GAIL NICHOLS INNOVATION EDUCATION

College Innovation Program

FROM IDEA TO IMPACT | THE NEXT VIABLE STEP

Program purpose

Students use the From Idea to Impact Flywheel to make decisions under uncertainty: choose and take the next viable step, choose partners wisely, and evaluate the evidence before committing further resources.

Who it serves

- Student founders, pitch-competition teams, incubator and accelerator cohorts
- Business, engineering, design, technology, health-science, and social-impact innovators
- Faculty researchers, alumni founders, and community entrepreneurs developing early-stage ventures

What participants leave able to do

- Distinguish a promising idea from a validated opportunity
- Identify whether the venture next needs Visionary, Explorer, Builder, or Commercializer capability
- Design an affordable test of the uncertainty that matters most
- Choose partners for expertise, reliability, and aligned incentives
- Recognize risks to funding, ownership, and control; decide how to respond

Ways to bring the program to campus

Keynote | 45-60 minutes – Campus events and entrepreneurship conferences

Interactive workshop | 60-90 minutes – Venture cohorts and pitch preparation

Classroom case study | 50-90 minutes – Case discussion for business and innovation courses

Why Gail Nichols

Gail Nichols is an innovation speaker, advisor, author, and co-creator of Willow CSN, a pioneering virtual call-center company. Willow grew from a capability Bell Canada initially said did not exist into a company recognized with Smithsonian Computerworld and President's Task Force awards and ultimately acquired for $41.5 million.

Drawing on Holly Home Supermarkets, Willow CSN, and TheNowMall, Gail teaches how innovators test, protect, finance, and sometimes redirect promising ideas.

Advance praise for The Next Viable Step

Gail's forthcoming book draws on the experiences behind this program.

"A book I wish I'd read before entering the private sector—and one that should be part of the curriculum of every business education program."

— Brian Nichols, technology entrepreneur and former research scientist

PROPOSED COLLEGE PILOT

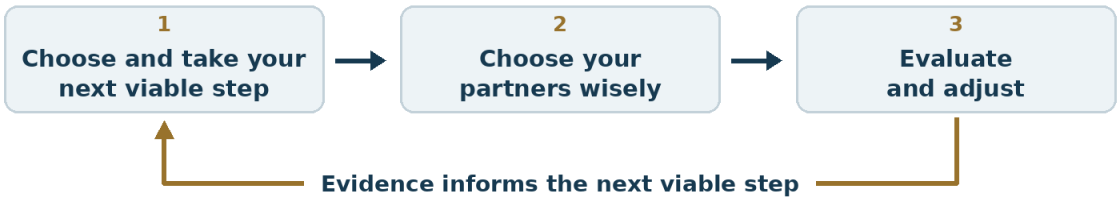
The Next Viable Step Workshop

75-MINUTE INTERACTIVE PILOT FOR STUDENT INNOVATORS

Pilot purpose

Students apply the flywheel to a real decision and identify the capability they need next: Visionary, Explorer, Builder, or Commercializer.

The From Idea to Impact Flywheel



Gail Nichols's application of Jim Collins's flywheel principle in Good to Great and Turning the Flywheel.

Proposed agenda

0–5 Opening decision. Name a real idea or venture decision you face.

5–15 The Willow case. See how one test and the people behind it made the next test possible.

15–25 Four essential roles. Identify what your venture needs now.

25–38 Choose the next viable step. Name the key uncertainty and design an affordable test.

38–50 Choose partners wisely. Assess expertise, reliability, incentives, and decision rights.

50–63 Evaluate and adjust. Set criteria to continue, adjust, pause, or stop.

63–70 Investor decision exercise. A funding promise slips. What needs protection, and what should you do next?

70–75 Commitment and close. Record the action, the people needed, and the review date.

Pilot deliverables

- Slides, a one-page Next Viable Step worksheet, and Innovation Readiness Assessment access
- Anonymous participant evaluation and a brief post-session faculty debrief
- A short summary of recurring participant needs or questions

Recommended conditions and measures

For 25–75 participants with an idea, project, or early venture. Requires a screen, audio, mobile QR access, and a campus contact.

Success: participants record an action, partner criteria, evidence to gather, a review date, and a trigger for changing course.

NEXT STEP | **Schedule a 20-minute Planning Conversation**