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The UMB Pulse Podcast

How UMB Helps Student Entrepreneurs and the Baltimore Tech Scene

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The UMB Pulse Podcast

How UMB Helps Student Entre

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Charles Schelle: 0:00

Dana, how good are you with plants? Do you manage to keep them alive?

Dana Rampolla: 0:03

I actually am pretty good at taking care of plants. I have a lot of house plants. I have a lot of yard plants. The problem now is I have some Florida style plants that I've raised since they were babies that I was able to keep indoors and I put them outside and now they're so huge. I don't know if we're gonna get them back inside. How about you, Charles?

Charles Schelle: 0:23

Yeah. I was gifted my first plant in years. And I was like, okay, we're going to attempt this again. It was something easy. I honestly don't remember what it was. It was, it was some sort of like creeping moss with purple flowers or whatever. It died within a week. I don't have a green thumb, whatever

the opposite of a green thumb is, it's that, but I would love to like, have plants inside my apartment to just, freshen up have that, little bit of more oxygen.

Dana Rampolla: 0:49

Right. I was gonna say, it's kind of a natural filter too.

Charles Schelle: 0:52

Well, there's this really cool product that U M B alum and, a classmate of hers, through a multidisciplinary program invented right here at U M B with the help of the Grid. And it's called AlgenAir. And it's actually, an algae lamp. And it sounds cooler than what I just described it. Trust me. It, it lights up green, it's on your desk and it actually will use photosynthesis, take that carbon out and exchange it for oxygen with the power of what we're told, 25 house plants. And I can tell you now I have zero room for 25 house plants in my apartment.

Dana Rampolla: 1:33

Well, you might be able to get one of these then, and it'll do all the work of, your poor plant that died, plus a few others. Well, I'm interested because I've worked here for a number of years. I'm familiar with what the Grid is, but I don't really know a whole lot about the Grid and how it actually works for students. So I would love to engage in a conversation to learn more.

Charles Schelle: 1:54

Yeah, and so the, the Grid is a great resource for students who might have like an idea for an invention, or maybe they wanna improve something, start a company or business, and to talk about what the Grid is. We have on hand this episode, Jenny Owens. She's the assistant dean of the Graduate School. She's also executive director of the Grid. Taylor DeBore, he is the assistant director of the Grid, and then our inventors of AlgenAir. There's Dan Fucich, he's the co-founder and chief Scientific officer. He is a graduate of the University of Maryland College Park and Kelsey Abernathy is the other co-founder. She is a 2021 graduate of U M B with a PhD in environmental molecular biology. So, I'm looking forward to finding out how these two even came up with the idea of using algae for your apartment.

Jena Frick: 2:54

You are listening to the heartbeat of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, the U M B Pulse.

Dana Rampolla: 3:07

We've got a full house today. Welcome to Jenny, Taylor, Dan and Kelsey. So let's start out Jenny or Taylor. Tell me what is the Grid? How did it start?

Jenny Owens: 3:20

I'm Jenny Owens. I'm executive director of the Grid and Associate Dean in the Graduate School. The Grid, if you're new to this work. Just a moment to orient you. It's celebrated its fifth birthday this year which is really exciting. It's a, it's a hub of entrepreneurial resources for students, faculty and staff. And it's a place for them to gather and collaborate, to learn, and hopefully also to empower and create.

Dana Rampolla: 3:46

And if I'm a student, how do I find out more? How do I, how do I become involved?

Jenny Owens: 3:53

Yeah, I mean there are so many workshops that we offer throughout the year, and these range from intellectual property, inclusive leadership, design thinking, customer discovery, these are open to any member of the UMB community and beyond. So if you have a spouse, a friend who's also interested in working on a project with you, they're more than welcome to come. So that's one area that you can get involved. We also have a series of mentors, so if you, if you have an idea and you're interested in getting additional advice, that's another opportunity. And we also have Grid pitch. So this can feel intimidating if you're like, whoa, this seems like a, a big thing to get involved with. But you have mentoring for several weeks. You can come in with an idea, you can come in with a prototype. You can come in any place you are and get support for, for your needs.

