Innovative NSF Program Helps Rutgers-Newark Scientists Turn Ideas into Startups

By Lawrence Lerner

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Rutgers University–Newark is about to welcome a new initiative that will train scientists to become entrepreneurs in order to get research out of the lab and into the marketplace faster.

Innovation Corps (I-Corps), a program supported by the National Science Foundation, is a four-week class that has been adopted university-wide and is open to all Rutgers students, faculty and staff.

The program, which takes its methodology from Silicon Valley, helps gauge whether an innovative research idea has a viable customer base to determine if, and how, work on a project should move forward and perhaps morph into a tech startup.

Rutgers received a five-year, $500K NSF grant for **I-Corps**, which offers training to 30 research teams per year working on science- and tech-based projects that dovetail with NSF research priorities. These include physical sciences, engineering, biological sciences, environmental research, computer science, math, and social and behavioral sciences.

The first cohort, which had five student and five faculty teams, met at Rutgers-New Brunswick for training earlier this year. The deadline for applications for the second cohort, which will meet at Rutgers-Newark over four days in July, has been extended to June 8.

"I-Corps can help scientists—undergraduates, graduate students or faculty—identify the value of a technology for a customer and build relationships within industries," says Mark DeGuzman, a research project coordinator in the physics department at RU-N, who has served in an entrepreneurial lead role in the national I-Corps training and is helping to bring the program to Rutgers. "It also can provide Rutgers and RU-N Ph.D. students with career paths outside academia."

He says Rutgers participants should apply ideally as a team of three, including a researcher or inventor who serves as an academic lead, an entrepreneurial lead who would act as the team's CEO (and can be a grad student or post-doctoral student), and an industry mentor whose experience and connections can lend support to the team.

Rutgers I-Corps can assist in pairing teams with a mentor if they're struggling to find one. The program also is actively recruiting mentors from the business community and Rutgers alumni to guide teams through the process. (Anyone who is interested should contact **DeGuzman** directly.)

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Teams receive up to $2,500 toward their market research and are required to conduct dozens of interviews with potential customers to gauge the market for their idea and refine their business model. DeGuzman says that the Rutgers course then could serve as a feeder into NSF's national I-Corps program, which offers several months of training and an additional $50K research grant.

In addition to New Brunswick and Newark, future cohorts may meet at Rutgers University-Camden, Rutgers Biomedical Health Sciences, and other Rutgers units around the state.

The Rutgers I-Corps program has been a collaboration between DeGuzman and RU-NB Professor Dunbar Birnie, the faculty leader of the original $500K grant, along with the Rutgers Office of Research Commercialization, Rutgers' Office of Research & Economic Development, and Rutgers Business School. Regional partners include the New York City Regional Innovation Node (NYCRIN) and the NJ Small Business Development Center.

"We're looking forward to tapping innovators on the RU-N campus and integrating them into the New Jersey tech ecosystem," says DeGuzman. "There are lots of opportunities here for researchers to learn about business opportunities and accelerators and capitalize on their work."

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