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## USF Poly Incubators Selecting Inaugural Businesses

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THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Most people hear "incubator" and think of chicken eggs or newborn babies, but at the University of South Florida Polytechnic the term refers to a method of nurturing new businesses and entrepreneurs.

Business incubators are nothing new, with roughly 1,100 in the U.S. and 7,000 worldwide, according to the Athens, Ohio-based National Business Incubation Association. About 94 percent of business incubators are non-profits, like USF's.

The USF Poly incubators are the first in Polk County. One facility, Blue Sky West, opened this year in downtown Lakeland and is geared toward fledgling companies and entrepreneurs.

USF Poly's Winter Haven counterpart, Blue Sky East, is designed for established companies who need help developing new technologies and products.

USF Poly has spent more than \$450,000 establishing both facilities, which have an annual budget of roughly \$108,000 (excluding private funding sources). Selected individuals and firms can use USF's office space and receive in-house help from faculty, research partners and student interns. Ultimately, the university hopes those firms will leave the "nest" one day, become independent and create jobs in growing industries.



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Q&A with Didier Rousseliere, Director of Business Incubator and Global Partnerships for University of South Florida Polytechnic in Lakeland Fl., Tuesday February 9, 2010.

USF Poly is currently in the process of selecting its inaugural class of entrepreneurs and firms to be hosted in the incubators - seven have been admitted thus far. We asked Didier Rousseliere, USF Poly's director of business incubation and global partnerships, about what Polk can expect from this new venture.

Rousseliere, 52, is a former attache for academic affairs with the Consulate General of France in Los Angeles. He reports directly to USF Poly Chief Executive Marshall Goodman in his current post.

**Q. USF Poly's incubators are the first to be established in Polk County. What's the best way to define what you do?**

A. A business incubator, in the simplest form you can put it, is a support system for the creation of companies. You basically nurture a company, or someone who wants to create a company, to the point where he "graduates" and is able to actually be a successful company. Just one number out there: 70 percent of the companies that are created close down in the space of three years. And the statistics are reversed for companies that are incubated - 70 percent are still there after three years. So it gives them a much better start and it creates the conditions for them to be ready. What is a little bit special with this incubator is we're associated with a university, so we fully intend to bring all the research capability of the university to support the projects we have.

**Q. What would make someone a good candidate for your incubators?**

A. There's a number of activities that are not a good match necessarily for this place. Obviously we are geared toward technology, so if your project is to print and sell T-shirts, that's not a good match. There's a number of industry clusters (we're interested in) like radio-frequency identification, logistics ... obviously energy and renewable energies, everything that's medical or health-related. We're really working toward bringing a mix that will work well together.

**Q. What do the hosted firms give back to the incubators?**

A. This one (Blue Sky West) is geared toward the new entrepreneur. A number of them do not have the resources and the finances to go through a normal process. We want to help them as much as we can. We will give them six months free rent and then incrementally we'll go toward a rent that is market price. For the Winter Haven site, established companies, it's a different approach. It's market rate (rent). The giveback is minimal in terms of monetary value. It's tremendous to us in terms of experience for students. It's obvious that right now new graduates are having a hard time finding a job, and practical experiences like this make the difference.

**Q. What benchmarks has USF set for these incubators?**

A. My very first concern is to get the model going, and for that we need to have some companies in. I'm really not focused on getting (Blue Sky West) filled ASAP, because once it is filled, it's filled for three years. Every one coming in is going to take two to three years to "graduate." That's the normal process in this type of industry. For the other companies (at Blue Sky East), it's shorter, probably 12 to 18 months. We're in the building process, so we want to aggregate but be very selective about what talents and assets we bring to the table.

**Q. Which firms have been admitted to the incubators so far?**

A. They are: Collabria Software (software development for security and public safety industries); Design the Difference (Web services); Goldsmith Design-Tech (product design and engineering); MD Web Solutions (healthcare Web services); MJA Consulting (consulting for the renewable energy industry); Sweat Monkey (Web services for youth volunteers); and Wakeman Consulting (software development).

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