Charles Schelle: 4:43

Going back to the origins of the Grid, now, the Grid's actually an acronym. Explain what it stands for. And do you still use the, the full name or, or reference the, entire name of the Grid

Jenny Owens: 4:52

So the whole name is Graduate Research Innovation District. It took, there were many meetings to try to figure out like what to call this what would be distinct, what would be unique. And we actually ended up a group of, there were students, there was folks from, UM Ventures, there's people from the Graduate School, and we ended up one afternoon at Mount Vernon Marketplace up the street and we had note cards and we were just brainstorming. And as universities, we love our acronyms. We wanted it to be pronounceable and memorable. And also symbolically, you have a bunch of things woven together. You have interconnectivity. We thought the name was reflective of our different disciplines on campus and where we can intersect and build and creates. So that's the, the origin story of the name. But it was it was. Way too long. It felt like, it was like naming a child. Yeah.

Charles Schelle: 5:44

Well, it makes sense because as you mentioned, everything's woven into this and we have our different professional schools from, from the different disciplines. Right. So you have potential from medicine and nursing and pharmacy and law and social work. And then you have, folks like Dan and Kelsey who will hear from later, coming in from, from another arena. But the heart of this is entrepreneurship and why is the word entrepreneur scary for some students? And, and why shouldn't it be?

Jenny Owens: 6:16

It can be a scary word. It can be perceived as a scary word and, and some of the reasons why might be risk and uncertainty. This idea that you're trying something new, this idea that you can fail in it. For us that are conditioned to value stability. Going out on your own and trusting in your ideas can be a big leap. So I think there's some of the psychology there. That can be something to overcome. I think there's financial concerns, like our students often are going and taking out loans or going into debt for their education, and so they want stability to repay them. Or is this gonna cost me extra money to, to figure this out? So I think there are financial concerns about, why maybe entrepreneurship feels intimidating. Lack of experience. Our students are trained in a certain

discipline. Who am I to build this? Like, what skillset do I have? So I think that could be there too, and, and a lot of our PhD students in particular and many other students, you're trained for a path. You're trained to be a nurse, you're trained for, to be a scientist and to step off a path. When you're charting out your life, and you may have selected this for a reason, can feel like Like a deviation, from what is expected of you. So I think there's reasons why it can be intimidating to students, but I think it's also important to note that the fear associated with the term, if there is fear, isn't necessarily justified. There's a lot of reasons why you'd wanna get involved. I think there's an opportunity for innovation and opportunity to make your mark in a unique way and take your unique lens, like all of us are individuals and see the world in a certain way. Taking that lens and applying it to a problem that you see, or an opportunity, I think is really exciting. And these students often possess knowledge. I'm excited that Dan and Kelsey are here because they're a prime example of students who took what they were working on and found a really novel use for it. I think with entrepreneurship there's flexibility and autonomy, and who doesn't want that? You know, this idea that you can design something around your values, you can design it around how you see yourself working. Instead of picking an organization where you think you'd be a good fit, building that organization to fit around your values, that's, that's a amazing and powerful thing. I think skill development, there's opportunities to learn whole new skill sets, and learning things as you go can be really empowering, personal and professional growth I think are also opportunities of, engaging in this can be a transformational journey for a lot of people and build different confidence and different skillset. And then last, I just wanna say potential for impact. We know what jobs are out there, and there's many, many more. We have AI that's emerging even stronger. There's so many jobs that haven't been created yet. And I think as these jobs are being created, being alongside of that change to make your mark with your innovation is, is a, a way to build something different, a way to build something that's evolving as the world is evolving. So I think it's an exciting term, but I could see why there's a pros and cons.

Charles Schelle: 9:22

You mentioned a lot about the potential for students what they can do, but then the other part of this equation is the business community. Explain that link between the students and the business community, how the two meet through the Grid.

Jenny Owens: 9:35

So I really think Baltimore is an amazing place for students to get started on their journey, cuz it's one of the best kept secrets in the nation's innovation scene, I think. And also more approachable. You're not paying the high rents that you'd pay in Boston or Silicon Valley. There's adequate venture capital that's continuing to grow. It's one of the 20 hottest cities in tech. It's ranked third in Fast Company's List of Innovation States, Maryland as a state. It's fourth in the number of startups per million residents. Like there's really a lot of movement and momentum here. And not to mention Baltimore itself as a destination. We have Philly, we have Pittsburgh, we have D.C., we have New York. Everyone's a train ride away. And so when you're looking for collaborators, you have the FDA, you just have these tremendous resources here so that students can connect. And we also have a, a big list of mentors. So when students have an idea, we really try to be deliberate about finding the right people for them to connect with. Is it more of a social venture? Is it more bio like, is it more

