

Abridged Mason's NSF I-Corps Regional Course Syllabus

Introduction

This 6-session course will teach you the techniques and practices that will allow you build a successful foundation for your enterprise. This is probably the most important class you can take if you are starting your commercialization efforts. You will learn who your customers are, why they might want your product, how to reach them, and how to recruit them. You will also learn who your customers are not. The course is based on the Lean Launchpad methodology and is a critical part of the I-Corps and ICAP preparation and training.

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Detailed Time Commitment Expectations (total 48 hours)

1. Class time: **17 hours**. You are expected to attend every class session. Any absence must be reported to your ICAP Mentor and the I-Corps Program Manager prior to the scheduled session.
2. Customer discovery interviews: **20 hours**. You are expected to complete at least 20 interviews by the end of the 6 sessions, which will require at least 20 team-hours of time.
3. Flipped classroom / independent learning: **5 hours**. You will need to watch and read a number of assignments before certain classes.
4. Homework worksheets: **3 hours**. You will be required to fill in 3 worksheets and discuss them with your mentor throughout the class.
5. Office Hours: **3 hours**. You will meet with your ICAP Mentor a minimum of 3 times during the course.

Course Description

This course is a real-world, hands-on, experiential learning opportunity that helps transfer knowledge obtained from potential customers into products and processes that benefit our society. You will spend time talking to and learning from customers, partners, and competitors, and learning how to deal with the uncertainty of commercializing innovations and creating ventures. All participants will benefit from participating in this NSF I-Corps Regional Course and all teams will receive support from an ICAP Mentor. University-based I-Corps eligible teams will be able to apply for the NSF National I-Corps upon successfully completing the course.

Customer Discovery is an iterative process that requires you to get out of the building and interview potential customers and stakeholders to understand their problems and pain points. Conducting these interviews or experiments leads to real-world learnings and insights that validate or invalidate key components of your business model, often leading to crucial time-saving pivots, i.e., changes in customer, product, or other business model components in response to market feedback. Class time will be spent discussing what you learned by talking to your potential customers.

Tens of thousands of faculty researchers and startup founders have found this technique critical to their early success, in a variety of funding environments and geographies. This class, really a series of

techniques (which you will practice!), provides the basic tools to allow you to understand your customers, including:

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|----------------|-----------------|
| --Users | --Buyers |
| --Payers | --Beneficiaries |
| --Recommenders | --Influencers |
| --Supporters | --Saboteurs |

Companies and startups who do not understand their customers will, and do, fail.

Course Deliverables Overview

Customer Discovery Practices and techniques

- **Part 1** – You will hypothesize (guess) about who your potential customers are, what they might want from you or your product, how they buy, who influences them, how they make decisions, and about a number of other demographic/personal/professional characteristics.
- **Part 2** – You will test those hypotheses in front of your potential customers. We will teach you how to find your 'customers', how to get them to talk to you, how to actually talk to them, and how to test your hypotheses, all while having an apparently casual conversation.
- **Part 3** – You will adjust your hypotheses, discarding some and adding others. You will talk to more customers and continue to adjust.

Customer Discovery Interviews – 20 Overall

You are required to interview at least 20 new customers and log your interviews using the tools provided. This is a key metric used by instructors to evaluate your progress. Planning is critical to your success; please make your interviews the top priority. The best practice is to start planning your interviews immediately after Session 0 with your ICAP Mentor.

Worksheets and Form

The worksheets and forms used leading up to, during, and after this course are meant to help delve deep into crucial aspects of the Lean Startup approach. It is important that you not only complete the worksheets and forms, but also save drafts by date to see how they change over time. Below is a list of those worksheets and form.

- Customer Segmentation Worksheet
- Customer Job Process Map
- Customer Buying Ecosystem Worksheet
- Customer Discovery Interview Form

Presentations

Your team will deliver five presentations (Introduction, Session 2, Session 3, Midpoint, and Final) during the program. A template will be provided for each presentation via email and will also be made available on Google Drive in the Group folder under Course Materials, during each session respectively.

Office Hours

Prior to the beginning of the course, **teams are required to have a preliminary meeting** with their assigned ICAP Mentor. If you do not receive any contact, please reach out to the ICAP Program Coordinator. These should be scheduled directly with the ICAP Mentor. Sufficient time before and after the sessions must be given to the Mentors to review the team's work and provide adequate feedback.

