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 to 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 training.

George Mason University I-Corps Teaching Team

- Julie Collins (Instructor), Gisele Stolz (Senior Director/Director, I-Corps), Josh Green (ICAP Director), Sampson Addo (I-Corps Program Manager)

Detailed Time Commitment Expectations (total 48)

1. Class time: **17 hours.** You are expected to attend every class session. Any absence must be reported to your Mentor and the I-Corps Program Manager before the scheduled session.
2. Customer discovery interviews: **20 hours.** You are expected to complete at least 20 interviews by the end of the six sessions, which will require at least 20 team-hours of time.
3. Flipped classroom / independent learning: **5 hours.** You will need to watch selected videos and read several assigned reading materials before certain sessions.
4. Presentation Slides/worksheets: **3 hours.** You will be required to complete presentations for each class and discuss the embedded worksheets with your mentors throughout the course.
5. Office Hours: **3 hours.** You will meet with your mentor a minimum of 3 times during the course. In addition, before the beginning of the cohort, you are expected to meet with your Mentor as much as necessary to complete all pre-cohort assignments.

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 a Mentor. 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, is really a series of techniques (which you will practice!), provides the basic tools to allow you to understand your customers, including:

--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 several other demographic/personal/professional characteristics.
- **Part 2** – You will test those hypotheses before your potential customers. We will teach you how to find your 'customers', how to get them to talk to you, how to 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 Total

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 Mentor.

Presentations

During the program, your team will deliver five presentations (Session 1, Session 2, Session 3, Midpoint, and Final). 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 Mentor. If you do not receive any contact, please reach out to the I-Corps Program Manager. These should be scheduled directly with the 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 (Kickoff)	6:30pm – 7:00pm	Introduction of Instructors/Mentors / Introduction to the Syllabus Using your Team's Google Folder
	7:00pm – 7:45pm	Introduction to Lean Startup Lesson 1: Invention to Innovation. Why I-Corps? Lesson 2: Identifying Interview Candidates: Who to target and how to make contact
	7:45pm – 8:00pm	Questions & Answers and Homework Assignments

	Time	Topic
Session 1	9:00am – 10:30am	Introduction Teams report outs (5 mins each) – Interview Target and Objectives Break (5 mins)
	10:30am – 10:40am	Return to the main room for debriefing
	10:40am – 12:00pm	Lesson 3A: Customer Discovery Part 1 - Interview Goals Lesson 4: Maps to Guide Discovery: Industry ecosystems. Customer ecosystems, and workflow maps Questions & Answers

	Time	Topic
Session 2	9:00am – 10:30am	Introduction Teams report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets Break (5 mins)
	10:30am – 10:40am	Return to the main room for debriefing
	10:40am – 12:00pm	Lesson 3B: Customer Discovery Part 2 - Learn to manage a conversation Questions & Answers and Homework Assignments

	Time	Topic
Session 3	9:00am – 10:30am	Introduction Teams report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets. Break (5 mins)
	10:30am – 10:40pm	Return to the main room for debriefing
	10:40am – 12:00pm	Lesson 5: Defining Value: Understanding decision criteria and using them to identify how customers value and ultimately switch to a new solution. Questions & Answers and Homework Assignments

	Time	Topic
Session 4	9:00am – 10:30am	Introduction Teams report outs (5 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets. Break (5 mins)
	10:30am – 10:40pm	Return to the main room for debriefing
	10:40am – 12:00pm	Lesson 6: Understanding the Business Model Questions & Answers and Homework Assignments

	Time	Topic
Session 5	9:00am – 11:00am	Introduction Final Presentation - Teams report outs (10 mins each) - What we thought, what we learned, what we will do next. Interviews and worksheets. Break (5 mins)
	11:00am – 12:00pm	Lesson 7: What's Next? Questions & Answers

Next Steps

After completing the I-Corps Regional Course, teams that have completed their required assignments and the initial 20 interviews will officially become ICAP clients and can continue to receive support from their ICAP Mentor and the I-Corps Team. Teams will receive an initial Roadmap from their 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 are eligible to apply to participate in 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 open the door to many federal funding opportunities, including VIPC and SBIR/STTRs. **For those teams that continue to do the work, the Mason I-Corps and ICAP Teams will continue to assist you on your journey!**