manufacturing like we have people to connect students with to really customize that path. And I would be remiss too if I didn't talk about the BioPark. The BioPark is a fantastic resource for students. There are so many companies that are doing incredibly innovative things right here on our campus. There's even a, an event tomorrow Science in the City, which is hosted pretty regularly where leaders in startup, leaders at U M B, students will go and mingle. And I think those, those are great opportunities for students to continue to lean in, to opportunities to bridge into the business.

Charles Schelle: 11:08

Right. And. Talking about that, that tech scene and, and hub scene. There are a lot of professional groups in the city too. Right. And I'll see in the the newsletters about, hey, there's a women in Science meetup at Checkerspot Brewery happening this week. Actually, there's probably a brewery for, for every association to have their event in, in town at this point. Right. So let's get to, the Grid pitch. You mentioned that earlier. Go more in depth about the Grid pitch what students get through that mentorship, the, the lead up to it.

Taylor DeBoer: 11:41

I'm Taylor DeBoer, assistant director of the Grid. So yeah, the Grid pitch. It's really about innovation and discovery, I think, for our students. I think that's, that's the key. And we've, we've now had five of them and it's grown and evolved quite a bit. One thing that's really interesting about Grid pitch is, two things. First, it's not a competition like many of the pitch showcases across the state and across the United States are it is a showcase. It's not a competition. And we have a two-tiered system with Grid pitch where we accept students who just have an idea, and that's called our vision category. So, most pitch competitions or showcases feature students who are a little further along in their entrepreneurial journey, and we have that as well as part of our venture category. But we want to make sure that students who just have an idea who maybe want to dip their toe in the entrepreneurial pond can and can experience that mentorship, that pitch development. It's, it's six weeks of what we pair the students with mentors. If they get accepted and they have six weeks to work with them, develop that pitch deck learn about concepts like customer discovery, market viability all of those great things. And then at the end of that six weeks, they get to pitch in front of startup leaders in the startup community, entrepreneurs, university leadership, fellow colleagues, students, friends, family. So it's a really great opportunity for them to kind of learn about the entrepreneurship in general and also learn about pitch development and kind of get started along that journey. So I think also another thing that it really helps with is public speaking. I think it's a great opportunity to get in front of a group and learn how to talk about your cool idea in a way that's going to be engaging for the audience. And I think that's also a big part of it. And then, the networking that happens, the networking that happens after the event, at the event, throughout the process, the connections that get forged with other students who are participating in Grid pitch. I think all of that is all of that is part of it, but I think that networking piece is also really, really important and we continue that relationship with those students. After the showcase in April. I'm still in touch with them regularly this summer. I meet with them, answer questions, try to continue to support them in ways, in any ways we can. A lot of them continue to have conversations with their mentors and work with their mentors, which is great after Grid pitch, so it doesn't just end in April. It usually continues throughout the summer and the rest of the year. So, and Dan and Kelsey

participated in our first two. Dan and Kelsey of AlgenAir we're so happy to have them here. Participated in our first two Grid pitches, 2018 and 19. They can talk a little bit more about that experience, but they started as participants. They've since graduated and or have had, had great success and have come back as mentors. And at our most recent Grid pitch, they spoke and shared some, some wisdom and knowledge with our, with our fellow students. So, they've remained very close to the Grid pitch showcase event.

Dana Rampolla: 14:45

So that leads us to Kelsey and Dan. That would be the next logical step. Why don't the two of you hop in and tell us a little bit. First, tell us a little bit, paint a picture for us, what is AlgenAir?

Kelsey Abernathy: 14:55

Thank you so much for having us. My name's Kelsey. I'm one of the co-founders of AlgenAir alongside Dan. And AlgenAir develops living technology to improve the health and wellbeing of building occupants and our products combined biology, engineering and design to address these problems caused by our modern built environment. And our first product is the aerium. It's a modern house plant that harnesses the photosynthetic power of having 25 plants in a single room in terms of how much carbon dioxide it can remove from the air and oxygen it's producing. We also last fall launched the first commercial size unit, which is a hundred gallon system that's using algae in the Pittsburgh International Airport to remove as much CO₂ as about having 5,000 plants in a single space.

