

## **Partnership proves beneficial for USF CONNECT incubator clients**

Starting college is oftentimes one of the most exciting new chapters in a person's life. It's a time of distractions, late nights, and the occasional study session. However, there's one breed of student that comes into college thinking long term, with goals set out far in the future. These students are called entrepreneurs.

At the University of South Florida there are countless resources to help these students succeed, one of them being USF CONNECT. Located directly on campus in the business park, USF CONNECT is part of the business and economic initiative that provides support for start-ups.

Within USF CONNECT there are two business incubators: the Tampa Bay Technology Incubator (TBTI) and the Student Innovation Incubator (SII). While the TBTI is open to entrepreneurs from all across the country, the SII is reserved for USF students in order to help grow and foster their business.

The SII is located on the first floor of USF CONNECT and provides vital resources to student entrepreneurs. "We provide services ranging from physical office space to 3D printing prototyping labs to mentors and other high skilled individuals," Justin Heacock, program assistant at the SII, said.

One of the main facets of the SII is high-level mentor engagement, which features members of the CEO Council in seminars throughout the year. "We work with the local business leaders in the area to provide focused seminars designed to make students and people in the community learn about specific things needed to develop their business," Heacock said.

The other half of the mentor program is the Florida SBDC at USF. While their regional headquarters is located off campus in downtown Tampa, they have two offices at USF CONNECT. Jim Taylor, business consultant at the Florida SBDC at USF, works exclusively at the USF CONNECT office, providing consulting to SII and TBTI companies.

"We work very closely with our onsite consultants. Jim Taylor is a tremendous resource to not only our SII companies but also our TBTI companies," Director of Business Incubation and Economic Development, Stephanie Ashley said. "He's worked with more than 20 of these companies providing consulting services ranging from business planning to marketing to financing."

Taylor has worked closely with Chris Crist, owner of CC's Gourmet Products, a snack foods company looking to enter markets in the Tampa Bay Area. Since January 2015, Crist and Taylor have put in nearly 30 hours hashing out everything from distribution to financing issues. The bulk of their time has been spent developing a marketing plan to get CC's Salsa into retail superstores.

"While working with Jim Taylor, the thing he really helped me out with was being more confident talking to business owners and industry professionals, finding the ways to contact them and finding new strategies to earn business," Crist said.

Florida SBDC at USF, with the support of USF CONNECT, launched the Entrepreneurship Certificate Program, a series of courses that give entrepreneurs the knowledge they need to grow their business. This year marks its fourth year of existence and to date they have had more than 75 entrepreneurs complete the program.

Stephanie Costolo, a student entrepreneur in the SII program and client of Taylor's, recently attended the Entrepreneurship Certificate Program with her sights set on opening a holistic health and wellness center called Prasada.

Costolo attended the six-course program for free, courtesy of the Florida High Tech Corridor (The Corridor) scholarship program. The Corridor has partnered with USF CONNECT to provide scholarships to SII companies interested in the course, a \$170 value per attendee.

While Prasada is still in the conceptual phase, Costolo has met with Taylor several times to discuss plans on finding a location. They've spent several hours going over entity, investment, and marketing issues. While the knowledge is invaluable, she attributes the networking opportunities to her growth while being a part of the SII.

"You are around a lot of people who are highly motivated and intelligent and I see students all the time linking up with different entrepreneurs and forming different ideas," Costolo said. "It's all around a really solid program to be a part of."

USF CONNECT and the Florida SBDC at USF have teamed up to create a powerhouse of student and non-student entrepreneurs. While the SII is still in its nascent stage, there has been rapid growth within its first three years.

"In our first year we had 14 student companies participating in the program, the second

year grew to 24, and currently we have 39 student companies that are operating out of the incubator,” Ashley said. “We see nothing but tremendous growth in 2016.

“It is an unbelievable opportunity for these companies to be able to come into their office space and know that they can walk across the hall or walk down the hall and have [the Florida SBDC at USF] right at their finger tips.”