

# I-Corps Spark at Boston University

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The course assignments and submission of deliverables will be managed through an online platform called Canvas. You will receive an email invite to the course a few days before the KickOff.

This document provides information you need to prepare for the Spark course.

**There is a short pre-work assignment that you must complete before the KickOff Workshop. You must submit your work NLT 8am on Monday, June 22nd using your login to Canvas.**

## Course Schedule

Program Kickoff Workshop – **Tuesday, June 23, 2020 from 5:00pm – 8:00pm**

Zoom Link: <https://mit.zoom.us/j/91181546845>

Program Closing Workshop – **Tuesday, July 21, 2020 from 5:00pm – 8:00pm**

Zoom Link: <https://mit.zoom.us/j/91181546845>

### **June 23, 2020 – Kickoff Workshop and First Presentations**

#### **June 24 - July 1**

- Minimum of 4 interviews completed
- Complete First Office Hour presentation
- Schedule and complete Office Hour #1 with assigned instructor

#### **July 2 - July 8**

- Minimum of 8 total interviews completed
- Complete Second Office Hour Presentation
- Schedule and complete Office Hour #2 with assigned instructor

#### **July 9 - July 17**

- Minimum of 12 total interviews completed
- Final Presentation completed

### **July 21, 2020 – Closing Workshop and Final Presentations**

**Attendance at all sessions is required for completion of the course**

# I-Corps Spark Overview

## Objectives

This program introduces participants to the Lean Startup methodology and techniques to conduct customer discovery through field interviews. Participants will learn how customer discovery applies the scientific method to the innovation process and entrepreneurship.

You will develop a Business Model Canvas around a technology-based product or service. You will learn about the innovation process, how to create value by exploring possibilities for commercializing research and gain new communication skills. Your new understanding may inform your research or even provide the confidence needed to pursue venture creation. Our past experience and feedback from prior participants indicate that this part of the I-Corps training was especially valuable and impactful to all.

## Program Summary

This I-Corps program is called “Spark”. It is a three-week program consisting of an initial workshop, two Office Hours, and a final presentation to share your findings. During the training you will conduct a total of 12 or more Customer Discovery interviews.

Spark has several assignments. These assignments include recommended readings and videos that reinforce materials from the lecture and provide support for customer discovery interviews. There are also deliverables specified. You will conduct at least 12 customer discovery interviews and document your results. You will also be required to complete two Office Hour sessions with instructors. The Office Hour sessions include a review of your progress and personalized instruction based on your specific issues.

## I-Corps Background

In this program, you will learn the importance of identifying your initial customer and the value propositions that will drive them. To do this, you will also learn how to conduct, gather, and analyze customer discovery interviews, and you must interview at least 12 potential customers. You will also learn how to modify and test business model hypotheses in response to interviews.

This course is based on the successful National Science Foundation (NSF) Innovation Corps (I-Corps) methodology of linking university research with the marketplace. We will provide a real-world, hands-on learning experience to successfully transfer knowledge into products and processes that benefit society. You will engage with industry and learn from the marketplace.

This course will not teach how to write a research grant or a business plan. It is not an exercise of your laboratory skill set or your research capabilities. The end result is not a paper to be published. The final deliverable is to describe what you have learned from your customers.

## **Program Philosophy**

The startup culture is different from the university culture most graduate students and postdocs are familiar with. Startups communicate much differently than researchers inside a university and lab. The I-Corps culture is intentionally oriented to expose you to the environments in which startups operate. We will be direct, open, and sometimes tough – just like the real world.

We also expect you to question the instructors, to challenge their point of view if you disagree, and engage in a real dialogue with the instructors and mentors. This approach may sometimes seem abrupt, but it will teach you to challenge yourselves quickly and objectively, and to appreciate that as entrepreneurs, you need to learn and evolve faster than you ever imagined possible.

## Your Pre-Work Assignment for the KickOff

This assignment is to be completed before the KickOff. There are 2 deliverables: the 7 Questions and a short 2 slide presentation.

To submit the deliverables, please go to Assignment 1 in Canvas when it is activated for the course. There is a large SUBMIT ASSIGNMENT button at the top of the page.

### The KickOff Workshop

At the workshop, you will get:

- a) an overview of the NSF I-Corps program including how this Spark program fits into the NSF National programs and possible future SBIR proposals.
- b) You will present 2 slides along with a 90 second description of who you are, what you do, who you think your customers will be and why they would want to buy.
- c) The I-Corps Teaching Team will present 3 short lectures covering customer segments, value propositions and interviewing customers.
- d) There will be a breakout session where in small groups you will meet with your lead instructor. The key point of this discussion will be taking your slide with WHO you think your customers are and WHY you think they will buy and refining your customer segment descriptions and the value propositions. This is in preparation for identifying your first interview targets and what you want to learn from them.

### About your 2-Slide presentation:

At the KickOff workshop, **you will present your 2 slides in 90 seconds or less**. Just tell us:

Who you are - who is on the team

What kind of technology you have - just one or two sentences

What kind of applications you think it has

Who you think would buy

Why you believe it is valuable to them

**Don't overthink it** - it is expected for most of this to be guesswork at this point. We look forward to seeing you at the KickOff and to working with you in the coming weeks. If you have questions, please reach out to [icorps@mit.edu](mailto:icorps@mit.edu)

## Prerequisite for the Workshop - Assignment 1

### Summary

- 1 - Introduction to the lean startup approach to customer discovery by Steve Blank (video)
- 2 - Quick overview of the Business Model Canvas (video)
- 3 - Business Models – an introduction (video)
- 4 - The process of Customer Discovery
- 5 - Get your Kindle textbooks using the info provided by the I-Corps Office
- 6 - Initial readings and resources
- 7 - Notes, optional readings and resources
- 8 - Deliverables for this assignment

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**1. The Lean LaunchPad approach.** Below is a link to a series of videos that introduce the Customer Discovery Process that will be the heart of this course. They are very short and it will only take about 20 minutes to watch them all.