Charles Schelle: 15:48

Wow. That that is amazing. That, that sounds like a whole greenhouse. Yeah.

Dana Rampolla: 15:54

That is amazing. And is this something that you both conceived of as students? Tell us a little bit about how you connected and then how the Grid became a piece of your journey.

Kelsey Abernathy: 16:05

So Dan and I met in 2015. We were both in the same graduate program the MEES program, Marine Estuary Environmental Sciences, located at IMET in the Inner Harbor. Dan, it was actually University of Maryland College Park. I'm University of Maryland, Baltimore. But we were in the same space doing different lab researches, but we had similar classes. And we went through this program known as the Reef Program. I feel like there's a lot of acronyms, and the Reef program is the Radcliffe Environmental Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program, and this was designed to teach scientists the business side of science and entrepreneurship. We both went through this program independently and it just was something that spoke to both of us in the sense that it was the first time someone was telling us that we could. Use our science degree to do something other than research. We could actually apply it to develop products that could help people and build business, build businesses with them. And so when we were going through the program. The program director Nick Hammond, said there's this new event through UMB called the UMB Grid pitch. And if you guys are interested, I think you should apply. And we did not have a business idea at the time. We had projects that we were working on for the program, both independently but we wanted to do something different. And so I think I went to Dan and I was like, would you wanna do this? Let's

come up with some ideas and we sat down for a solid half of an afternoon and just whiteboarded out a whole bunch of ideas. And that led to the idea that we pitched at the first Grid pitch which was called Urban Algae. And Dan, if you wanna explain Urban Algae and how that ended up becoming what is today AlgenAir.

Dan Fucich: 17:59

Yeah, that was a boy that was, seems like a long time ago, but it's, it's part of the journey how we got there. I like to say that we were interested in the Grid pitch. We, we loved the energy in pitching and so we whiteboarded a bunch of ideas and we took the three that were the least bad. And that started urban algae. We were trying to solve the problem of, toxic contamination of cyanotoxins in dietary supplements. That you can go and buy. It's called Bluegreen algae on the shelf at Whole Foods. People are taking this every day and they're thinking it's improving their health but they're actually ingesting a toxin that is slowly damaging their liver. And about like 75% of the off the shelf products labeled Klamath Lake or Bluegreen algae products contain these cytotoxins. So we wanted a dietary supplement that we could control the strain and not have contamination from these cyanotoxins. We wanted to build extremely large photo bioreactors in underutilized urban areas on basically rooftops and. That was our first idea and part of that pitching in 2018, then 2019, and being paired with great mentors through Grid and, and having those recurring meetings, the six weeks before your actual pitch, the feedback from the judges and that continue mentorship over time, that led us to talk to individuals that were a lot smarter than ourselves. Poke holes in the idea that. That, that we had initially. And then we took what we really liked about the core of that idea in utilizing carbon dioxide from indoor areas and actually bioremediating that with micro-algae. And so we were able to hone in our idea. Develop a consumer product to solve the single room solution for elevated indoor CO2. And then we're looking to increase the scale as we grow and develop the company.

Dana Rampolla: 19:51

That's incredible. So neither of you really felt like you had a lot of business experience coming into this. Like you feel like that's where you've gotten all of your business acumen, that's helping you grow this into an actual business.

Dan Fucich: 20:06

Yeah, that's exactly right. I think, in the past, I, I, in high school, I really liked Shark Tank and I worked odd jobs and stuff like that, but nothing to prepare you for actually starting your own business. It wasn't a thought. I thought that I was gonna be a, a professor with, the pads on the sleeves and I was running a lab and teaching and yeah, as, as Jenny said, like learning on the fly as you grow and find your core competencies and, and learning more about business as you do it was, was a really rewarding process. And Kelsey, if you wanna add to that.

Kelsey Abernathy: 20:41

Yeah, definitely. I started grad school thinking I was gonna be a research scientist for NOAA and I think having gone through everything in the past five years now, I couldn't imagine working in a research lab swung to the complete other side and we've gone through programs like the Reef program and accelerator programs as we've been on this journey. But I think the most valuable

experience has come from just actually building the business itself and being hands-on and you kind of learn as things come at you. And that's been a really cool experience.

