the top of their game, and they're used to being the folks that have all the answers. Now we're putting them into something that's just totally foreign, which is entrepreneurship. They are not as confident, and they don't have as much of the information, and it is a tough process. Growth can hurt. So it's interesting to see mid-term that we are getting them out of their comfort zone a little bit, and that they are getting a little uncomfortable. Then at the end of the program, we track again where they are. If they started a business, where they are from a confidence level and skills level. Then we continue to go on to track our alumni. This has been something new since the Path Forward Center took this over from UMBC. When UMBC closed out the program in 2010, closed out their engagement with it, they commissioned actually an economic impact study that was done by an independent firm. That really set the

base line for the success in the metrics. So we'll plan to do that again in another couple of years. In the meantime we do an annual survey with our alumni to figure out who's there, what have they done, how many jobs have been created, and what kind of revenues. Admittedly as anybody in economic development will know, that's actually one of the toughest parts of the process; once they've been successful is getting them to come back to share their success with you. I would say that it's maybe a little bit easier for us in that when you get a group together that's been together for a year, they build an affinity with each other and they become a community. When you have that community feel it's easier to stay in touch with them and to get back in touch with them and to find out how they're doing as they progress.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: A couple more questions before we wrap this up. Another shocking aspect about the ACTiVATE program is it's relatively low cost compared to other programs that are out there. What would be the secret? I think that's what a lot of our listeners want to know is, how can they institute a program that is going to have great results and keep the bottom line very low?

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: Well, employ entrepreneurs to do it! Seriously, our program is taught by entrepreneurs, it's taught by seasoned entrepreneurs. Very often we'll get cashed out entrepreneurs, so we do pay them a stipend to teach the program, but it's perhaps not like what you would pay a professional trainer if you will. We do engage with the business community quite a bit to get facilities so we don't pay for facilities. Then we have found it can sometimes be a challenge when we are running the program through the university, there is a certain amount of overhead that goes with that. That can be a challenge in keeping the cost down. But you can also leverage resources too when you do that. At a university you might have access to facilities, but then you also have access to – if it's got an incubator you can use entrepreneur residents, you can couple with other events that are going on in the community for networking events, and really leverage as much of the existing ecosystem that's already out there as you can. Then that way you're not having to recreate anything.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: That's really good, because I think that's one of the things a lot of our practitioners have, is just that problem with community and how to build it. I think you explained it very well.

Finally, any other things you want to share with our listeners that would benefit their organization if they're looking to build a similar program to ACTiVATE, or just in general. Even going back to community building in a region, especially helping out a segment of the population who gets overlooked typically in the field of technology S&T.

Ms. Lenzer Kirk: I think there are a couple of things that I can think of. In building the ecosystem you have to recognize that there has to be value to everybody that you engage with. Understanding what that value is to the different stakeholders that you're engaging with and then communicating that value back to them in your marketing and when you're kind of promoting the program. One of the things that we really don't do with the program is we don't sell it as this is a philanthropy. Because I think that belittles a little bit the potential of the women that are engaged. They just need to see themselves being successful and have role models that they can look at. That would be kind of the second thing is that if you're trying to attract an affinity group, don't put out your marketing materials that don't portray role models or people in that affinity group. For our program, we use all pictures of the women that have been through the program, and it's an incredibly diverse program. Women start to relate to when they find things they can relate to, or people they can relate to, they can see themselves. One of the things we did find is that many times when there is a program that is very heavily male, or they don't see themselves in this program, some women will opt out. Not all, but some women will opt out. So making sure that you have different messaging and making sure they're well represented or considered in the messaging as you're promoting the program, I think is really important.

Mr. Ksiazkiewicz: Well I just wanted to thank you again for speaking with us today. For everyone out there listening, if you'd like to learn more about the ACTiVATE Program you can visit their website at:  
[www.pathforwardcenter.org](http://www.pathforwardcenter.org).

For more information about the Awards Program, please visit SSTI's website at [www.sstiawards.org](http://www.sstiawards.org). Thank you once again Julie for spending some time with us and talking about this wonderful program.