



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Making West Virginia a Destination of Choice for Entrepreneurs and Young Professionals

Arria Hines, President and Chief Executive Officer
Allegheny Science and Technology

Arria Hines is an award-winning entrepreneur, philanthropist and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) evangelist. She is President, CEO and co-founder of Bridgeport, West Virginia-based Allegheny Science & Technology (AST), a technology and energy consulting firm with expertise in applied science and engineering, program strategy and implementation, and IT development and analysis.

Under her leadership, AST has garnered numerous awards for rapid growth, cutting edge innovation and personalized client service, including the Department of Energy's Small Business of the Year, the Department of Defense Nunn Perry Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Mentor/Protégée Program, and Inc.'s 5000 Fastest Growing Private Companies in America.

Hines has been honored with several individual awards, such as the West Virginia Small Businessperson of the Year, the Women Impacting Public Policy Innovator of the Year, the TechConnect West Virginia Outstanding Woman in Technology and the Enterprising Women Magazine Woman of the Year.

With a passion for promoting STEM-based careers, especially for women, Hines serves on the West Virginia Governor's STEM Council. She is also a member of the West Virginia MBA Advisory Council.

Hines earned her MBA from West Virginia University and holds a bachelor's degree in accounting from West Virginia Wesleyan College.

I love West Virginia. It has been my chosen home and place of work for my entire life. I was born and raised in Lewis County, attended West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon, earned my MBA at West Virginia University in Morgantown and started my technology and energy consulting firm, Allegheny Science and Technology (AST), in Bridgeport.

West Virginia is a state rich in natural resources, genuine people and economic potential; however, it is also a state that's had its fair share of trouble attracting and retaining the best and brightest entrepreneurs and young professionals.

The median age of our residents is 42 years old. That puts us 46th in the nation, and it's trending in the wrong direction, which does not bode well for our future workforce or the elders who will depend on them. We ranked 49th for economic opportunity and entrepreneurship in the latest state rankings by *U.S. News and World Report*.



AST's Bailee Miller assists a young scientist with an activity at NASA's IV & V Facility in Fairmont, West Virginia



If our football or basketball teams were ranked second to last in the nation, alarm bells would be blaring. We need to approach our economic development challenge with the same sense of urgency and action. Our state has too much untapped potential for us to sit on the sidelines and let others continue to pass us by.

As a three-time entrepreneur, I've faced the traditional challenges of starting and growing a business, such as raising capital, gaining access to opportunities and becoming known within the right communities. But I've also faced additional challenges establishing credibility as a female entrepreneur in a male-dominated industry while attracting and maintaining a skilled workforce in West Virginia.

I started AST in 2009 with one contract, three people and \$135,000 in revenue. Through delivering trusted solutions, establishing strong relationships with clients and partners, and becoming an employer of choice, AST has grown to more than 200 people across 17 states, with offices in West Virginia, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Idaho and Colorado, and \$50 million in annual revenue.

I didn't do this alone. I was blessed with a seasoned leadership team, skilled and dedicated employees and wonderfully supportive clients who treated me and my team as partners. I also had access to financial and technical assistance, such as the loan guarantee program through the



*Left: Anne Barth, Director of TechConnect West Virginia, Arria Hines and Woody Thrasher, West Virginia Commerce Secretary
Right: AST Employees collaborate at the company's Bridgeport, West Virginia headquarters*

U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and the West Virginia Small Business Development Center (SBDC). These are wonderful resources, and AST wouldn't be where it is today without them; however, they are similar to resources found in nearly every state in our union.

If we're going to attract our nation's best and brightest, we need to change our economic game. We need our policy makers to incentivize entrepreneurs to start or move businesses to West Virginia and provide technical assistance to help them get started. These policies should emphasize female entrepreneurs who open new businesses at a rate of five to one, yet face significant hurdles in access to capital and credibility in the business community.

We need our business and government organizations to invest in our state by setting aside more contracts for West Virginia-owned and operated businesses. Let's keep our money where we need it most – right here at home.

We need our educational institutions to partner with our local business community to share their ideas and educate students about in-state career opportunities by inviting business leaders to engage with

students. Ultimately, this will inspire and empower our future workforce to start careers or businesses right here in West Virginia.

We need to diversify and stabilize our economy by encouraging and incentivizing more Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) businesses and evolving our state from an extraction-based economy of natural gas, coal and timber to a homegrown manufacturing and advanced technology growth engine.

Lastly, we need an awareness campaign to change the negative perceptions of West Virginia and entice skilled workers to move here. Those of us who live and work here know how much our state has to offer. Where else can you find world class outdoor activities, close knit communities, renowned universities and median home prices of \$149,000?

The game clock is ticking and our time to act is now. If we want to achieve the economic results our state needs and deserves, we must devise a new game plan and bring together our government, industry, academic and civic organizations to execute it. ▽