Charles Schelle: 21:16

Was there like an aha moment as you were learning through the different strategies, the different things you had to do to, to make this a, a product, get it on the market where everything started to click after you were initially, underwater?

Dan Fucich: 21:31

I, I think, and Kelsey, if you have other thoughts, the, the moment that's sticking out in, in my mind is when we, so when you're trying to grow microalgae, you're creating a photo bioreactor. You need your nutrient sources. And I think the aha moment was when I was searching for a carbon dioxide source for the actual photo bioreactor, and I think the aha moment was, well, the building exhaust has very high concentrations of CO₂ that we're breathing out and then that aha moment of. Yeah, we can use that CO₂ source run it through the photo bioreactor, and it can be an organism alongside the humans in our built environment. So we're giving it carbon dioxide and it's giving us oxygen. And just that, that complete cycle of symbiosis was really pivotal in the, in the direction of the company.

Charles Schelle: 22:21

If someone buys one, puts it in their, their office or or bedroom, what do they have to do? How, how does it work exactly.

Jenny Owens: 22:28

I have one. I love it. Of course, I would have one, right. But essentially there's a subscription model and Kelsey and Dan, you can always jump in and correct me, but you just, you get a little, a new thing every two months and you kind of, it's a tube essentially, and it's a base. It looks nice. I have a lot of plants, like I'm really into plants, like more so than I want to be. I do. I. That's kind of a joke, but I have 59 plants in my home, and I only know because my seven-year-old counted them this weekend. He was like, you have 59 plants, mom. I said, thank you son, so, but I also have this awesome aerium and essentially you it, it starts kind of a lighter color. It turns darker green over time. You clean it out every two months. There's a, a very thin filter. It's very easy to care for. And what's really nice is a plant enthusiast like me is you can take the leftovers and it becomes a fertilizer for your plants. And so I dilute it and then feed my plants. So it serves kind of a two purpose for me of I have healthier plants and I have, better air quality. So that's my experience as a consumer of it. But Dan and Kelsey, you can chime in if I'm missing anything there.

Dan Fucich: 23:36

That's perfect. I love directly from, the everyday user's mouth. I think that's perfect. Couldn't have said it better myself. And yeah, we like to think that, I went to school for five years in phycology to grow algae so that it's so easy that anybody can do it and really empower people to grow their own fresh source of spirulina at their house. And, have a, have a device that improves the indoor air quality of, of gaseous pollutants, CO₂ in creating oxygen that any other air filter that uses a particulate filter can't do. So yeah, exactly right.

Charles Schelle: 24:12

I'm so bad at taking care of plants. I think algae is the only thing I could probably keep alive. So this sounds like something that's ideal for me, especially with the benefits. Since Kelsey and Dan both mentioned that they're part of the Marine Estuarine Environmental Sciences program and worked at IMET. Can you explain to our audience what they are and how they're connected to U M B?

Kelsey Abernathy: 24:34

The MEES program is a interdisciplinary graduate school program that is across all of the University of Maryland schools. And so you have College Park, U M B, U M B C and then there's different labs located throughout Maryland where you could actually go to do your research. So IMET is a lab we were at Horn Point is one. There's Another one down in Southern Maryland, and I think there's one at College Park itself. And basically wherever your professor is, that they are doing the research that is where you're located. And so our professors both happened to be at the IMET location, even though they were through different University of Maryland schools.

Charles Schelle: 25:22

So Taylor and Jenny, because of the, multi-campus, aspect of that program, is that how you're able to connect or are those program students all invited to, to be part of the Grid?

Jenny Owens: 25:33

So the Grid pitch, you can have, as long as there's a UMB student, you can have other members. We've had a lot of different, partnerships that occur. But we do ask that one person is a U M B student and a lot of our programs open to anyone and in College Park too is very inclusive with them opening their programs to us as well. And we often feature them in our newsletter, but we do have a newsletter that goes out periodically. There's a website with more information. Taylor's present at all of the orientations on campus. And then we're located in the library as well, on the H S H S L, so we have a central location there on the third floor. Dan is, he's like honorary U M B grad. I, I think. But I do think that's like a really unique and awesome collaboration to have where essentially your mentor school determines, where you're graduating from. And I think. Like having relationships like this where you meet other students with similar or intersectional kind of interests, I think is a powerful testament to like being a part of an, a great system like the U S M.

