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[INCUBATOR PROGRAM IN POLK]

Polk Entrepreneurs Are Serious, Not Just Dreamers

By [Kyle Kennedy](#)
THE LEDGER

Published: Sunday, September 5, 2010 at 7:56 p.m.

LAKELAND | The first entrepreneurs to be accepted into the University of South Florida Polytechnic's business incubator program share a common dream of starting their own companies.

But to call them "dreamers" might trivialize their personal stakes in the startups. Most have invested too much money and too much of themselves for this opportunity to be a whimsical experiment.

The USF Poly incubators, Blue Sky West in downtown Lakeland and Blue Sky East in downtown Winter Haven, are the first in Polk County and two of about 1,100 nationwide.

They're designed to help would-be entrepreneurs and existing businesses start new companies, and develop new technology and products.

Applicants are typically selected from technology-related industries or other growing sectors, with USF Poly providing rent-free office space (at least for a few months) and guidance from the university staff and experts.

USF Poly has spent more than \$450,000 establishing the facilities and has budgeted roughly \$108,000 a year for them, plus money from private funding sources.



MICHAEL WILSON | THE LEDGER
Eddie Hill, executive director of the University of South Florida Polytechnic Blue Sky Incubator program, recently discusses the facility's innovative impact at Blue Sky East in Winter Haven.

The idea is to help build self-sufficient companies and improve their chances of succeeding and creating jobs.

USF Poly also sees the incubators as a place for its student interns to use their skills and gain experience by working with entrepreneurs.

Ten companies make up the university's incubator program so far.

Today, on Labor Day, The Ledger is highlighting the people behind four of those enterprises and describing their plans for starting new businesses amid a national recession in a county where unemployment stands at 13.1 percent.

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