



Stanford's Lean Launchpad Class Achieves Huge Impact

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The 15-year-old teaching innovation has inspired similar programs at other schools, and its approach has spread to agencies focused on health, climate change, and defense.

We just finished the 15th annual [Lean LaunchPad class](https://leanlaunchpad.stanford.edu/course-info) at Stanford. The class had gotten so popular that in 2021 we started teaching it in both the winter and spring sessions.

During the 2025 spring quarter the eight teams spoke to **935** potential customers, beneficiaries and regulators. Most students spent 15-20 hours a week on the class, about double that of a normal class. Here is an update on what Lean Launchpad has accomplished in the past 15 years, and its impact on the world outside of Stanford.

This Class Launched a Revolution in Teaching Entrepreneurship

This class was designed to break out of the “how to write a business plan” as the capstone of entrepreneurial education. A business plan assumed that all startups needed to was to write a plan, raise money, and then execute the plan. We overturned that orthodoxy when we pointed out that while existing organizations *execute* business models, startups are *searching* for them. And that a startup was a temporary organization designed to search for a repeatable and scaleable business model. This class was designed to teach startups how to search for a business model.

Several government-funded programs have adopted this class at scale. The first was in 2011 when we turned this syllabus into the curriculum for the [National Science Foundation I-Corps](https://new.nsf.gov/funding/initiatives/i-corps) (<https://new.nsf.gov/funding/initiatives/i-corps>) . [Errol](#)

[Arkilic](https://www.linkedin.com/in/errol-arkilic-350b8/) (the then head of commercialization at the National Science Foundation, adopted the class saying, “You’ve developed the scientific method for startups, using the Business Model Canvas as the laboratory notebook.” Here is a rundown of how the Lean Launchpad concept has expanded.

I-Corps at the National Institute of Health

In 2013 I partnered with [UCSF](https://www.ucsf.edu/) and the National Institute of Health to offer the [Lean LaunchPad class for Life Science and Healthcare \(therapeutics, diagnostics, devices and digital health.\)](https://steveblank.com/2013/08/21/reinventing-life-science-startups-evidence-based-entrepreneurship-2/) In 2014, in conjunction with the National Institute of Health, I took the UCSF curriculum and developed and launched the [I-Corps @ NIH](https://seed.nih.gov/I-Corps-at-NIH) program.

I-Corps at Scale

[I-Corps](https://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/i-corps/) is now offered in 100 universities and has [trained over 9,500 scientists and engineers](https://nsf.gov/resources.nsf.gov/2023-06/TIP_I-CorpsReport_2023_Final_6.21.2023.508.pdf) (7,800 participants in 2,546 teams at I-Corps at NSF (National Science Foundation), 950 participants in 317 teams at I-Corps at NIH, and 580 participants in 188 teams at Energy I-Corps (at the DOE). [15 universities in Japan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkE5HZ0kC3o) now teach the class.

\$4 billion in Venture Capital For I-Corps Teams

1,380 of the NSF I-Corps teams launched startups raising \$3.166 billion. Over 300 I-Corps at NIH teams have collectively raised \$634 million. Energy I-Corps teams raised \$151 million in additional funding.

Mission-Driven Entrepreneurship



In 2016, I co-created both the [Hacking for Defense](https://steveblank.com/category/hacking-for-defense/) (https://steveblank.com/category/hacking-for-defense/) course with [Pete Newell](https://www.linkedin.com/in/petenewell/) (https://www.linkedin.com/in/petenewell/) and [Joe Felter](https://www.linkedin.com/in/joefelter/) (https://www.linkedin.com/in/joefelter/) as well as the [\(https://www.h4diplomacy.us/program-overview#:~:text=What%20is%20Hacking%20for%20Diplomacy,challenge%20using%20lean%20startup%20approaches.\) course with \[Jeremy Weinstein\]\(https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/people/jeremy-weinstein/\) \(https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/people/jeremy-weinstein\) at Stanford. In 2022, \[Steve Weinstein\]\(https://www.linkedin.com/in/sweinstein/\) \(https://www.linkedin.com/in/sweinstein/\) created \[Hacking for Climate and Sustainability\]\(https://h4cs.stanford.edu/detail/\) \(https://h4cs.stanford.edu/detail/\). In 2024 \[Jennifer Carolan\]\(https://www.linkedin.com/in/jcarolan/\) \(https://www.linkedin.com/in/jcarolan/\) launched Hacking for Education at Stanford.](https://www.h4diplomacy.us/program-overview#:~:text=What%20is%20Hacking%20for%20Diplomacy,challenge%20using%20lean%20startup%20approaches.)

How the Class Works

While the Lean LaunchPad students are experiencing what appears to them to be a fully hands-on, experiential class, it's a carefully designed illusion. In fact, it's highly structured. The syllabus has been designed so that we are offering continual implicit guidance, structure, and repetition. This is a critical distinction between our class and an open-ended experiential class.

For example, students start the class with their own initial guidance: They believe they have an idea for a product or service (Lean LaunchPad/I-Corps) or have been given a clear real-world problem ([Hacking for Defense](https://steveblank.com/2016/01/26/hacking-for-defense-standford/) (https://steveblank.com/2016/01/26/hacking-for-defense-standford/)). Coming into the class, students believe their goal is to validate their commercialization or deployment hypotheses. (The teaching team knows that over the course of the class, students will discover that most of their initial hypotheses are incorrect.)

