

Applying and Preparing for I-Corps Teams

The National Science Foundation’s *I-Corps* (Innovation Corps) program teaches NSF grantees to identify valuable product opportunities that can emerge from academic research, and offers entrepreneurship training to participants by combining experience and guidance from established entrepreneurs through a targeted curriculum. Teams receive a $50,000 grant for instruction and travel to support Customer Discovery activities to test their hypotheses about the commercial appeal of their innovation. This document provides instructions to guide you through the process of applying for the *I-Corps Teams* program and includes tips and suggestions for success in the program.

For more information about I-Corps and other programs supporting entrepreneurship at Georgia Tech, please contact VentureLab at *info@venturelab.gatech.edu.*

# Application process

An I-Corps team consists of a minimum of three members:

* An *Entrepreneurial Lead*, typically a graduate student, who leads the team’s discovery efforts and is responsible for presenting results to the teaching team and other members of the cohort. Teams may be permitted to have two ELs.
* A *Technical Lead*, usually a faculty member but sometimes a senior research scientist or postdoctoral scholar. The TL has deep technical expertise in the core technology being explored.
* An *Industry Mentor* with connections and business experience in the field where the technology is expected to be applied. This is a voluntary position – mentors will not be compensated for their time, although their travel expenses will be reimbursed through the grant.

The *Principal Investigator* (PI) for the application will be a faculty member or other researcher who has received NSF funding in the past five years, ideally related to the technology under consideration. The PI often serves as the Technical Lead, but another TL may be designated if the PI’s teaching load or other commitments preclude their participation.

If a team with no history of NSF support wishes to participate, they may become eligible by successfully completing any of several other programs, including regional I-Corps sessions and Georgia Tech’s *I-Corps Site* program. Please contact [*info@venturelab.gatech.edu*](mailto:info@venturelab.gatech.edu) for more details.

Once the team has been established:

1. Attend NSF’s monthly I-Corps webinar to get more details about the program and get answers to any questions you might have about the program. Schedule and access information about the webinar is at <https://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/i-corps/webinars.jsp> . The webinar is not required, but is strongly recommended.
2. Complete the four-question Executive Summary included in this document, limiting your responses to a total of two pages.
3. Review the schedule of upcoming cohorts at <https://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/i-corps/teams.jsp> and identify one or more sessions that are compatible with the team’s schedule. Teams may request a specific cohort, but a team’s first choice may not be available.
4. Email the Executive Summary to[**icorps-apply@nsf.gov**](mailto:icorps-apply@nsf.gov)
5. If your Executive Summary is accepted, you will be contacted via email and asked to participate in a conference call with NSF program managers and I-Corps instructors. **All team members must be present for the review call.** Be prepared to answer questions about your commercialization strategy, team background and commitment, and schedule. More than one review call may be required before a decision is reached.
6. You will be notified via email if your team has been accepted into the program. If so, you will be given instructions for a full proposal.

# Time Commitment

**All members are required to attend and participate in the three-day opening session, the five weekly online review sessions, and the two-day closing session. Teams will be expected to complete a minimum of 100 interviews with potential customers and stakeholders during the program. Please ensure that all team members can meet this commitment -- NSF is serious about these expectations.**

# Tips for I-Corps

Many teams have found these tips and suggestions to be helpful as they prepare for and participate in I-Corps.

## Networking

* Reach out to others at your university who have participated in I-Corps to learn about their experience.
* Complete your LinkedIn profile. Accept the pending invitations from people you like, know, and trust. Add your participation in I-Corps as a new entry.
* At least one member of the team should upgrade their LinkedIn account to the “Premium” level. This level allows you to use the *InMail* feature to contact people outside your network – an important tool for contacting potential interviewees. Premium service is an approved expense during the I-Corps program.
* Make a list of potential customers you want to interview. Think broadly. Figure out their typical job titles.
* The goal is to interview a minimum of 100 people. The first few interviews will be less effective because you will be using new skills. Start with lower value targets and work your way up.
* Identify trade shows and conferences, ideally ones occurring during your cohort, where you might be able to talk to many potential customers.
* Make appointments with at least 12 of those customers during the first two days of the opening session, but don’t schedule meetings that conflict with the class time.
* Most your interviews should be face-to-face, which can often lead to time pressure and travel / traffic problems during the opening session. Have “backup” interviews planned if some fall through. The team may need to split up to get the expected number of interviews.
* Try to schedule more than one interview at a given location to reduce travel time, and leave some room in your schedule for unexpected follow-on interviews, as you’ll usually want to end an interview by asking “is there anyone else here we might also benefit from talking to?”