Kelsey Abernathy: 26:35

Being in the program, and I think Dan and I actually learned a lot about how the university systems work while we were building this business. Because since we were both from different universities, we had to go through the process of the conflict of interest process for each of the universities and kind of figuring out how everything connected to each other to ensure that what we were building for AlgenAir was separate from the research that we were doing in the lab for our thesis work.

Charles Schelle: 27:04

So then touching on that, what either resource or process that you learned from the Grid did you use, or what you think was like vital to making those connections, making it kind of get off the ground?

Kelsey Abernathy: 27:18

I'd say from my end it was, I think initially just being connected to people in the ecosystem. So when we signed up for that first Grid pitch our mentor was fantastic and actually helped us connect to a bunch of different people to talk to before we actually did the pitch. So during that kind of six week lead up period, and through those connections started a lot of conversations around what it was that we were building and why, and I think. That was very important because for both of us initially, this was just kind of a fun pitch competition experience to go through. Like we didn't enter this with the full intent of this is going to become a business. But in talking to people, we got enough encouragement and start enough different conversations that when the pitch ended, both of us were like, we, we wanna continue doing this. We wanna see where this can go, and. It would take another, I think, close to six months between the Grid pitch finishing and us actually forming AlgenAir as a legal entity. And it, during that time is kind of when we went through the process of pivoting on what we were gonna be changing the name, and started applying to different accelerator programs and grants in order to find the funding to build those first prototypes.

Dana Rampolla: 28:44

When it sounds like you've built the prototypes, you're making sales. Obviously Jenny is a, is a good customer and maybe the rest of us will be joining in after everything we've heard today. But what are your what are your next steps? What are your growth plans? So you mentioned the airport in Pittsburgh. That sounds like a huge undertaking, a growth on, your, your in-home conceived idea. So what's next?

Dan Fucich: 29:06

Yeah, that's a, that's a great question. Right now we are stabilizing and scaling the consumer product. So our tabletop unit, the aerium that's the equivalent of 25 house plants, in a single room. We're stabilizing that consumer product. Then scaling up in volume and actual, larger photo bioreactors to commercial installs. I think green walls that incorporate micro algae and enclosed ecosystems that can grow their own fertilizer for the terrestrial plants that you may have. So yeah, right now we're, we're increasing marketing and scaling the hardware sales and then supporting the customers with our refill units. And then going to commercial sales for larger scale. Like the Pittsburgh International Airport. It's a hundred gallon system. That was a really fun product sprint. Essentially we set the deadline pretty aggressively where we went from a product sketch on a whiteboard to a hundred gallons active in the airport, growing in like 40 days. We had a great team that helped us locally here in Pittsburgh Valley Design. They were integral. And then we just worked really well with them, and we, we exceeded expectations in the, in the words of the Pittsburgh International Airport. So that was a really fun system. And then at scale, the business models actually can feed themselves. When you do have the larger scale units, you can distribute that biomass locally to customers. In this case near Pittsburgh. You can imagine one in New York, one in Los Angeles our, our customers are concentrated in urban and highly high population density areas. So the large scale versions, you can use that biomass to then support the small consumer product area customers and next steps on the the next large scale. I have trouble saying no. So even though I told myself I'm gonna focus on the consumer product. We were approached by an artist Lisa Morin. She is a Baltimore artist and former colleague at IMET the Institute of Marine and Environmental Technology. She has an ongoing installation called What Is The Shape of Water and

she's telling the story of bioluminescent dinoflagellates which is another fancy word for micro algae that light up when you shake them lack of a better term. So her installation showcases biological illumination. So we're telling the story going from fire candlelight into that electric light, the classic Edison bulb. And then now what the future looks of 50, a hundred years down the line looks like where we could actually be using organisms to light our indoor spaces, which ties exactly in with AlgenAir's living technology where you can imagine using biological organisms to light up the world in indoors in our built environment. So that is going in in November in the Peel Art Museum. So it's. Nice to have a little bit more of a runway than 40 days. But yeah, that project is coming along well and it's gonna be really beautiful. So if people are interested in the artistic side we'd, we'd love to show you that

Charles Schelle: 32:22

Was one of her pieces of works displayed at Light City Baltimore a few years ago by chance. Yeah, cuz I think I remember seeing that and, and walking in there. I was just, blown away by it.

