



ILLINOIS

Technology Entrepreneur Center Silicon Valley Workshop

Category 2, Best Student Alumni Programming

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Technology Entrepreneur Center, College of Engineering

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Overview/Background

The College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is one of the largest and most respected engineering schools in the country with many prominent alumni. As one of the original units within the university, the College of Engineering has significantly contributed to the growth and prestige of the institution.

The college is made up of many distinguished faculty, including Nobel laureates, recipients of the National Medal of Science or Technology, and members and leaders within the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, National Academy of Sciences, or the National Academy of Engineers.

The Technology Entrepreneur Center (TEC) was created in 2000 to foster entrepreneurship through its courses, venture and product competitions, workshops, and events. The University of Illinois has a 140-year history of producing scientific visionaries, Nobel Prize-winning innovators and some of the world's most successful entrepreneurs. The TEC's courses and its co-curricular activities expose students to the complex concepts inherent in the simultaneous processes of technology innovation and market adoption. The Center offers on-site and online certificate programs for education and professional development and hosts outreach activities for students and alumni. The TEC also administers the annual V. Dale Cozad New Venture Competition and the \$30,000 Lemelson-Illinois Student Prize for innovation, among several other programs.

Although part of the College of Engineering, the Center is interdisciplinary, having affiliated faculty members from several departments and colleges. TEC faculty members have produced an impressive body of collaborative research and publications in both theoretical and applied disciplines.

TEC's Silicon Valley Workshop was designed to give students the opportunity for a hands-on experience with the College of Engineering's vast pool of alumni in the Valley, and to illustrate to the student participants the value of the entrepreneurship ecosystem that exists there. The delegation spent the first week of the trip at the Plug and Play Tech Center (www.plugandplaytechcenter.com) in Sunnyvale, CA. While at the Center,

they met with startups, venture capitalists, service providers, and Plug and Play's management team to learn about the role of a business incubator in the startup process; ins and outs of funding a new venture; exit strategies; getting customers involved in the development process; and what it takes to be a technology entrepreneur. To supplement the Plug and Play agenda, the administrative team from Illinois arranged for a presentation by David Jeske (CE '96) and a visit to ShareThis in Mountain View during the Plug and Play week.

The agenda for the second week of the workshop was developed to engage University of Illinois alums and startup companies, as well as large tech companies in the Valley. Visits to Yahoo and Google showed student participants what happens when a startup turns into a large global company. Presentations by Yelp, Pattern Insight, Palantir Technologies, Slide, and other startups illuminated the startup environment in the Valley from a University of Illinois alumni point of view, and showed challenges that they face. Presentations at the students' hotel by the founders of Military.com and Affinity Labs; RF.com; and service providers to startup companies also inspired students. Finally, an Illinois alumni reception in Palo Alto provided the opportunity for students to meet alumni that are currently living in the Valley, and allowed for them to interact on a one-on-one or small group basis to learn from them, without having a predetermined topic. Over sixty alumni from the Valley area attended the event, making it a great success. At the reception, students were able to ask their own questions and the University was able to continue to showcase our talented students.

Goals and Objectives of TEC's Silicon Valley Workshop

In order to allow students the opportunity for a hands-on experience in the startup community, the Silicon Valley Workshop was supported by the College of Engineering, TEC, and the Office of the Provost after conferring with several alums in the area and advancement officials in the Illini Center West (the University's office in California). The workshop's goals were to:

- expose students to many facets of technology entrepreneurship, with firms in various stages of the startup lifecycle;
- allow students the opportunity to meet with prominent alumni currently living in the Valley;
- showcase the University of Illinois' vast pool of science and engineering talent; and
- to continue to build an entrepreneurial community at the University of Illinois.

TEC's Silicon Valley Workshop Fit with Advancement Goals

The Center was originally established in the Department of General Engineering at the recommendation of the campus' Technology Entrepreneur Efforts Committee, which consisted of associate deans and department heads from Liberal Arts & Sciences; Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences; Veterinary Medicine; Commerce; Law; and Engineering. After several years of increasing enrollment in its courses and broad cross-college and cross-campus participation in its extracurricular activities, the Center was elevated to a college-level unit. In that capacity, the Center is better placed to serve all of the College of Engineering students and faculty. This elevation also sent a clear message to the rest of the college from its dean that entrepreneurship, innovation and technology commercialization are critical elements of the engineering educational experience at Illinois, and that the Center plays a vital role in that experience.

The Silicon Valley Workshop showcases the entrepreneurial and innovative student leaders that are embedded in the various departments in the College of Engineering to our most entrepreneurial alumni. Rather than bringing over 25 alumni to campus throughout the year, this workshop allowed the alumni to

meet the students, and vice versa, in an entrepreneurial ecosystem not matched anywhere else in the world. Whereas travel to Illinois might make it difficult to garner alumni involvement with these students, being able to make the connections in California allowed for meaningful exchange.

