Yale’s amplifyHERscience program focuses on gender equity in commercialization

It took less than six months to pull together a new initiative at Yale University -- called amplifyHERscience -- created to encourage and support women faculty to extend the impact of their research beyond academia. It was during a “Shark Tank”-like event towards the end of 2019 that Morag Grassie, PhD, senior associate director of the Blavatnik Fund for Innovation at Yale, and Michelle McQueen, a communications officer for Yale’s Office of Cooperative Research (OCR), first noticed an alarming lack of women presenters.

“We wanted to create a program that would motivate more women to join the bio-entrepreneurial ecosystem at the same rate as their male colleagues,” Grassie says.

The two women joined forces with Lolahon Kadiri, MD, PhD, a senior business development associate in Yale’s OCR, and set to work on creating the amplifyHERscience initiative, which officially launched in the spring of 2020. The program helps women to explore real-life applications of research; de-risk early-stage technologies; and achieve an inflection point to attract external partners for additional research development and commercialization.

“We want more women who are interested in furthering the reach and potential impact of their research to know that they can do so if they want,” McQueen says.

Creating a long-term solution

Before the launch amplifyHERscience, Yale had tried several grassroots initiatives and programs to support women entrepreneurs, such as a monthly breakfast among others, but these efforts would quickly fizzle out when the person driving the event left or moved to work on other things.

“We are approaching this with a goal of building a long-term, self-sustained, comprehensive pro-

laid out all of the information that flowed in a way faculty could easily follow. After the content and design was set, the team went back to each involved department to get their feedback. They also brought in several faculty members who have commercialized research already, or are in the process, to provide content feedback as well.

The biggest issue they faced in developing the Roadmap was meeting deadlines -- something everyone can relate to. To rectify that, the three departments involved met as a team and developed a timeline as well as a table of contents. Once they were able to agree on those two items, they were better able to manage the content and compete it on time.

From inception to print, the roadmap took about eight months to complete. The content development and review process took up a lot of that time.

“Publications take time,” says Gramm. “It was vital for our team to include the faculty and TTU leadership that were going to help champion this resource to help us think through the roadmap and the way the information was displayed.”

Reaping the benefits

Gramm says The Commercialization Roadmap helps the university and the TTO achieve goals more efficiently because those who are interested in engaging can be self-directed, better informed, and gain significant know-how before embarking on the commercialization path.

“We’re building a culture of innovators who … are thinking through their research/inventions or creative endeavors to form an approach that helps them to get to their goal faster, while at the same time, thinking about those who will be interested in the benefits of their output,” says Gramm.

The Commercialization Roadmap is something Gramm has wanted to create for more than two years, with a goal of reaching across campus to areas where she might not always have regular contact.

“There are many silos on university campuses, and this is one way to help stakeholders to understand the efforts of innovation and entrepreneur-ship centers. It appears efforts become ‘real’ and less conceptual when individuals can read it and find the information on a website,” she says.

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gram that will thrive regardless of staffing changes,” Kadiri says. “The initial stages of creating a successful program involve getting to know our constituencies and their needs, trying small scale pilots, and learning as we go. This is what we call a ‘customer discovery’ in the startup world. We are currently working with individual faculty to build our community of entrepreneurial women-scientists from the ground up.”

These collaborations help connect each organization’s bespoke network and help to create a broader women’s entrepreneurial macro-network across the country. The program founders also took advantage of the general principles outlined by several existing toolkits, including: The Women Inventor’s Toolkit by AUTM (https://tinyurl.com/5duxhkcm) and Gender Diversity in Innovation Toolkit, developed by the Women in IP Committee of the Intellectual Property Owners Association (https://tinyurl.com/3jxzn9ss). Internally, they reached out to all relevant affinity groups on campus and leveraged their existing networks and memberships to reach their target audience.

amplifyHERscience also connected women with resources such as “Women In Bio” – mentoring programs that support women in various stages of their career and personal development; the Boston-based “Women in the Enterprise of Science and Technology” (WEST), which helps women in the field to advance their careers; and Theia Healthcare, a non-profit dedicated to inspiring and empowering the next generation of women entrepreneurs and investors in healthcare.

Here’s an example of a panel that’s being hosted by amplifyHERscience in mid-May: https://conta.cc/3u5myCk. The winner of the first annual amplifyHERscience award will be announced then too.

**The structure**

Launching the effort was no small undertaking. With plenty to do in their day jobs, the women spent a lot of late nights putting together amplifyHERscience.

“If you’re going to take something like this on, passion is important,” McQueen advises. “But hopefully one day, equity will prevail and programs such as these will no longer be needed.”

Today, the program has four major components:

1. **Outreach:** There’s a twice monthly outreach called “Touch Base Tuesday” where peers and colleagues share resources and stories of success. Having one-on-one or small group conversations goes a long way, according to the program’s founders. Presenters at these meet-ups speak to women researchers about increasing the impact of their academic research by getting involved in innovation and entrepreneurship, and tell them about the OCR and the resources available to support and guide them in this journey.

2. **Connect:** amplifyHERscience is putting effort into creating a network/community of women entrepreneurs, mentors, and advisers to assist with women-led research commercialization efforts.

3. **Educate:** The team is organizing events and webinars on various relevant topics, sharing new opportunities, hosting small group brainstorming sessions with two to five faculty members, and holding regular one-on-one “office hours.”

4. **Celebrate:** They’re celebrating and spotlighting their women innovators and entrepreneurs through internal and external communication to increase awareness of their contributions, and hopefully, to inspire other women to follow their path.

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The women reflected on several lessons learned while creating the program. For example:

- Women are not less interested in commercialization than men, they just have some unique barriers.
- Semantics and approach matter. The way they connect with women and the process with which they approach and engage them is more personalized, more conversational, and then set in environments and groups they feel safe and supported in.
- Men are important allies, and they want to help. Leveraging the support of male colleagues and partners is key to closing the gender gap – ask for help if it’s not overtly offered.
- It’s important to stay consciously and strategically on top of what women in this space are doing, and what resources are available to them not only at Yale, but outside as well. That ongoing focus is critical achieving success and equity for women founders.

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