
Breaking the Mold

ONE WOMAN'S PATH INTO CONCRETE INDUSTRY MANAGEMENT (CIM)

By Cara Baker



Rylie McKinney

When Rylie McKinney enrolled at Texas State University, she didn't expect concrete to shape her future. In fact, she didn't know much about the industry at all.

"I was set on business because I've always been entrepreneurial and math-oriented," she said. "But then I talked to the recruiter for the Concrete Industry Management (CIM) program, and she told me all these amazing

things — how it's small, hands-on, and full of opportunities to travel and meet professionals." That conversation changed everything.

What began as a "why not?" decision turned into a thriving career path. Today, McKinney is a senior in the CIM program — one of the fastest-growing specialized degree tracks in construction and materials science.

FROM LONE WOMAN TO LEADING VOICE

"When I joined, I was the only girl in my class," McKinney recalled. "There were about 30 students total." Just a few years later, the program has nearly quadrupled in size, now enrolling more than 100 students and including around 30 women.

Ryan Penlerick, the program's director and Professor of Practice, says this growth is a point of pride. "The young ladies in the program always do very well," Penlerick said. "About 16 percent of our total enrollment is women now — well above the industry average. They bring a completely different perspective on a lot of things, and there's no reason they shouldn't consider this as a career."

For McKinney, being one of the first women in her class wasn't always easy — but it gave her an edge. "I feel like I'm actually at a huge advantage compared to the males," she said with a laugh. "If you walk into a room and you're the only woman, people are curious. I worked really hard to prove myself, and now people know I mean business."

Her advice to women considering the program? Confidence is key. "It's alright to be nervous, but

confidence in yourself says more than anything they could ever say to you," she said. "Stand your ground and show that you know your stuff."

A DEGREE THAT BUILDS MORE THAN CONCRETE

The CIM program blends science, construction, and business — preparing students to lead in a multi-billion-dollar industry that touches nearly every part of modern infrastructure.

"It's a business-intensive degree," Penlerick explained. "We teach students the technical side — mixture design, testing, materials science — but also how to manage operations, run companies, and make decisions in the field."

For McKinney, that mix of technical and entrepreneurial training was the perfect fit. She's spent years in materials labs experimenting with concrete mixture designs, while also learning how to write business plans and lead projects.

As part of her senior capstone, McKinney is launching a business concept focused on shotcrete — particularly as used for pools. Her industry mentor, Juan Jose Armenta, has already connected her to the American Shotcrete Association (ASA) and is helping her refine her business model.

"Ultimately, I'd love to start my own company," McKinney said. "This capstone is giving me a real plan to do that. Even if I don't go straight into it after graduation, I know I'll have the tools."

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE, REAL-WORLD OPPORTUNITIES

McKinney's favorite part of the program isn't just the coursework — it's the people.

"We're like a family," she said. "I came from a really small town, so walking into a close-knit program where professors and industry mentors actually know you — that's probably the main reason I stayed in the program."

Students regularly network with industry professionals through weekly guest lectures, field trips, and national conventions. They also travel across the U.S. and Canada for competitions and professional events, all funded by the program's patrons and sponsors.

"The opportunities that come out of this program are actually insane," McKinney said. "We have 100 percent job placement after graduation, tons of scholarships, and amazing travel experiences. You just don't get that in other degrees."

POURING A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

As McKinney nears graduation, her path reflects what CIM is all about — turning curiosity into confidence, and raw materials into careers.

For students who like working hands-on, problem-solving, and thinking big, McKinney says CIM is worth a closer look. “It’s definitely worth a try,” she said. “You get so many experiences, you meet incredible people, and the opportunities are endless. You might come in not knowing much about concrete — but by the time you leave, you realize you can build just about anything. One thousand percent recommend.”



Cara Baker is a creative professional with a BA in Graphic Design and a background in journalism and communications. She served five years in the U.S. Navy as a print photojournalist and editor, documenting events such as the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge and the maiden deployment of USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76). After her service, she honed her writing and branding skills in both corporate and nonprofit settings before becoming Managing Editor at the American Shotcrete Association, where she oversees global author relations, editorial content, and design for the quarterly magazine. Skilled in copywriting, editing, layout, and graphic design, Cara blends creativity with precision in every project.

CIM

CONCRETE INDUSTRY MANAGEMENT

The **Concrete Industry Management (CIM)** is a professional degree that combines business education, cutting-edge technology, and hands-on experience.

It produces leaders perfectly tailored for the numerous industry jobs available. Graduates aren’t just ready to enter the concrete and shotcrete worlds — they’re ready to redefine the future of our workforce.

This program is available at:

- **California State University, Chico**
- **Middle Tennessee State University**
- **New Jersey Institute of Technology**
- **South Dakota State University**
- **Texas State University**