

INCUBATORS: A community business incubator that recently expanded — San Diego Miramar College's Regional Entrepreneurship Center REC Innovation Lab — will be able to do more in helping local entrepreneurs get rolling.

EDUCATION: REC Innovation Lab Cuts Ribbon on New Facility

By Karen Pearlman | January 22, 2024

A community business incubator that recently expanded will be able to do more moving forward in helping local entrepreneurs get rolling.

San Diego Miramar College's Regional Entrepreneurship Center REC Innovation Lab is a startup incubator focused on helping women and minority entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds to launch scalable, high growth business startups. And unlike other incubators around San Diego County, the REC Lab is uniquely situated on the community college campus.

At the REC lab, students learn how to take their startup to the next level by acquiring the skills required to pitch investors in hopes of obtaining venture capital to grow their business and receive resources for business and career development, training on cutting-edge technology such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, the latest tools, and a broad and diverse network of industry experts to support them.

Many of the students are veterans, minorities, women, first-generation college students, and people who would not typically join an incubator without the REC.

In 2020 51% of REC student founders were women, 71% were racial or ethnic minorities, 18% were black, and they range in age from 15 – 72 years.

During the semester, students practice pitching to mentors and real-life Venture Capitalists often gaining valuable feedback that leads to funding.



Tanya Hertz Executive
Director REC Innovation Lab,
Miramar College

“Unlike traditional incubators that charge money or take equity, we are able to provide resources through classes,” said Tanya Hertz, executive director of the REC Innovation Lab and associate professor of entrepreneurship at Miramar College. “Entrepreneurs who want help starting a company can sign up for the REC by taking the BUSE 229 class at Miramar College, offered each semester for just \$46 a unit. As long as you have taken a basic Introduction to Entrepreneurship class, then you are eligible to join the REC. If you are ready to join now and have life-experience, we can even waive the prerequisite.”



Construction is underway on a \$233.5 million affordable housing campus in Clairemont. Photo courtesy Miramar College

The lab initially opened online during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic 2020 and was entirely remote, then moved around into classrooms around campus until settling into its own spot last year on the ground floor of the school's Diesel Technology Building. Miramar College is officially cutting the ribbon on the new REC Lab Jan. 24.

Small Biz Success Stories

Hertz said there are already dozens of the successful businesses that have started because of the program, including hundreds of small food-based businesses and MEHKOs that have gone through the REC as part of the San Diego Food Justice G.E.T. Cooking Program. Last year, a G.E.T. Cooking grant allowed Miramar College to distribute \$750,000 in

micro-grants ranging from \$2,500 to \$7,500 to more than 200 program participants in addition to providing them with technical assistance and business education.

The REC Lab has helped many local entrepreneurs get going, Hertz said, including Anh Pham, the CEO and Founder of Earth Fan Surf Company, a business that manufactures and sells eco-friendly wood bodyboards, and Ruth Young-Loaeza, a former hospital housekeeper who founded

NEET SHEETS, a revolutionary bedding innovation that has transformed the way to make beds.

Hertz said another of the REC Lab's successes has been Alive Ferments LLC.

Founded in 2020 and first launched in 2022 by Italy-born brothers Niccolo and Sasha Fraschetti, Alive Ferments has helped more than

5,000 people improve their gut health by making it easy to integrate probiotic fermented foods into their diets. Their products are in more than 60 natural grocery stores across California and in Utah, Nevada and Hawaii. Niccolo Fraschetti credited

Hertz and the REC program for helping the brothers head in the right direction.

“I was able to find a supportive environment where we learned how to do things hands-on instead of just in theory,” he said. “A lot of it was demystifying everything that it seemed like we couldn't do ourselves and felt like we had to pay someone else to do it. That wasn't the case. Tanya would say, ‘This is how you do it. I'm not doing it for you, but I'll show you how to do it.’”

The business has grown its revenue by almost 40% in 2023 compared to 2022. Currently bootstrapped with no debt, he said Alive Ferments is looking to acquire investment to expand to

other distribution networks and increase online sales. Frascchetti said the company is currently seeking investors who are aligned with its values and goals: "Promoting healthy, sustainable and innovative food products to share with the world."

"We are looking to bring influential individuals or organizations on board from the industry who can contribute their expertise and connections to further enhance the company's growth and success," he said. The Frascchettis' journey into the culinary world began with a deep-rooted appreciation for wholesome food and a commitment to preserving local traditions, Sasha Frascchetti said.

"Growing up in rural Tuscany, our family always prioritized nourishing meals prepared from scratch," he said. "This was a time when the older generations were starting to embrace processed and refined foods as a sign of progress, while simultaneously cherishing their love for traditional local cuisine. This stark contrast ignited our desire to bridge the gap between these two worlds."