

CASE STUDY:

Techstars Founder Catalyst WaterTech & Sustainability

What is Founder Catalyst?

Techstars Founder Catalyst stands apart as the only pre-accelerator program backed by two decades of Techstars' proven experience and by a network that has guided over **5,000 startups** and produced **23+ unicorns**.

While ideas are everywhere, opportunity is not. Founder Catalyst is built to meet the needs of early-stage tech communities, bringing visibility to nascent founders that may otherwise be overlooked by traditional capital deployment. This **non-equity, part-time** program focused on education, mentorship, with a focus on ecosystem building within a specific community.

Having an idea is easy. Building a company ready for investment is hard. This program creates a support system around founders that guides them to a point where they can confidently charge the path to funding.



Founder Catalyst by the Numbers, Globally

9x

Higher likelihood of being accepted into a TS Accelerator after graduating a Founder Catalyst

532

Total number of founders who have successfully completed a Founder Catalyst program

33

Total number of Founder Catalyst programs delivered since 2021

20%

Acceptance rate for Founder Catalyst alumni into Techstars Accelerators

The "Pre-Accelerator" Focus

While a full accelerator focuses on scaling, Founder Catalyst focuses on **validation**:

- **Customer Discovery:** Moving from a lab concept to a product people actually want to buy.
- **Pitch Development:** Turning complex academic research into a 3-minute pitch that investors and partners can understand.
- **KPIs & Metrics:** Establishing the business fundamentals (Unit Economics, Product-Market Fit) before seeking major funding.
- **Founder Support Enrichment:** Increasing access to network, education and resources.

Techstars Startup Community Team



Katie Smith

Head of Startup Community



Emily Skinstad

Senior Director, Startup Community Operations



Sebastian Turano

Program Manager, Founder Catalyst

Bridging Research and Market: The UA x Techstars Partnership

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, is leveraging its world-class research and infrastructure to become a global hub for WaterTech innovation. By utilizing a high density of federal and academic assets — including the National Water Center and the University of Alabama — the region provides an unparalleled environment for developing and testing complex water technologies.

To capitalize on this ecosystem, the Techstars Founder Catalyst WaterTech & Sustainability program was launched to bridge the gap between academic research and commercial success. This partnership provides pre-seed founders with specialized startup advice, mentorship, and network access necessary to transform technical concepts into investment-ready ventures.

The program specifically addresses the unique hurdles of the water sector, such as navigating complex regulatory pathways and achieving technical validation. By offering early-stage support and fostering connections with local partners, the initiative attracts global talent to Alabama, building a sustainable pipeline of startups equipped to solve critical water challenges.



Great sourcing, planning, communication, organization, and execution. Jerome and Sebastian did a fantastic job in leading this program.

-Dan Blakely,
Associate Vice President for Economic Development at the University of Alabama



Key Partners



Dan Blakely

Associate Vice President for Economic Development at the University of Alabama



Justice Smyth

Executive Director at the Tuscaloosa County Economic Development Authority (TCEDA)



Dr. Theresa M. Welbourne

CEO of The EDGE Accelerator and Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute

The “Full Stack” Founder Journey

The Founder Catalyst program is unique because it doesn't just fund companies; it builds the "Founder Mindset."

- **The Pivot Point:** The program shifts focus from academic theory to market reality, training founders to prioritize commercial demand and scalable impact over their initial technical prototypes.
- **Mentor-Driven Accountability:** Weekly masterclasses and 1:1 sessions force founders to confront hard truths and refine their business models.
- **Sustainability:** By integrating UA faculty, alumni, and federal partners like the National Water Center, the program builds a "sticky" innovation culture that keeps specialized WaterTech expertise and talent within the Alabama network.

Key Success Metrics

Exceptional Founder Satisfaction:

The program achieved an elite **4.8/5 overall founder CSAT** in 2025, reflecting the high value delivered across the two-year partnership.

Elite Mentorship & Coaching:

Founders reported near-perfect satisfaction with the program's core pillars, specifically highlighting **mentorship (4.7/5)** and **masterclasses (4.6/5)**.

Robust Ecosystem Demand:

The program generated massive regional and university interest, serving over **20 companies and 30 founders**. Many of whom went on to launch pilots with major industrial and manufacturing partners.

Strong Institutional Pipeline:

The partnership successfully activated the intended pipeline, with 13 startups from the Founder Catalyst program applying to a Techstars Accelerator, and 7 being accepted.



Overall, the program exceeded our expectations. The in-person week in Tuscaloosa was particularly impactful, where we received precise and actionable feedback on our pitch, established a pipeline of potential customers, and explored opportunities with local partners. The program has been a pivotal experience, laying a strong foundation for our future growth and success in the US market. The support from Techstars, the partners and the local ecosystem has been exceptional, thank you for providing the resources and connections to propel us forward!

-Virginia Szepietowski

CEO of Nyad (formerly UrbanBlue)



[Nyad](#) (formerly UrbanBlue), relocated from London to Alabama following the program and is currently piloting its AI-powered wastewater co-pilot with chemical manufacturers in the state, introduced through TCEDA.

The company has also launched municipal proof-of-concepts in New York City and hired a Head of Machine Learning and AI Research from the University of Alabama. Most recently, Nyad closed an oversubscribed funding round, raising \$1.312 million.

Strategic Impact

Ultimately, the program has successfully solidified Tuscaloosa's reputation as a global WaterTech hub, attracting talent from six continents and facilitating tangible economic impact through company relocations and local industrial pilots.

By bridging the gap between global innovation and Alabama's specialized assets, the initiative delivered measurable founder progress and forged deep ties between startups, the University of Alabama, and the local business community. This collaborative effort not only strengthened the region's innovation pipeline but also validated its effectiveness as a premier launchpad, with a majority of participants advancing toward high-level investment accelerators.

The momentum will continue in 2026 with two additional Founder Catalyst programs in Tuscaloosa – one beginning on April 6 and another one starting in the fall.