Dan Fucich: 32:32

Yes. Yeah. It's, it's captivating, mesmerizing like the, the, the vocabulary list goes on. And we're really honored to be a part a small part of the story she's telling.

Dana Rampolla: 32:44

That's incredible. And then from the Grid side, do you, you both are young entrepreneurs, do you give back in any way to the Grid? Do you circle back with students who are currently going through the program and Grid pitch?

Kelsey Abernathy: 33:01

Absolutely. We've tried to stay as involved as we can. I've been a mentor for the past two Grid pitches working with students, kind of helping them before their pitch, and that's something that is such a, like, cool honor to be able to do because. Our mentors have been so important in getting us to where we are and where AlgenAir is today. So to kind of be on the other side and provide mentorship and give back to students just starting on their journey has been a really neat experience. And I always try to approach it from the idea of like, what, what do I wish I knew at that stage? What do I wish someone had told me or shared with me? And how can, how can I help them where they wanna go. And then since we're located in Pittsburgh now we aren't as involved on the like, I guess day to day, but whenever we're in town, we always try to visit the Grid and if they're having any events as well.

Taylor DeBoer: 33:58

Kelsey and Dan are really like the gold standard of, of. What we're trying to build here with the Grid. And so, their success that they've had, is, is a big part of that, but it's also the mentorship that they give back to our students. I could go on and on the amount of times that they've supported our events led programs for us, worked with students mentored They're truly, truly valuable mentors to our students. And that's really what we're trying to build with the Grid is, is, is guide and mentor students on their journey. We hope and wish them success, and when they do have success, we hope that they're willing to come back and support our students. The way that Kelsey and Dan have well

Charles Schelle: 34:39

Earlier you said, you have trouble saying no. I was wondering if Mark Cuban would call if he would say no.

Dan Fucich: 34:47

It would certainly be instrumental in accelerating our process. But yeah, that would, that would be a, a pretty fun, experience yeah. Going on Shark Tank would be, I guess that's the show, right? Like that's the ultimate, that's the highest level. Ultimately, Taylor, you're, you're too kind. Yeah. We're happy to support Grid anyway that we can, because frankly, we wouldn't be here without both of the Grid pitches and all the mentors and the support that we received. So just trying to help other students go along the same path that, that we did, and learn from the mistakes, the many mistakes that we made. So yeah, happy to help.

Dana Rampolla: 35:25

It's so interesting how you were traveling down this path, thinking you knew where you were headed, and now look where you are. It's really an exciting story. I appreciate you guys sharing so much with us.

Charles Schelle: 35:36

There are different resources throughout U M B that are pulled into the Grid. And one that comes to mind is the intellectual, property, clinic. Taylor and Jenny, talk a little bit about those different resources and, and how they, help students preparing with their pitches and their ideas.

Taylor DeBoer: 35:55

Big part of what we do is collaboration, right? We're interdisciplinary. We work with entities across campus with the different schools. Law clinic is a great example. We've worked with them since the beginning of the Grid. They used to meet clients in person. So that clinic, for those who don't know, provides pro bono legal counsel. It's a student run clinic and they work with attorneys and professors in the school of law. They work with clients pro bono around issues, IP issues. Kelsey and Dan have actually worked with them in the past. So they used to meet with clients in our old space, in person. Now they meet mostly virtually, but we send so many individuals, both students and non-students. A lot of people reach out to me with questions about IP. We send so many people to them and we have a close relationship with them. Their director, Patty Campbell and a bunch of the other professors who work with the law clinic lead a lot of our IP related programming. Usually three or four programs every year led by intellectual property clinics. So we have a great relationship with them and we collaborate with the Office of Sustainability on events. We work very closely with O R D. They're great partners of ours, continue to be great partners of ours and we've. We've collaborated, and led events with them. We've worked with the Center for Global Engagement on programming. We've co-hosted events with Women in Bio. School of Pharmacy has contributed and award money for our Grid pitch students. So they're close collaborators and we've worked with them. So yeah, we've worked with a lot of. Different entities around campus. So it's, it's a big part of, of our mission is to collaborate and in fact, our in-person programming is almost all collaborative now these days. We try to do three to five of those per semester. And we, we make

sure that those are collaborations,whether it's with Women in Bio Office of Sustainability,Office of Research and Development,various different organizations.

