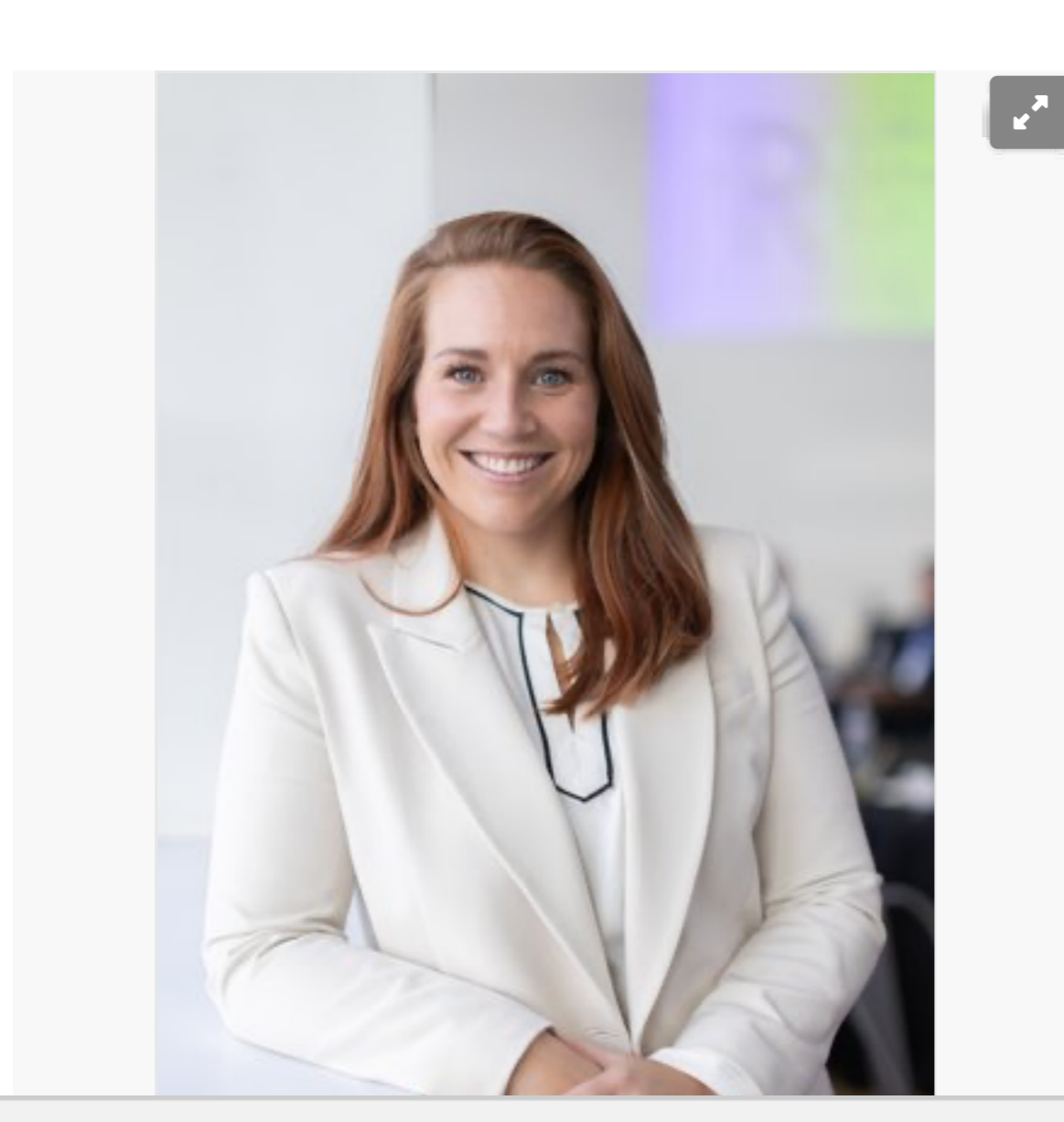




Education

20 People to Know in Higher Education: Erienne Olesh, West Virginia University

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By Ethan Lott – Data Editor, Pittsburgh Business Times
Mar 24, 2025

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Erienne Olesh oversees innovation and entrepreneurship activities at West Virginia University.
- Olesh helped Endolumik, a WVU spin-off, secure FDA approval.
- She enjoys students' creativity and resilience in developing solutions.

