

## Regional I-Corps program helps teams from Eastern Michigan University identify valuable product opportunities

Participants emerge from the workshop with a better understanding of the business potential for their novel technologies

by Debra Johnson, Published May 20, 2016



**YPSILANTI** – Six teams from Eastern Michigan University recently participated in the Regional I-Corps entrepreneurial training program, aimed at fast tracking their technologies to market and boosting the impact of their research.

The Michigan Regional I-Corps workshop began on March 10 and concluded on April 7. The workshop was held at Wayne State University and was led by the Center for Entrepreneurship within the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan, a designated National Science Foundation (NSF) **I-Corps Node**.

Twelve teams began the Regional I-Corps program, including participants from the University of Michigan, University of Toledo and Wayne State University. Five faculty members and one student from Eastern completed the workshop. The EMU teams, along with their projects, are listed below:

- Emily Schwinghamer, a student working on her masters degree in the textiles program at EMU. Her research explored the properties and potential uses of fibers from milkweed seeds for use in apparel.
- Muhammad Sohail Ahmed, a professor in engineering technology. His project was Secured Messaging: Click2Text, a tool intended to increase collaboration within a classroom.
- Ben Ilozor, a professor in the visual and built environments. His project was SpaceDEC™, an innovative architectural design software tool to be used for space planning, efficiency and/or effectiveness.
- Judi Brooks, a professor in the health sciences, Angela Lukomski, an associate professor in nursing and Renee Lajiness-O'Neill, a professor in the psychology department. Their project was PediaTrac™, an innovative, web-based, open source tool that will engage families in the gathering of data on infants, so healthcare professionals can provide a new level of collaborative and preventative care.

During the workshop, participants conducted market research and fieldwork through direct contact and interviews with individuals in various customer segments. Each team conducted 30 interviews, which prompted them to get out of the lab and off campus to engage with the business ecosystem.

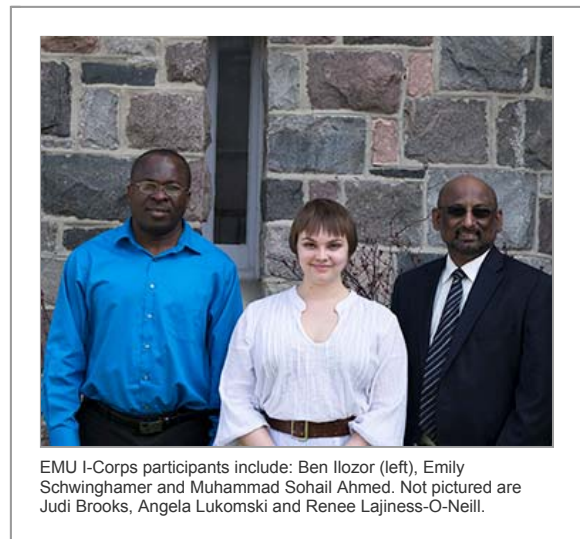
“Through this process, teams with a more research focus will acquire a keen understanding of the attributes that make their research important and reveal commercial opportunities to further their research,” said Melinda Marion, technology transfer at EMU and was an instructor mentor at the I-Corps workshop. “Those teams with products may realize the commercial potential, and what it takes to be effective and successful in both start-up and entrepreneurial environments.”

Before the workshop ended, teams had to present their subject matter and complete a business model canvas template that consisted of logging interviews and answering pertinent questions, such as:

- Which customer problems will they help solve or which customer needs will they satisfy? Who are they solving a problem or fulfilling a need for? Who is the customer?
- How will they reach their customer segments and how will they get, keep and grow their customer base? Who might key partners be?
- What is the revenue model? What are the pricing tactics and what are their customers willing to pay?

“Participation in I-Corp was an unbelievably immersive process that helped our PediaTrac™ team move beyond our research project and into developing clarity about the feasibility and market of our idea,” said Lajiness-O'Neill. “The discovery process of I-Corp was incredibly illuminating and allowed us to actively explore potential customers and partners who could benefit from our innovation. The process was rigorous, but well worth it!”

Marion said the EMU teams were awesome, and led the program with the most interviews and interactions with mentors.



EMU I-Corps participants include: Ben Ilozor (left), Emily Schwinghamer and Muhammad Sohail Ahmed. Not pictured are Judi Brooks, Angela Lukomski and Renee Lajiness-O'Neill.

“The I-Corps participants took full advantage of all of the resources at their disposal and can now move forward with a new understanding of their work. They also met new cohorts and engaged in new relationships with mentors that will last forever,” Marion said.

This evidence-based approach has been shown to have a substantial impact on the success of startup companies, products and even NSF and National Institute of Health SBIR/STTR grant proposals. I-Corps graduates have a success rate of about 60 percent in NSF SBIR/STTR grant submissions compared to the 10 percent success rate of applicants who have not been through the I-Corps program.

Teams who have completed a Regional I-Corps program are eligible to apply to attend the National I-Corps, which was previously reserved for teams lead by a principle investigator with linkage to an NSF award. Once a team is approved to the National I-Corps, they are awarded \$50,000 and assigned to a national cohort at various U.S. locations.

“Make no mistake about it – participating in either the Regional or National I-Corps program is a ton of work,” Marion says. “But for those who do the work, the program yields a great return because teams learn how to refine and focus a given innovation or technology. It’s better for them to find out that their idea doesn’t satisfy the needs of the end users well before they commit a lifetime of going in the wrong direction. That is what the I-Corps experience is all about.”

The National I-Corps program was created by the NSF in 2011 to increase the economic impact of research conducted at state universities and private laboratories and move academic research it has funded to the market. The Regional I-Corps program is modeled after the National I-Corps program.

National I-Corps teams are comprised of academic researchers, student entrepreneurs and business mentors who participate in the curriculum via online instruction and two on-site activities at a designated location. At this level, teams must conduct 100 interviews over a seven-week period.

One major difference between the National and Regional program is that applicants to Michigan Regional I-Corps need not be academic researchers working on an NSF-funded technology. Any Michigan-based technologist, regardless of academic affiliation or funding source, is eligible to apply.

For more information on upcoming I-Corps programs contact Melinda Marion at [mmarion3@emich.edu](mailto:mmarion3@emich.edu) or visit [U of M I-Corps homepage](#). Additional information can be found on [The National Science Foundation I-Corps website](#).

### About Eastern Michigan University

Founded in 1849, Eastern is the second oldest university in Michigan. It currently serves 22,000 students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, specialist, doctoral and certificate degrees in the arts, sciences and professions. In all, more than 300 majors, minors and concentrations are delivered through the University’s Colleges of Arts and Sciences; Business; Education; Health and Human Services; Technology, and its graduate school. EMU is regularly recognized by national publications for its excellence, diversity, and commitment to applied education. For more information about Eastern Michigan University, visit the University’s website



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