**MIT I-Corps Customer Discovery Intro** – Playlist 1: <http://bit.ly/1vmsicorps>

**2. The BMC.** Please watch the following short video from the folks that created the Business Model Canvas (BMC) which is part of the Lean Launchpad method that we will be using.

**Overview of Business Model Canvas:** <http://bit.ly/vmsbmc>

Download a PDF or PPT version of the canvas document from: <http://bit.ly/vmsbmc1>

**3. Business Models.** Below is a link to a series of videos (approx. 12 min) that introduce the concept of Business Models. It explores the Business Model Canvas, which is a useful tool that captures the elements of your business model on one page.

**Intro to Business Models – Playlist 2:** <http://bit.ly/2vmsicorps>

**4. Customer Discovery.** Next is a set of videos diving into more specifics about the process of the Customer Development process and testing your hypotheses about your business idea.

**Intro to Customer Development – Playlist 3:** <http://bit.ly/3vmsicorps>

**5. Get your textbooks.** Textbooks can be provided to you by the I-Corps office by request. These texts can be used to **supplement** the informational videos which are part of this course and cover similar material as the textbooks.

### 6. Readings

The Startup Owner's Manual: pages 22–84 & 195–199 / Kindle locations: 674-1581 & 3073-3143

Business Model Generation: pages 14-51, 86–111, and 135–145

Disciplined Entrepreneurship: Introduction, Step 0 – Getting Started pages 15-21 / Kindle Locations 626-720

**7. Optional Readings, Resources and Notes** for assignment 1 – *see end of this document*

**8. Deliverables.** For this assignment you have two deliverables.

- a) You will provide brief answers to a short series of questions, **and**
- b) You will prepare a 2 slide presentation for the KickOff

Please see the instructions for the deliverables on the next page.

## Deliverable 1a - the 7 Questions

1. You will provide brief answers to a short series of questions.
2. Fill out [the 7 Questions form](#)
3. After submitting the form you will receive an email with an attached PDF containing your responses. Save the file on your computer.
4. Rename the file using the following syntax: **7Q\_teamname.pdf**

## Deliverable 1b - Presentation for Kickoff Workshop

Please prepare the following **2 slide** presentation for the Workshop. Each team will have 90 seconds to present:

**Slide 1:** Team name, your institution, product picture, product description (one sentence), Pictures/names of your team members. Include the block for number of interviews as you will need those later for future assignments. For the KickOff the number of interviews should be 0 or blank. You can download a full size copy of the image at: [Sample title slide](#)

**Slide 2:** A two column slide consisting of:

- a) List of **who** you think will buy - working from the answers you submitted to the **7 Questions**, after watching the videos in the first 2 assignments, please think a little more about who your customers might be. Try to think of 2 or 3 different applications or industries where your technology could be used and then who are the users and other people involved in any decision process. Put on the slide under WHO column on left.
- b) List of **why** you think they will buy - For each of the users and other people involved, think a little more about why they would be highly motivated to use / purchase your technology. Put on the slide under WHY column on right. [Example Who / Why slide1.pptx](#)
- c) Create a PowerPoint file of your slides and name the file using the following syntax:  
**A1B\_teamname.ppt**

**When both deliverable files are ready, login to Canvas and go to Assignment 1 and click on the blue Submit Assignment button to upload them.**

## Optional Readings

In particular, please read the following articles:

Steve Blank, ["What's a Startup? First Principles"](#)

Steve Blank, ["Make No Little Plans – Defining the Scalable Startup"](#)

Steve Blank, ["A Startup is Not a Smaller Version of a Large Company"](#)

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## Optional Resources

**a) Steve Blank.** Steve has a very extensive website ([steveblank.com](http://steveblank.com)) with many articles and experiences concerning the Lean LaunchPad approach and related materials. You may find a great deal of the items interesting and relevant.

**b) NSF I-Corps National Team Program.** The NSF offers an immersive national level program for further I-Corps customer discovery training. It provides for up to \$50,000 in grant funding. Completion of this I-Corps program may qualify you to apply. If you are interested in learning more about this program see the information below.

The following brief video provides an introduction and overview of the NSF I-Corps Team Program

**NSF I-Corps Team Program:** <http://bit.ly/vmsnsficorps>

Please make sure you review the NSF website describing the program, the requirements and the process.

**NSF website for I-Corps Team Program:** [http://www.nsf.gov/news/special\\_reports/i-corps/teams.jsp](http://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/i-corps/teams.jsp)

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## Notes

The NSF I-Corps program uses the Steve Blank Lean LaunchPad framework. As you read the articles, the texts and watch these (and later) video lectures, please bear in mind that they are a little general in that they aim for any technology startup including mobile apps. Things certainly can go quickly for a software app. However, life sciences technologies, platform technologies and actually building hardware takes longer but the same concepts are still valid. The closer you are to science and research the further away you are from actually delivering a product. New discoveries on a lab bench can be quite a few years away.

Bill Aulet's text Disciplined Entrepreneurship takes a slightly different perspective on value propositions and product market fit. Much like Steve Blank's approach, the examples are often more general and do not involve research-based startups. However, the principles in both texts are entirely consistent.