

OPENING STATEMENT
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of the Subcommittee on Research and Technology

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Research and Technology
“From Lab to Market: A Review of NSF Innovation Corps”
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Thank you Chairwoman Comstock for holding this hearing and thank you to the witnesses for your participation in this important discussion. As my colleagues may have noticed, I take every relevant opportunity to talk about and promote the Innovation Corps, or I-Corps, program. So I am especially pleased that we are having the first hearing dedicated to the I-Corps program since a field hearing in my hometown of Chicago in 2012.

I'd like to think the 2012 hearing helped win over some of my more skeptical colleagues at the time. But the program was in its infancy then, having been launched by NSF in 2011. Now we are 7 years in, and the program has not just grown and expanded at NSF, it has been adopted and adapted by several other agencies, including NIH, DOE, and even DOD. While I helped build support in Congress to see I-Corps funded and expanded; agency, university, and National Lab leaders alike embraced the potential and worked hard to implement it as effectively as possible. As a result, we are starting to see exactly the kind of outcomes that we hoped for back in 2012: over 1,000 companies have completed a national I-Corps course and we're seeing many of the alumni go on to start successful companies.

There are some notable research institutions who started creating a culture of entrepreneurship decades ago, such as MIT and Stanford. There are many more universities – public and private alike – that have actively sought to learn from and implement many of the best practices from those pioneering universities. Unfortunately, many of them have a hard time securing the funding and the right expertise to successfully undertake these efforts. There are also some institutions that have simply not made this a priority.

Institutional culture is a hard thing to overcome. Our world class research institutions around the nation excel at conducting cutting edge research and educating the next generation of scientists and engineers. There is a fear among some that promoting entrepreneurship would compromise the important basic research mission of these institutions. I believe that there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. And it is clear that students and faculty across the country are eager to see their research breakthroughs further developed into commercial products and processes for the benefit of society and our economy. In addition, because we now graduate far more PhDs than we have faculty jobs, entrepreneurship provides a viable career option for the more than 50% of PhDs who will not be able to pursue academic careers.

With a very modest investment, I-Corps helps address the lack of funding from the private sector to develop entrepreneurial capacity at institutions of all sizes and types. It also helps to strengthen the SBIR program, shift institutional culture, and ultimately pay the American taxpayer back many times over in the form of commercialized products that would have otherwise collected dust on a laboratory shelf. By the end of an I-Corps course, participants make the “go/no-go” decision. Those that decide to “go,” or to start a company, have some market research to back up their decision, and those that either pivot to a new idea or choose “no-go” save themselves the effort of starting a company that would have been likely to fail. Just a few examples of companies that have developed from teams that participated in I-Corps training at the University of Chicago in recent years are Conduit, a company that speeds up the development and improves the quality of software for Internet of Things devices; Qualia Health, which

makes a health assessment and monitoring app; and ClostraBio, which is developing therapeutics to combat food allergies. These companies are all making very real contributions to our economy, job market, and well-being. And these are only from one site out of many around the country.

I remain a committed champion of this program and never cease to be amazed by how successful it has been and continues to be. But we can't rely on past successes to keep I-Corps strong into the future, so I plan to introduce new legislation very soon to expand upon the I-Corps authorities already in law. My bill, the Innovators to Entrepreneurs Act, will open up I-Corps courses to participation by many more entrepreneurs than are currently taking advantage of them. Currently, the Nodes that teach these courses are operating below capacity, which is a missed opportunity both for their faculty and for the companies that could be taking advantage of their training.

My bill will also direct NSF to offer a new course that goes beyond the current I-Corps curriculum to focus on how to attract investors and grow a business. Since 2011, we've learned that the I-Corps curriculum does a great job of teaching aspiring entrepreneurs how to do customer discovery and vet their ideas, but once they decide to start a company and begin the commercialization process, it doesn't teach them how to take the next steps, like how to develop financial projections and build a winning team. Some of the same visionaries who developed the current I-Corps curriculum recognized this need and developed a new pilot course they've been calling "I-Corps Go". The results so far have been promising and demand for this type of training is high. Therefore, my bill directs NSF to develop I-Corps Go into an official I-Corps course and to offer it nationally to interested companies through the Nodes that offer the current curriculum. I hope my colleagues will take a look at my bill and agree to cosponsor.

I look forward to today's discussion about the status of I-Corps, what we know about its outcomes to date, and how we can continue to strengthen the program and expand its reach. I thank all of the witnesses for being here today, and I yield back.