Schedule

The Introductory Session will provide participants an introduction to Lean Startup Business Models and Customer Development. It also covers the course expectations and how to best prepare for the course. Following the introductory call, teams will need to schedule office hours meeting with their ICAP Mentor and review their updated Customer Segmentation Worksheet and Introduction Presentation.

	Time	Topic
Intro-Session (Session 0)	6:00pm – 6:45pm	Introduction of Instructors/Mentors Introduction to the Syllabus Using your Team's Google Folder Introduction to Lean Startup
	6:45pm – 7:45pm	Lesson 1: Finding Customers – People you know you know, people that you don't know you know, and People Who Want to Talk (20 th and 21 st century versions)
	7:45pm – 8:00pm	Questions & Answers and Homework Assignments

	Time	Topic
Session 1	1:00pm – 1:30pm	Lesson 2: Why are we here? Why Lean matters... and changes everything
	1:30pm – 2:30pm	Lesson 3: How to conduct an interview: using VOSERA to make the conversation easy (and allowing you to test your hypotheses!) Introduction to customer segments and value propositions. Lesson 4a: Customer Segments – who might want what you have? Defining, refining, and testing ideas for customer segmentation
	2:30pm – 3:40pm	I-Corps Instructor / ICAP Mentor Breakout Session Break (5 mins) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets
	3:40pm-4:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return to the main room for debriefing Two presentations from breakout rooms

	Time	Topic
Session 2	1:00pm – 1:30pm	Lesson 4b: Ecosystem exercise (there are more customers than you think!)
	1:30pm – 2:30pm	Lesson 5: Why might someone want what you have? What 'value' do they seek? Value propositions... and how to make them testable.
	2:30pm – 3:40pm	I-Corps Instructor / ICAP Mentor Breakout Session Break (5 mins) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets
	3:40pm-4:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return to the main room for debriefing Two presentations from breakout rooms

	Time	Topic
Session 3	1:00pm – 1:45pm	Lesson 6: Planning an interview – using hypotheses and VOSERA to structure the conversation
	1:45pm – 2:30pm	Lesson 7: Using the BMC as a Hypothesis Generation Machine, and interviews as a Hypothesis Testing Machine
	2:30pm – 3:40pm	I-Corps Instructor / ICAP Mentor Breakout Session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break (5 mins) • Team report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets
	3:40pm-4:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to the main room for debriefing • Two presentations from breakout rooms

	Time	Topic
Session 4	1:00pm – 2:30pm	Lesson 8: The Virtuous Ratchet for testing hypotheses. Building your BMC. Jobs-to-be-done and other innovation methods
	2:30pm – 3:40pm	I-Corps Instructor / ICAP Mentor Breakout Session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break (5 mins) • Team report outs (8 mins each plus feedback) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets
	3:40pm - 4:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to the main room for debriefing • Two presentations from breakout rooms

	Time	Topic
Session 5	1:00pm – 1:20pm	Introduction and Presentation by VIPC
	1:20pm – 2:00pm	Final presentations (in breakout sessions, 8 mins each plus feedback)
	2:05pm – 3:40pm	Lesson 9 – What have you learned? How do you leverage it for Next Steps?
	3:40pm – 4:00pm	Next Steps and working with your ICAP Mentor and other support in the Ecosystem

Next Steps

Following the completion of the I-Corps Regional Course, teams that have completed their required assignments and the initial 20 interviews will officially become ICAP clients and be able to take advantage of continued no-cost, long-term mentoring, and support. Teams will receive an initial Roadmap from their ICAP Mentor summarizing the feedback from the final presentation – providing immediate next steps for the team. These teams will also be able to schedule office hours with their Mentor to continue building on their early learnings gained during the regional course.

University-based teams that have completed their initial 20 interviews may be eligible for the NSF National I-Corps Program. This 7-week virtual course will continue to help teams hone their customer segment and value proposition, and develop the other elements of the Business Model Canvas. This program includes a \$50,000 customer discovery grant and helps to open the door to many other federal funding opportunities, including SBIR/STTRs.