

PROJECT SUMMARY

Overview:

Over the past five years, the University of Washington (UW) has developed an extensive ecosystem for technology entrepreneurship. We provide integrated resources and programs and use the business-model canvas as part of the planning around each commercialization opportunity. The UW launches over 17 technology start-ups per year, and these companies are more fundable than ever before.

As researchers develop entrepreneurial skills, early customer engagement remains a challenge. Researchers tend to focus on hypothetical customers or to study a market. We propose to apply I-Corps Site funding to qualified teams for the purpose of initiating and developing specific customer relationships. By offering an organized program of mentoring and resources for early customer engagement, we expect the commercialization projects in our pipeline to exhibit more specific information about early customers and their feedback on product definition.

We will solicit Site teams from three overlapping pipelines of emerging start-ups at the UW:

UW Center for Commercialization; the Buerk Center for Entrepreneurship; and the Clean Energy Initiative.

Intellectual Merit :

We have overlapping pipelines of technology start-ups and of student-led start-ups. We use the business model canvas as an organizing tool. While this has made the need for early customer development more visible, we would like our clients to conduct more early interviews with specific customers. On the whole, this aspect of customer development and thereby product definition and the business model still lags the technical specification.

With an I-Corps Site award, we can address customer development within the I-Corps framework.

Our hypotheses are (a) that participating in the I-Corps network will enable us to rapidly and efficiently adopt best practices for supporting our clients in customer development, and (b) that seeding the start-ups in our pipeline with small quick awards tied to the development of specific customers will significantly improve the quality of customer relationships, of product definitions, and of the business models in our gap funding process. We believe that for the majority of our clients the initial customer interviews are the most difficult, because the experience is novel in itself. If we can incentivize our clients to initiate relationships with potential customers much earlier, then they will become more comfortable with these experiences, and the relationships will have time to produce more thorough feedback.

It will be valuable for us to initiate this as part of the national network. We will be able to provide data and consult with our peers about efficacy of our approach and best practices.

Broader Impacts :

Pursuit of the innovation economy is a global phenomenon. The UW has been actively participating in the state-level and regional strategies for the past six years. We believe the I-Corps national network is a good model for making a coherent effort to execute a national strategy. To help drive the regional innovation economy around Seattle and the Puget Sound, UW has developed its own ecosystem for technology entrepreneurship. We are ready to participate nationally, to refine our programs and to share best practices.

An I-Corps Site award would provide a better entrepreneurial experience, especially for the students, by emphasizing the importance of early and frequent interactions with potential customers. This would directly improve the quality and momentum of the start-ups in our pipeline, which translates into healthier company starts in Washington State.