The Business Model Canvas

The [business model](https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything/) (https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything/) / [mission model](https://steveblank.com/category/business-model-versus-business-plan/) (https://steveblank.com/category/business-model-versus-business-plan/) canvas offers students guidance, explicit direction, and structure. First, the canvas offers a complete, visual roadmap of all the hypotheses they will need to test over the entire class. Second, the canvas helps the students goal-seek by visualizing what an optimal endpoint would look like –

finding product-market fit. Finally, the canvas provides students with a map of what they learn week-to-week through their customer discovery work. I can't overemphasize the important role of the canvas. Unlike an incubator or accelerator with no frame, the canvas acts as the connective tissue – the frame – that students can fall back on if they get lost or confused. It allows us to teach the theory of how to turn an idea, need, or problem into commercial practice, week by week a piece at a time.

Lean LaunchPad Tools

The tools for customer discovery (videos, sample experiments, etc.) offer guidance and structure for students to work outside the classroom. The explicit goal of 10-15 customer interviews a week along with the requirement for building a continual series of minimal viable products provides metrics that track the team's progress. The mandatory office hours with the instructors and support from mentors provide additional guidance and structure.

AI Embedded in the Class

This was the first year where all teams used AI to help create their business model canvas, build working MVPs in hours, generate customer questions, analyze and summarizing interviews.

What Students Learned

Below are links to the Lessons Learned presentations from the spring 2025:

Team

Cowmometer

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vRj2BWE2uOX-FqMnvbGIMhC3nzq8i1HYz5re0D1MrePxaZ7RFWwE8-l6wjEV0x6RQ/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&pli=1&slide=id.p1) – Early detection of cow infections through biological monitoring of milk.

Team

NowPilot

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vS1yhVSagRzFYUjaLuqPH8LmJUB5SEPSiaWYof-up6oOY9-UKSgDJJoSYtwM_3ilA/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p1) – AI copilot for enhancing focus and executive function.

Team

Godela

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vSOyYnU3G9a1oYT8CkkFIUlj78HC-FSZON1qSjcapHoz2bN5GGUmFxl15s1D6-R8g/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.g36025861631_0_0) – AI

physics engine – with a first disruptive market in packaging.

Team

ProspectAI

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vSX6rY3nzuOonBD3HTScmMgc0W1RbzJv2S6wfpZfDmmLAs-5MlltqyZGAUhEveNfg/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p1>) – An AI sales development agent for lean sales teams.

Team

VLAB

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vRI57u1DBVj35RaDuwc6bzTHm77qxhCKTP6JH5AxOndSpfqRk0xsPVE0X0jA5Pa4w/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p1>) – Accelerating clinical trials with AI orchestration of data.

Team

Blix

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vSG8FNp5aZ7133csu6pJPYCY4BpbZnsN9nSLf-wpg_CuUCZSbjVW2X4kD_EZFe3lQ/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p2) – IRB clinical trial compliance / A control layer for AI governance for financial services.

Team

Plotline

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vT1DEjzFEoAevL2AJIkhus0a0_XNLWs6igQsZpTbkd9Bu0MNPxl82Zqvr-R9BRQ/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p1) – A smart marketing calendar for author's book launch.

Team

Eluna/Driftnet

(https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vR_yAMYtNdchAvTMFhLwjkhUaByjYJXGaiQ_fUCIpbjbjeczZBrKMt3hv0AVGF3gw/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p1) – Data Center data aggregation and energy optimization software.

It Takes A Village

While I authored this article, this class is a team project. The secret sauce of the success of the Lean LaunchPad at Stanford is the extraordinary group of dedicated volunteers supporting our students in so many critical ways.

The teaching team consisted of myself and:

- [Steve Weinstein](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sweinstein/)

(<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sweinstein/>) , partner at America's Frontier Fund, 30-year veteran of Silicon Valley technology companies and Hollywood media companies. Steve was CEO of [MovieLabs](https://movielabs.com/) (<https://movielabs.com/>) , the joint R&D lab of all the major motion picture studios.

- [Lee Redden](https://www.linkedin.com/in/lredden/) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lredden/>) – CTO and co-founder of Blue River Technology ([acquired by John Deere](https://www.dcv.com/news-insights/john-deer-e-acquires-blue-river-technology-for-305-million-bringing-full-stack-ai-to-agriculture/) (<https://www.dcv.com/news-insights/john-deer-e-acquires-blue-river-technology-for-305-million-bringing-full-stack-ai-to-agriculture/>)) who was a student in the first Lean LaunchPad class 14 years ago!
- [Jennifer Carolan](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jcarolan/) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jcarolan/>) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jcarolan/>) , Co-Founder, Partner at Reach Capital, the leading education VC and author of the Hacking for Education class.
- Our *teaching assistants* this year were Arthur C. Campello, Anil Yildiz, Abu B. Rogers and Tiren Ajilore.

Mentors helped the teams understand if their solutions could be a commercially successful business. Thanks to Jillian Manus, Dave Epstein, Robert Feldman, Bobby Mukherjee, Kevin Ray, Deirdre Clute, Robert Locke, Doug Biehn, and John Danner. Martin Saywell from the Distinguished Careers Institute joined the Blix team. The mentor team was led by Todd Basche.

Summary

While the Lean LaunchPad/I-Corps curriculum was a revolutionary break with the past, it's not the end. In the last decade many variants have emerged. The class we teach at Stanford has continued to evolve. Better versions from others will appear. AI is already having a major impact on customer discovery and validation and we had each team list the AI tools they used. And one day another revolutionary break will take us to the next level.