The workshop helped the College of Engineering to illustrate entrepreneurship at Illinois to alumni and potential donors; particularly those interested in entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity. The College's advancement professionals are seeking an endowment for the Center. The support of the Silicon Valley Workshop from the alumni that participated will only help advancement officers in this endeavor. As TEC is starting the planning cycle for the second Silicon Valley Workshop this winter, alumni from other areas of the country are interested in expanding the program to locations such as Chicago and Boston.

Audience

The students that attended the workshop were selected based on application materials solicited August-October, 2008. Seventy-eight full applications were received and evaluated, and the Technology Entrepreneur Center conducted group interviews with all applicants to further discuss their interest and activities in entrepreneurship. After those interviews, 20 engineering students and 5 students from outside of the College of Engineering were selected to attend. A list of alternates was prepared, should one of the selected students decline.

Alumni that participated in the workshop as speakers were selected from the alumni database in the Silicon Valley area. Several alumni with whom the University enjoys a close relationship were key in shaping the agenda for the workshop. Many more alumni were interested in participating, and we look forward to including them in future workshops in the area.

The invitation for the alumni networking reception during the second week of the workshop was sent to all University of Illinois alums in the San Francisco Bay area, and over sixty alums attended the reception, conversing with students on a variety of topics.

The Team

The Silicon Valley workshop was created and administered by a core team of three individuals for the bulk of the planning of the workshop: Rhiannon Clifton, Assistant Director; Stephanie Larson, Program/Marketing Specialist; and Tammy Nicastro, Director of the Illini Center West created the agenda by recruiting alumni and other speakers, planned the networking reception and handled other strategic issues. Bridget Haas, Office Support Associate, coordinated travel logistics and dissemination of participant booklets.

The students were joined in San Francisco by faculty and staff of the Technology Entrepreneur Center including Andrew Singer (Director), Rhiannon Clifton, Brian Lilly (Adjunct Associate Professor), and Stephanie Larson. Tammy Nicastro and Tiffany Xanos, Director of Advancement for Computer Science, also joined the students and faculty for a portion of the second week's activities.

Financial Information

The workshop was funded by the College of Engineering (\$20,000), the Technology Entrepreneur Center (\$15,000), the Office of the Provost (\$7,500) and the student attendees (\$400 each). The funding covered airfare, hotel, selected meals, and ground transportation via a charter bus. Students were responsible for

meals not covered by the hotel agreement or hosts of the lectures as well as incidentals, in addition to their \$400 fee.

The Challenge

In August of 2008, after a visit with a prominent entrepreneurial alum in the Valley, the Dean of Engineering requested that the TEC create a workshop to be scheduled in January 2009. From that date in August, the entire workshop - including marketing, the student selection process, agenda development and speaker recruitment, and all travel logistics - was fully completed in approximately five months.

The original cost for each student was estimated to be \$850 for lodging, ground transportation and airfare. Due to negotiations with several San Francisco Bay-area businesses, the TEC team was able to get each student's cost down to \$400. Students were thus better able to afford to attend this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The TEC also worked with other campus units to sponsor students that might not otherwise be able to attend.

As part of the commitment that student participants made when attending the workshop, they hosted a campus version to share the knowledge that they gained in California. This workshop was held in February, during our campus-wide InnovationWeek. The TEC's staff helped the students to implement the campus version of the workshop, and were able to get one alum that met with the students in California to attend the campus session.

Results

Many of the companies and alumni that participated in the workshop in Silicon Valley were overwhelmingly supportive, and most stated that they would like to be involved in the workshop and other Center activities the the future, which speaks to the value and success of the workshop. Also, several alumni committed to returning to campus to deliver lectures and meet with students and faculty.

Another measurement of success of the program is the student participants' response to the workshop; they have become the Center's entrepreneurial evangelists for the campus. The enthusiasm they exhibit to other students on campus interested in entrepreneurship is outstanding. Here are few quotes that display their enthusiasm:

- **“Overall...it was the best conference/workshop I've ever been on.”**
- **“Overall, the trip was a great experience. I think it would be valuable for future students to have this experience.”**
- **“He [an alumni lecturer] gave some really good advice. It is very amazing and inspiring to meet someone who actually did 3 startups and succeeded.”**

One final measurement of success is with the feedback from the students, faculty, presenters and overall community, this trip has become an annual event. TEC also has plans to replicate this workshop in other cities to offer additional opportunities for our students. Alumni and friends in the Chicago area have already committed to supporting a workshop of this kind in that area, and TEC plans to implement it in May of 2010.