

Z Fellows - 2025 Cohorts Application

First Name

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Alfredo

Last Name

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Costilla Reyes

Company or project name

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altitut.ai

Birthday

*

(To be filled in by user)

Phone Number

*

(To be filled in by user)

Are you technical?

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Yes

Have you previously applied to Z Fellows?

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No

Where are you based?

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Folsom, CA

Are you in school or working? Or both? Where at?

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Both. I am a Lecturer at the University of California, Davis.

What is the project that you are currently working on or would like to pursue? Why?

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I'm building altitut.ai, an "AI Co-founder" to help students and aspiring entrepreneurs navigate the startup journey. It's a generative AI platform that assists with brainstorming, automated market analysis, and real-time feedback on business pitches. I'm pursuing this because my entire entrepreneurial path was a process of learning things the hard way, and I want to build the tool I wish I'd had.

What problem are you solving?

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Aspiring founders, especially those outside major tech hubs, lack access to immediate, expert feedback. This knowledge gap leads to critical early mistakes and high failure rates. Quality mentorship doesn't scale, but an AI-powered co-pilot can bridge this gap, providing on-demand support to help founders learn and iterate faster, democratizing access to entrepreneurial guidance.

What expertise do you have to execute on the work that you want to do?

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For the past 3 years, I've been the Principal Investigator for an early-stage AI company, leading technical development and securing over \$1.2M in NSF SBIR grants. As a lecturer at UC Davis, I teach "Launching a Company," mentoring student teams from idea to launch. My PhD in Electrical Engineering and hands-on work building an AutoML platform give me the deep technical expertise to build altitut.ai.

Who are your competitors and what do you understand about your idea that they don't?

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Competitors are static resources like university courses, incubators, and online libraries. They offer periodic, non-scalable mentorship. What they miss, and what I understand from my own journey, is the need for an interactive partner. Altitut.ai isn't just a resource; it's a dynamic AI co-pilot, providing personalized, real-time feedback. It scales the Socratic, iterative process of building a company.

What have you worked on in the past?

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A) I joined an early-stage AI company as the first technical hire and served as PI for 3 years, securing over \$1.2M in NSF funding for our AutoML platform. B) I developed and taught the curriculum for "Launching a Company" at UC Davis. C) I led an IoT-based urban farming project that won Mexico's National Youth Prize and gained international recognition.

What's the nerdiest thing about you?

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I spent my postdoc years building an AutoML platform to run on edge devices, optimizing complex machine learning models to function on tiny, resource-constrained hardware. It's like teaching a supercomputer to think inside a calculator.

What drives you?

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I'm driven by demystifying technology and entrepreneurship for others. Seeing a student's idea finally click or watching a complex algorithm solve a tangible, real-world problem is what motivates me to both build and teach.

What non-traditional things were you doing growing up?

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I've always been hacking systems. It started with a simple coin-flip game to sell candy at school and moved on to modding PlayStations in middle school. In college, I built an app to find free food from campus events. These side projects evolved into real ventures: a tablet company I co-founded, and later, an award-winning IoT startup for indoor farming I launched during my PhD. Looking back on this entire journey, the common thread was learning everything the hard way—there was no playbook. That firsthand struggle is exactly why I'm building altitut.ai. It's the AI co-founder I wish I'd had; the guide to help navigate the chaos when you're just starting out.

Tell us about a risk you've taken or a challenge you've faced. Tell us whether you failed or succeeded, how you behaved, and how you think this reflects your character.

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I took the risk of joining an early-stage AI company as the first technical hire instead of taking a safe academic job. The challenge was turning their academic tech into a commercially viable platform. I succeeded, leading the charge to secure over \$1.2M in NSF funding to build it out. I was relentless, acting as both lead engineer and grant writer. This reflects my willingness to bet on a vision and my ability to execute on both the technical and business fronts to make it a reality.

Personal and/or Project Website and/or Links about you

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www.altitut.ai

Please list or describe any achievements and prizes.

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- NSF SBIR Phase I & II grants (\$1.2M+ total)
- Mexico National Youth Prize (Highest honor from the President of Mexico)
- NSF I-Corps Grant (\$50k)
- Rice Business Plan Competition Finalist
- Recognized by FoodTank as one of "16 Young Entrepreneurs Revolutionizing Food and Farming"
- Patagonia Business Case Competition Finalist (UC Berkeley Haas)

Who would you co-found a company with if you could pick anyone in your network?

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Brad Lightcap from OpenAI. I had the privilege of connecting with him after being selected for a YC120 event, and I was struck by his expertise in scaling a world-changing AI company. My strength is in building deep technology and teaching the foundational principles of entrepreneurship. Brad's is in operations and go-to-market strategy. Our skills would be perfectly complementary, blending product vision with world-class business execution.

How did you hear about Z Fellows?

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(To be filled in by user)

Optional: What's 1 thing you need help with?

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I need help refining the GTM strategy for a product aimed at students and individual aspiring founders. I'd love to connect with experts who have successfully scaled EdTech or prosumer SaaS products from zero to their first 1,000 users.