

CBP SBDC Lean Makers Pilot Program

On December 15th 2016, twenty-two entrepreneurs from the DC Metropolitan Area, some from as far away as Baltimore, presented their final pitch to a panel of angel investors and bankers, for the conclusion of the CBP's Small Business Development Center's Lean for Makers pilot program.



The panelists: John May (investor), Zachary Hauser (Capital One Bank), Rafael Martinez (Access National Bank), Bob Smith (investor and Director of MEC SBDC)

This pilot was created under the impetus of the SBA's Lean for Main Street Challenge to adapt the National Science Foundation's I-Corps Lean Program to small businesses. The SBDC at CBP was one of five national winners of the Challenge, and in September 2016, launched the 15-week pilot which focused on two audiences, makers and food makers. The program accepted 30 companies or projects, 15 from each segment, on a selection basis to ensure we had motivated participants committed to completing this relatively long program.

The products manufactured by the participants represented a range of industries, from drones, to sensors for home security systems, to carrier bags for sketchers, to wooden decorative items

for pet lovers, and handicap chairs with incorporated showerheads. Among the food makers, we also had a wide variety of businesses, with restaurateurs, food trucks, caterers, bakers as well as the Honey Bee Initiative from George Mason University.

The curriculum was divided into two parts: the first, modeled after the I-Corps' syllabus, focused on Starting Lean, with classes on the business model canvas, customer discovery, product market fit, and the second, on Execution, and covered more traditional classes essential to running and growing a company, such as financing, marketing, sales acquisition, HR or taxes.

The SBDC worked in partnership with a maker space, TechShop, based in Crystal City, and with a food incubator, Frontier Kitchen, to provide specialized training and a location to produce the prototypes or items. The SBA's grant fund covered the participants' membership fees for the duration of the course.

Overall, the course was a resounding success, with 27 companies or projects completing the pilot, and 22 pitching on the last day. Moreover, the program proved to be highly beneficial for the attendees as well.

Some of the participants, such as Red Bone Caribbean Fusion Catering's Chris Pryce, started applying the lessons of the lean method immediately to adapt his menu and his food presentation, resulting in an 80% growth in sales within the span of the course. The Lean Startup Methodology was a revelation for Chris: he diligently applied the lean principles of customer discovery, product market fit and iterative improvements to modify his offering. He reached out to his customers to obtain their feedback, interviewed competitors and potential clients. As a result of their input, he realized that Caribbean food was misunderstood and that the dishes needed to be presented in a more known format, such as tacos, wraps or bowls to reach customers unfamiliar with Jamaican cuisine or hesitant to try new things.

Other participants got their first sales (Melanie Lee Designs for example) or obtained an initial financing (Vera's Catering). Conversely, a couple of students realized that there was no market for their products and came to the conclusion that their project was a "No Go", thereby saving both time and money.

The course will be offered again in the Spring 2017, but will be modified to include some of the feedback from participants. The next iteration will also strive to avoid some of the errors which were made during the pilot: we will reduce the length of the course, include more hands-on

exercises in class, and most importantly, we will impose mandatory office hours with the counselors.



Some of the food items prepared by our Makers: Bon Bonni, Joyous Bakery, and in the foreground, honey from the Honeybee Initiative. On the right, Natasha Allicock, personal chef is seen preparing the dishes.



Gwen Wilson, winner of the Makers' Prize, for her handicap chair with incorporated showerhead.



Melanie Lee, winner of the Most Improved Maker Prize, maker of wooden accessories and decorative items for pet lovers.



Veronica Musie, winner of the Food Makers' Prize, from Vera's Catering, specialized in Ethiopian fusion cuisine



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Elizabeth Shankle, winner of the Most Improved Food Maker Prize, from Shameless Bakery, baker of alcohol infused cupcakes.

Some other examples of the products created by our participants:

