

Cool for School

College connections can give your high-tech business an edge.

By Nichole L. Torres | [Entrepreneur Magazine - October 2007](#)

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One of the best things about college--aside from the partying, of course--is being surrounded by scads of brilliant people. From fellow students to professors to visiting lecturers, there are many first-rate brainiacs around to help you launch your high-tech business. Whether you have an idea for a biomedical product or a new kind of technology, "you should get started in college," says Kathleen Allen, director of the Center for Technology Commercialization at the University of Southern California. "You should learn as much as you can about the latest trends in technology and see what interests you."

College is uniquely suited to starting a technology business not only because you have an abundance of information at your fingertips, but also because you have an entire campus of students from various concentrations ready to lend a helping hand. Even if you're not a tech-head, you might find a great business partner majoring in medicine, engineering or computer science. "We hold a lot of events at USC where we mix business students, engineers and scientists," says Allen. "Bringing together different mind-sets creates exciting businesses."

Starting a high-tech business was a huge part of Brad Chisum's MBA education. In 2006--about a year before graduating from San Diego State University--Chisum, along with Richard Waters, started Omega Sensors. Their plan was to bring to market affordable, high-performance sensors that have applications in the oil industry (e.g., for seismic imaging), industrial monitoring and the like. Chisum, 31, worked on the business side while Waters, 36, patented the technology they had perfected during their studies. Chisum was even able to use the company to earn class credit. "Every chance I got in class to use the business idea as my project, I did," he says.

The feedback they received from professors and students was invaluable, Chisum says, and entering business plan competitions helped their venture even more. They won the \$100,000 first prize in the University of Texas, Austin's Moot Corp. business plan competition and have been able to network with top-notch VCs, angel investors and senior executives. "There's no way to do that much networking faster than to go through multiple business plan competitions," says Chisum, who expects Omega Sensors' sales to reach between \$5 million and \$10 million in 2008.

Remember, it's not only about the technology. You may have the coolest technology on the planet, but you still have to find a way to fill a market need. "That's hard for [students] to do. They have to go over to the user side and really understand how they're [meeting] some need," says Charles Morrissey, associate professor of entrepreneurship at Pepperdine University.

So search out all the campus resources you can find--professors, fellow students, libraries, entrepreneurship clubs, technology and research centers--and launch that high-tech business now. Says Allen, "I've had students postpone graduation to get something launched because the opportunity was [immediate]. Markets move very fast today."