## Tools

* Sign up for a Dropbox premium account. It’s about $10 a month and it is an approved expense on the I-Corps grant.
* On the first day of the opening session, confirm that you have access to the Dropbox folders the TA set up for the cohort.
* Set up a second Dropbox folder just for your team. Add all the relevant documents including the syllabus, presentations, and photos and videos you create. You could keep expense receipts here, too.
* Install WebEx and Skype on your computer and create a Skype account if you don’t have one already.
* Download Waze for when you are out of town.
* Figure out how you will handle receipts and expenses.
* Decide as a team how you will communicate. You can use e-mail, but some teams use LaunchPad Central. Other teams may use Slack. Trello or Google Sheets can also be effective in coordinating interviews. Figure out what works for your team.
* Create a Google calendar for your team (with shared access) to track interviews, travel schedules, and team meetings.

## Logistics and Process

* Make sure you have the preferred e-mail address and phone number for the members of your team, and your Teachers’ Assistant.
* Do not be late. Plan to be early to all I-Corps activities. If you think you will be late, let the TA know in writing (e-mail or text) as soon as possible.
* Sign up for Office Hours with the teaching team every week.
* Set a time to talk every week, in person or online. Some teams meet every Sunday afternoon for two hours. Some teams talk every evening at 10pm for 20 minutes.
* When the EL is presenting, another member of the team should be taking notes on the feedback from the teaching team. After presenting – at the next break – have a team huddle to review the feedback received and decide what to do next.
* If you don’t understand the feedback from the teaching team, ask if you can discuss during office hours.
* Business attire is acceptable for all I-Corps activities.

## Presentations and Record-keeping

* Enter interviews into LPC the day they happen. Don’t wait.
* If you handwrite notes during an interview, scan them and attach them to your entry in LPC.
* Teams will be expected to prepare two brief videos to share with their cohort during the closing session. You’ll want to gather content for these videos and other presentations as you go.
* Take pictures while you are on the road. If you visit a customer with a big sign out front, take a picture of your team standing in front of the sign.
* Take 30 seconds of video of your team working together every week. This could be meeting with interviewees, during time in the car, at the airport, at the weekly meeting, etc.

*Replace and/or delete italicized text when preparing your proposal.*

# NSF I-Corps Executive Summary

*Your Research Team Name Here*

**The composition of the team proposing to undertake the commercialization feasibility research:**

**Entrepreneurial Lead(s):** *name/title/university affiliation*

**Principal Investigator:** *name/title/university affiliation*

**Industry Mentor:** *name/title*

**Relevant current/previous NSF awards (*including award number, the program that funded the project, and NSF program manager for the project, if applicable*):**

*List up to four; these awards do not have to be related to the work you wish to commercialize in I-Corps.*

**Award #**

**Title:**

**Program Manager:**

**Program:**

**Brief description of the potential commercial impact:**

*Three to five paragraphs describing the invention and the problems it is intended to solve. Focus more on customer use cases and less on technical detail. Consider including estimates of market size, descriptions of expected customers and potential competitors. How have others succeeded with technologies like yours?*

**Brief description of the current commercialization plan:**

*One to three paragraphs describing the team’s starting hypotheses about how the invention could be taken to market. Make a case for how the invention could be the basis for a* ***successful******business*,** *not just a desirable product. Describe key resources the business might require, and partners or channels that may be important.*