

Opening Statement - Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-IL)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Research & Science Education
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Hearing on:
Innovation Corps: A Review of a New National Science Foundation Program
to Leverage Research Investments
July 16, 2012
Northwestern University School of Law
Chicago, Illinois

Thank you Chairman Brooks for scheduling this hearing in Chicago and traveling here to hold it. I know your time here is short, but I hope you enjoy your visit as much as I enjoyed my time in Huntsville when I traveled there for our STEM Education hearing. I would also like to thank Northwestern University for hosting us here today; I am a proud graduate of Northwestern having received my bachelors degree in mechanical engineering. And finally I want to thank our witnesses for taking the time to share with us your insights and experiences with the National Science Foundation's Innovation Corps Program and everyone else who has joined us for this hearing.

Very briefly, I-Corps is an NSF education program which helps federally funded research innovations transition from the university lab into a profitable company. It is based on the Lean LaunchPad course developed by successful Silicon Valley serial entrepreneur Steve Blank and essentially applies the scientific method – which is well-known by researchers – to developing a start-up.

I strongly believe that the I-Corps program embodies NSF's original mission of both promoting the progress of science and advancing the national prosperity. Let's not forget that second part, especially when we are looking to maximize the efficiency of our federal investments. When Vannevar Bush talked about the need for a National Science Foundation in 1945, he was concerned about getting the U.S. back to full employment. Back then he wrote, "[w]e do not know yet how we shall reach that goal, but it is certain that it can be achieved only by releasing the full creative and productive energies of the American people." More recently, the America COMPETES Act Reauthorization that passed last Congress stipulates that the Broader Impacts criterion used in evaluating NSF grant proposals must include the "Increased economic competitiveness of the United States" and "Increased partnerships between academia and industry." As chairman of this subcommittee at that time, I included those two additional components in the bill in order to reinforce the original mission of the NSF as we see innovation and the role of our research universities becoming increasingly critical to job creation. We will hear today from our witnesses how educational programs like I-Corps fit perfectly into the mission of the NSF.

Although it's only about one quarter of 1 percent of NSF's budget, I think this program will yield disproportionate benefits. By giving scientists who have already been awarded NSF research grants the

education needed to push their work outside of the ivory tower into the marketplace, we are helping turn NSF's research investments into jobs. I'm encouraged by the many stories I've heard from awardees in the first and second cohorts, including two of the witnesses here today. In May I had the opportunity to sit in on the final presentations of the second I-Corps cohort at Stanford, and I was very impressed not only by the innovations presented, but also by the stories about what the participants learned through the program.

For anyone who hasn't looked at this program in depth, it is important to note that we are talking about a stage of commercialization before private sector financing gets involved. The goal of I-Corps is to educate scientists to help them establish the viability of an idea before forming a start-up. What I am especially excited about is not just the promise of the technologies being explored by the teams fortunate enough to participate in I-Corps. It's the exponential leveraging effect that is already happening. I-Corps participants are taking what they have learned and are working with their new private sector connections and their university administrators to create opportunities on their own campuses to educate students and faculty on the basics of entrepreneurship. Many are from institutions in communities and regions without a significant record of entrepreneurship. So they are becoming, in a sense, missionaries carrying the best practices of Silicon Valley back to their own communities and figuring out how to localize these best practices.

Despite the tremendous promise of the I-Corps program, some of my colleagues may be skeptical that this is an appropriate use of funds for the National Science Foundation. I explained briefly how I see I-Corps fitting into NSF's core mission, but I welcome all of the witnesses today to help us understand how NSF is filling an unmet need, and why you believe it is appropriate for NSF. I also welcome your thoughts on how the I-Corps program can be improved. And finally, I challenge you to share your thoughts on what more the private sector and universities themselves can be doing in this space. I invited Dr. Mazar to testify about his role as an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Northwestern University. Northwestern is just one of many universities around the country who have taken their own initiative and either their own funds or private sector donations to bolster entrepreneurial activity on their campuses.

The way I see it, this is not a situation where either universities do this on their own, or the private sector does it, or the federal government steps in. This is a partnership among all three, and all three have a role to play, resources to contribute, and benefits to reap. We have good representation here from all of the partners, and I look forward to an interesting and thoughtful discussion about the new NSF I-Corps program and where we take it from here. Once again I thank all of the witnesses for being here this morning and I look forward to your testimony.