Erienne Olesh, executive director, Office of Innovation and Commercialization, West Virginia University

Erienne Olesh focuses on boosting the number of research-based innovations that are commercialized by assisting startups with grants, strategies and more as she oversees innovation and entrepreneurship activities for West Virginia University. Olesh began this role in July 2024, having previously served as executive director of student and faculty innovation during her four-plus years at WVU, where she earned her MBA and Ph.D. in neuroscience. Most recently, much of her effort has focused on a multi-institution collaboration to create an innovation hub that would develop technology to ensure a reliable energy supply for the region's industrial sector.

What are the biggest barriers for startups finding success out of the university setting?

It's the lack of developing technology with an end user/customer in mind.

What's a success story you are most proud of regarding commercialization of innovation from WVU?

One of my favorite stories is Endolumik, a university spin-off started by a surgeon at WVU. I was able to help early on to connect the inventor with a small amount of seed funding, which gave them enough of a catalyst to form a startup company and connect with an experienced CEO. The female-led startup quickly advanced through the regulatory pathway and became the first company to be awarded regulatory approval under the FDA's "Safer Technologies Program." Their dedication to delivering safer surgical technology to patients is inspiring, and I am honored to have played a small role in helping them.

What do you enjoy most about interacting with students?

I love the creativity and resilience of students. So many of their ideas are inspired by real events and experiences in their lives. This pushes them to think about big solutions.

What is something on your bucket list?

Deep sea fishing for giant squid. I am an avid fisherwomen and love spending time on lakes, oceans or in streams. It doesn't happen very often but about once a decade the right ocean conditions occur that drive giant squid to the northern shores of California. The next time that occurs, I will be jetting off across the country to take a trip out on the Pacific Ocean.

Tell us about a mentor in the education field?

My dad retired from UC Berkeley as one of the most beloved professors in chemistry. He focused on using real-world examples to make organic chemistry relatable and interesting, like making hair gel out of flax seeds. If there is one thing I learned from my dad's success in teaching is that you can inspire students no matter what the topic if your own passion on the subject shines through.

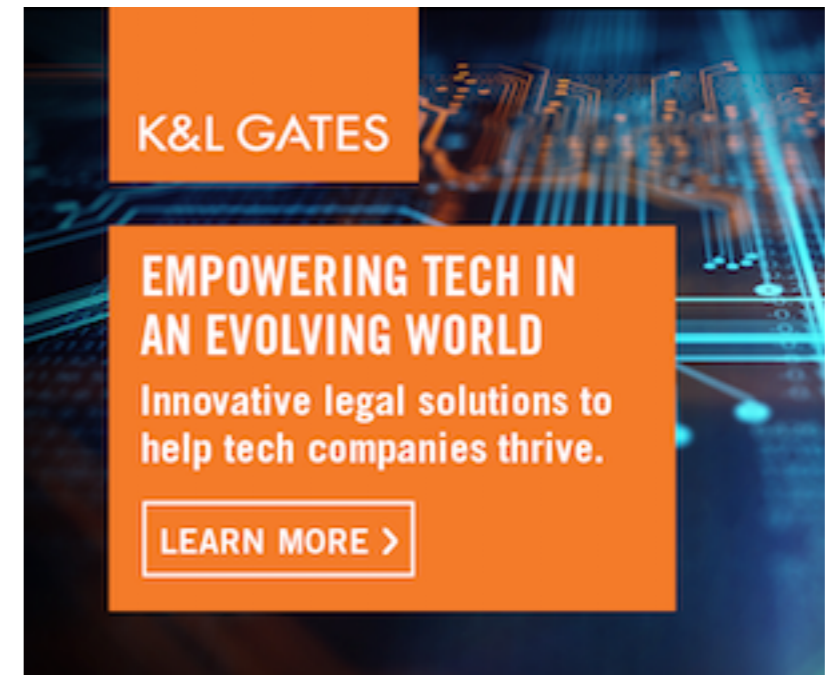
The 20 People to Know in Higher Education published in print on March 21 and included Q&As with 20 professionals who work at higher education institutions in the Pittsburgh region.

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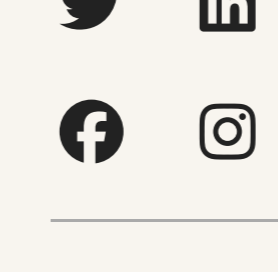
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