

5 questions with Joni Cobb

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Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/2012/01/19/2181276/5-questions-with-joni-cobb.html#storylink=cpy>

Since its inception nearly six years ago, Kansas Pipeline has moved from a largely state-supported, high-tech-entrepreneur grooming program to one that relies solely on donations to keep it going.

Its separation from the agency that started it – Kansas Technology Enterprise Corp. – and subsequent elimination of funding by Gov. Sam Brownback last year forced the group to find financial support on its own.

This month, the program that has groomed 46 Kansas entrepreneurs will expand to a regional focus by supporting entrepreneurs in Nebraska and the Kansas City area, including the Missouri side. The expansion is due in large part to an \$800,000, three-year matching grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, which was announced last year.

For every change the organization has faced, Joni Cobb has been at its helm.

The Eagle caught up this week with Cobb, Pipeline's CEO, in between meetings to plan the organization's annual Innovator of the Year awards event. The event, Jan. 26 in Overland Park, showcases the entrepreneurs who have gone through its yearlong fellowship training, and introduces its next class of entrepreneurs.

The evening culminates in the naming of a top entrepreneur, or innovator, of the year. That entrepreneur is selected based upon points he or she earns during the fellowship year as well as his or her performance in a mock pitch to venture capitalists, which happens on the same day as the awards event.

Q. 1 Was a regional expansion of the program something you envisioned from the start?

A. After the first two years of Pipeline, there was a lot of buzz and interest in the program from other states, cities and organizations. We looked to our own national advisers who were exposed to programs from across the globe – as well experts who came in and studied Pipeline – to help us assess its transferability outside of Kansas.

Q. 2 How is the fundraising going?

A. We are very pleased at the progress in our fundraising. After both the Kauffman Foundation and the Grassmere Foundation pledged their support, our alumni put enormous momentum behind the raise by committing their own \$215K to the matching grant. They then really dug in alongside us to meet with investors and companies around the region to hit our targets. We have hit all of our year one targets and are well on our way to secure year two and three.

Q. 3 Will there be any changes to the structure of the fellowship program because of the regional expansion?

A. Our aim with this three-year expansion pilot is to keep the integrity of the current Pipeline model. We are essentially taking the same basic model and just expanding the geography from which we draw applicants, mentors, partners and the like.

Q. 4 What has the experience been like trying to figure out how to coordinate students who will be located in a much larger geographic area?

A. Entrepreneurs by their own business realities are already driving around this region to do their work, raise money and the like. We are merely helping it happen in an organized and more robust way. To be able to have personal relationships between entrepreneurs, investors and experts from a broader region helps all of the entrepreneurs grow at home.

Q. 5 If you had to pick one major lesson you've learned in your time starting and growing Pipeline, what would it be?

A. The entrepreneurs within the organization – the alumni – are the magic ingredient that makes Pipeline so special. If it were not for their amazing support during all the ups and downs ... I'm sure I would be doing something entirely different.

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