Successful First Year Paves Way for Next Round of NSF I-Corps Teams

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One year ago, through the work of Tech Launch Arizona, the University of Arizona was selected alongside other universities as a National Science Foundation Innovation Corps (NSF I-Corps) site. In the program’s first year, 30 teams of inventors and scientists like Bonnie Hurwitz and George Watts were able to hit the ground running toward discovering the economic plausibility and social impact of their respective inventions.

Hurwitz, who holds a doctorate in ecology and evolutionary biology, has built her career on academic research. As an assistant professor of agricultural and biosystems engineering in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and a BIO5 Institute fellow, she has classes to teach, students to mentor, and her own research to move forward.

But she and co-inventor Watts, a research assistant professor at the Arizona Cancer Center who holds a doctorate in pharmacology and toxicology, also have a passion for seeing that their research makes an impact out in the world. To make that happen, they knew they needed to address how to commercialize their research.

"We are trained scientists. We work in the scientific method. But there’s a whole other component in the business realm that we needed to understand," Hurwitz said. "The NSF I-Corps program got us past that activation barrier, to realize that, yes, this is a priority, and this is how we can do it. It gave us the structure, the guidance, and the little push that we needed to go in the right direction and pursue the passion that we already had. NSF I-Corps allows inventors to step outside their usual realm of academic research and immerse themselves, with the help of a closely aligned team, in the oft-ambiguous world of business. During this immersion, teams find out what markets and customers might be interested in products derived from their inventions and why. However, the process to identify those appropriate markets and customers can be challenging. The I-Corps program encourages teams to talk directly with potential customers to gain a better understanding of their needs and the overall market opportunity." (To learn more about the NSF I-Corps program experience from Hurwitz and Watts, watch this video.)

"The whole template of customer discovery that's used in the I-Corp program is just as applicable to doing your research as it is to commercializing your research outputs," says Mary Poulton, another graduate of the program and director of the UA's Lowell Institute for Mineral Resources. "The notion of getting out of your office and talking to people is just as important to doing a good research proposal as it is to commercializing a product.”

Tech Launch Arizona helps bring cross-functional teams together, organizing each one around specific technologies to maximize the benefits that the I-Corps program will have in helping them bring the intellectual property to market. These teams, composed of a principal
investigator, entrepreneurial lead, and a business mentor, work collectively to break down the stories of their complex technologies into brief understandable customer pitches.

This past year, TLA successfully reached its goal of putting 30 teams through the program, which the office offered through four separate cohorts. Each team received a grant of between $2,000 and $3,000 dollars, which they used for customer discovery. Then, leveraging what they gleaned from those interviews, they further articulated their business concepts and strategies, and ultimately made a decision about whether to move their startup forward.

Examples of the teams that worked with TLA and I-Corps this past year include:

- The HedgeSmart team, which is commercializing software developed by inventor Roger Dahlgran [12], associate professor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. (Watch video.) [13]
- A team commercializing a new diagnostic tool for Lou Gehrig's disease, led by Jacob Schwartz [14], associate professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. (Watch video.) [15]
- A team including inventors Mary Poulton [16], director of the Lowell Institute for Mineral Resources, and Leonard Brown, also of the Lowell Institute, which is investigating the market for using video games to do mine safety education. (Watch video.) [17]

These teams and many others have benefited from the plethora of resources and partnerships that TLA offers. For example, the McGuire Center for Entrepreneurship [18] provides lecturers for I-Corps classes. Past I-Corps faculty have included Joe Broschack [19], program director for the McGuire Center, and Rick Yngve [20], adjunct lecturer at the Eller College. According to Hurwitz, "I-Corps provided us the ability to take our application and break it down in such a way that was understandable. We could then use it to talk with potential clients that may use our product and start to understand what their needs are and how we can improve our product and get it to market."

Tech Launch Arizona is accepting applications for future NSF I-Corps cohorts. Interested inventors, entrepreneurs and potential mentors can contact Samantha Bares at samanthab@tla.arizona.edu [21].

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Links
[2] https://cals.arizona.edu/abe/people/bonnie-hurwitz
[3] https://cals.arizona.edu/abe/
[4] https://cals.arizona.edu/
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE_SbVII2as
[12] https://cals.arizona.edu/arec/faculty/roger-dahlgran
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