

OPENING STATEMENT
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Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Research and Technology
“From Lab to Market: A Review of NSF Innovation Corps”
December 6, 2017

Thank you Chairwoman Comstock for holding this hearing and thank you to the expert witnesses for being here this morning to share your insights with us. The research carried out at our nation’s universities and national laboratories creates the foundation upon which our entire innovation economy is built. However, in order to benefit society, the science must find a way out of the laboratory.

Those societal benefits may be varied. Science itself, across all fields, serves as inspiration for the public and a tool for educating the next generation of scientists and engineers. Science can also be used to strengthen our national security, or to inform better and more effective policies for the public good.

However, sometimes, a scientific development holds the promise of a new commercializable product or process. And that is where the National Science Foundation Innovation Corps, or I-Corps, program has the biggest role to play. Unfortunately, the path from the laboratory to the market has rarely been smooth or easy. While the challenges are sometimes technical, they often are cultural and financial. Scientists and engineers trained to be academics speak a very different language than business people. Too often, as we will hear in today’s testimony, this leads to researchers spending extensive time and money developing technologies that nobody wants to buy. Even when the idea has a well-defined customer, the private sector may be unwilling to invest until the concept is more fully developed.

Over the last several years, the National Science Foundation has been a leader in addressing the cultural barriers impeding commercialization, while also making small investments in the proof-of-concept work. The I-Corps program stands out as an example of the excellent return we can achieve on a modest investment when we implement and scale up proven practices.

When NSF launched I-Corps in 2011, some of my colleagues were skeptical about the need for or appropriateness of having this program at NSF. Many in the university community were concerned that the program might harm NSF’s core research mission. I believe there has been a sea-change in the response from the university community that reflects the pent-up demand from researchers, the dedication of NSF staff, and the clear benefits of the program. As a result, this one little program may be helping to transform the entrepreneurial culture at universities well beyond initial expectations. I hope my colleagues also see the benefit of this program and remain committed to supporting it. And, I hope my colleagues also remain committed to supporting the long-term foundation of U.S. science and technology by continuing to invest in our research agencies, including NSF.

I look forward to today’s discussion, and I yield back the balance of my time.