

# Is Education Technology Where Women Are Starting To Buck The Tech World's Sexist Trends?

The number of women founders and executives at startups is dismal. But at ed-tech incubators, the numbers are starting to improve.

WRITTEN BY Tony Wan

The landmark San Francisco trial between iconic venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins and Ellen Pao, the woman who did not become partner, may be over. But its repercussions—and the quest to fix sexism in Silicon Valley and, by extension, the technology industry—are ongoing.

Venture capital may be one of the toughest areas to be either female or a minority—and at the technology high-fliers that are their favorite investments, it isn't much better. Women made up only 11% of founders in the most recent class of lauded tech incubator Y Combinator.

But in the geeky boys' club of tech, education tech may be one of the few slightly more bright spots where female founders and CEOs are showing up—and staying the course—in greater numbers.

The biggest indicator: At the upcoming ASU+GSV Summit, which draws 2,000 entrepreneurs and investors in the ed-tech industry, 29% (52 of the 179 who responded) of the companies are led or founded by a woman; 75% of them have a female on the executive team.

It's far from parity, but it's a promising sign. "Our numbers suggest that women are being consistently drawn to create companies and be leaders in ed tech," says Deborah Quazzo, founder and managing partner at GSV Advisors, which organizes the Summit.



incubators can be a fascinating indicator" of demographic trends, says Quazzo.

The oldest ed-tech incubator in operation is Imagine K12, which once claimed to be "unabashedly inspired by Y Combinator." Like its role model, however, Imagine K12 has not always had a good gender balance: In its inaugural class of 2011, none of the 10 companies had a female cofounder.

But the situation is improving, according to director Karen Lien. Seven of the 17 companies in its 2015 class have at least one female founder, and 10 out of the 43 total founders were women. "We haven't changed our selection mechanism—it's happening naturally," says Lien. "We're dealing with small numbers, but it's pretty clear to us that things are moving positively."

Other ed-tech incubators have sprouted across the country, thanks in part to record-setting venture capital activity in ed tech. Today there are at least seven such programs in the U.S. (The figure is higher if one includes those that don't offer financial support.)

Here's the gender breakdown for the graduates from three incubators that are the most "established" (a term used loosely): Imagine K12, LearnLaunch, and the Kaplan EdTech Accelerator.

Although the number of men founders still outnumber women founders, a solid 30% of these ed-tech startups count a woman on their founding team.

Increasing the number of female graduates from these incubators is also important when it comes to challenging another discouraging fact: Women-led companies that get funded are few and far in between. A study from the Diana Project found that just 15% of companies receiving venture capital from 2011 to 2013 had a female executive; only 2.7% had a women CEO. (The three incubators in our analysis invest \$18,000 to \$20,000 in each company; Imagine K12 and Kaplan offer an additional \$80,000 and \$150,000, respectively, upon graduation.)

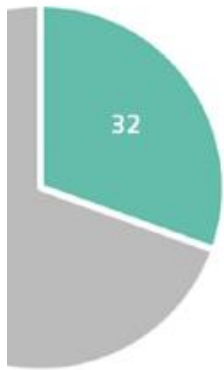
## **WHAT MATTERS**

Groups like Catalyst have done longitudinal surveys to dig into why there are so few women in corporate leadership jobs. Here's a summary of recent findings:

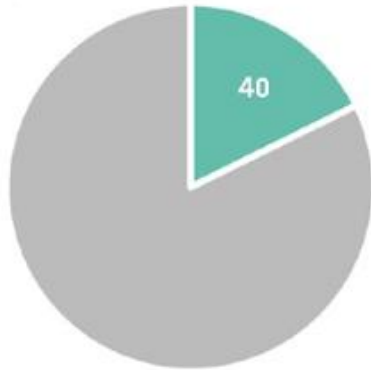
## Representation in Edtech Incubators

Companies  
with female founder(s)

# of female founders



Companies: 105



# total founders: 226

LearnLaunch (founded 2010), Kaplan EdTech Accelerator (2013), and EdTech Accelerator (2015)

	Companies w/ Female Founders	Total Companies	% Companies w/ Female Founders
	17	71	23.9%
Accelerator	9	21	42.9%
	6	13	46.2%
	<b>32</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>30.5%</b>

	Female Founders	Total Founders	% Female Founders
	22	156	14.1%
Accelerator	11	47	23.4%
	7	23	30.4%
	<b>40</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>17.7%</b>

- Women are on average paid less than men in their first jobs
- Men frequently advance faster than women

And particularly in technology industries:

- Women often feel like "outsiders"
- Female role models are scarce

And although the teaching profession may have many challenges—including, too often, low salaries—women represent more than 70% of teachers in U.S. public schools. And that may make a significant difference. The

phrase "founded by teachers" is a badge of honor for many startups, and many educators are building tools for the classroom and starting ed-tech companies on their own.

"Clearly, the important issues of education resonate in some unique ways for women—it's a clear way to apply technology to change the world," says Quazzo.



Our data show similarities to those in health care, another industry that employs many women. San Francisco-based Rock Health, a popular "med tech" accelerator, recently reported that 30% of its portfolio companies have a female founder.

At the end of the day, women don't gravitate toward one technology sector because it has inherent moral value, says Carol Barash, founder of Story2 and a graduate of the Kaplan EdTech Accelerator. "If your life's work is in teaching, improving educational outcomes, or empowering people, you wouldn't go to technology first. You would already have that ambition which technology emboldens and allows you to pursue at a larger scale."

While "technology has opened have a lot of doors," she adds, "the revolution isn't over by any means."

Women ed-tech entrepreneurs face the same challenges that women in other tech-dominated industries confront. At the top of that list: The overwhelming number of people who control investor dollars are men. The aforementioned Diana Project report found the percentage of female partners in venture capital firms actually declined from 10 to 6 percent between 1999 and 2014.

Reversing that abysmal trend would be a step toward achieving more equitable gender representation in technology leadership roles.

And it might also start to curb courtroom battles and depressing questions like the one Quazzo heard at SXSWedu last year when a young female entrepreneur asked how she should respond to questions like the one from a potential investor who asked if she intended to get pregnant soon.

*[Photos: Tom Gowenlock via Shutterstock]*



## **TONY WAN**

Tony Wan is the managing editor of EdSurge.  
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