Jenny Owens: 37:48

The space that we exist in in the library,like there's an innovation hub in the library with a3D printer.That's amazing.There's augmented and virtual reality opportunities in the library as well.There's so many resources there that students can use that we didn't have access to in our previous space.Dan and Kelsey are probably3D printing experts by now due to their prototyping,that they,that they did as well.But like that library partnership and just the welcome we felt in,in their space has been really valuable as well.

Charles Schelle: 38:21

Yeah,that's a relatively new space there on the third floor of the Health Sciences and Human Services Library.What else do you have in there if someone hasn't been inside?

Taylor DeBoer: 38:31

Yeah,so we have about1200square feet of flexible programming and,and collaborative workspace.So there are a ton of little tables where students are often sitting and studying,collaborating,having conversations,working.It is a library,so when we're not having programming,we try to keep it relatively quiet and respectful for the rest of the people who are in the library,but it's a great space for students to hang out and,and do work or research,whatever they they may need.And then when we have events it's completely flexible,so it gets converted into a1200square foot space.There's a large TV screen and AV equipment.PA system and all of that.So we can have events of up to about80people is our capacity.But it's growing because there are some stacks have removed and thanks to the continued,generous support of the library,we're gonna be gaining probably about four,500additional square feet of space.So we'll be able to have slightly larger events,in the future.So that's exciting.And then,and then my office is also in the Grid,so.And I have a conference room,so there's,there's flex space in there too,if students or faculty,staff really anyone needs to,to have a conversation.I've had some,some Grid pitch students meet with their mentors in my office in that conference room.So,so we have kind of a multipurpose space.

Charles Schelle: 39:48

Ideas can strike at any time.Can students or even folks in the community reach out to you anytime during the year or are you more like on a semester cycle with,with the different programming?

Taylor DeBoer: 39:59

I encourage students to reach out to me at any point.I meet with students fairly regularly and it sometimes it's,they're interested in learning more about what we have to offer.They're interested,they have an idea,but they're not sure if it's a good fit for Grid pitch.We also do career services out of the Grid,which is something I haven't mentioned yet.And that's a collaboration that started with Student Affairs.So we,we do a lot of career services as well.So I even meet with students and help them with,with career services,sometimes one-on-one.So,definitely do not wait for the Grid pitch application cycle to come out.If you're a student and you're interested in this world of entrepreneurship in any capacity we have so many things to offer and I'd love to just have

a conversation over Zoom or in person or get a coffee and talk about what you may want to do, what you're trying to build, what skills you want to gain and, and I can then kind of guide you to one of the many different things that we offer, or multiple things that we offer that kind of fits that student's needs. So that's, yeah, just email me. That's what I, just shoot me an email, send me a text, let's have a conversation.

Jenny Owens: 41:09

We work in the Graduate School, Taylor and I, but it's for all students. So it's not just for graduate school students. We have social work students, we have pharmacy students. Like, we just want to make sure everyone feels welcome in the space and that it's not just a graduate school thing. We were also deliberate about like the location of making it in the space too. That was kind of neutral to school. So I just wanna emphasize that. If you're not sure if it's for you, it is for you. It's for any student.

Taylor DeBoer: 41:34

I wanna add too that I think entrepreneurship is as much a mindset and a philosophy as it is a career path. So I think you, you don't have to be an aspiring entrepreneur by definition to gain knowledge or skills or to, to engage with our programming. I think that's really important. To highlight that maybe you need help with career services. Maybe you're just interested in something we have to offer. Maybe you're not sure why, but you wanna, you want to engage. So reach out to us, come to our Lunch and learns. I don't think it's just for students who are launching an app or creating a medical device or wanna start a company. I think it's for all students of U M B and we have programming and services to support all students.

Charles Schelle: 42:24

Fantastic. Thank you again to Jenny, Taylor, Dan and Kelsey, and to learn more about both the Grid and AlgenAir, you can visit the links in our show notes.

Jena Frick: 42:40

The U M B Pulse with Charles Schelle and Dana Rampolla is a U M B Office of Communications and Public Affairs production. Edited by Charles Schelle Marketing by Dana Rampolla.