



With a boost from the feds, Carnegie Mellon is helping students get smart about launching AI and robotics startups

Called the I-Corps, the program has not yet been impacted by the Trump administration's NSF funding cuts, stakeholders said.



More proof of artificial intelligence's increasing dominance in the tech sector:

For the first time, a National Science Foundation program designed to help aspiring scientists and engineers market their ideas has a cohort focused on AI's intersection with robotics.

The seven-week I-Corps cohort concluded last month at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). It's part of the NSF's Mid-Atlantic Hub, which has partnered with Project Olympus, CMU's startup help program, since 2022.

Project Olympus has an impressive pedigree: Duolingo, Bloomfield Robotics and FascioMetrics are a few among an exhaustive list of CMU-originating startups that went on to see million-dollar exits or profits.

Thanks to I-Corps' involvement, Project Olympus director Meredith Meyer Grelli believes CMU students are ready to step up to the plate and produce serious innovations in AI.

"I think world changing companies can be built by anyone, no matter their age," Grelli told Technical.ly. "This cohort was particularly broad in terms of its sort of life stage, or career stage, of its participants. The shelf life of computer science knowledge is just shortening as innovation continues to hasten. And so those who are right in the mix right now, surrounded by these experts doing work, it's an incredible opportunity."

One startup, TrueAI, a large language model company hoping to reduce hallucinations and bias in AI chatbots, was founded by sophomores after they both attended an AI ethics lecture, according to a CMU press release.

TrueAI founders Aidan Zhang and Cyprien Riboud-Seydoux both said the I-Corps' focus on customers helped them narrow their vision.

"The purpose of I-Corps — and they really drill this into you — is to understand your market," Zhang said. "It doesn't matter how good your product is or how much you think it could change the world. If you haven't gone out and talked to your customers and found a market, you're not ready to launch your product yet."

CMU as the 'beating heart' of AI innovation

Past cohorts in the Mid-Atlantic Hub have focused on sectors like textiles or bioscience. For Carnegie Mellon, with its historical prominence in AI innovation, that focus was a no-brainer, according to Grelli, the Project Olympus director.

"We have this world class field of talent that's not isolated to Carnegie Mellon, but certainly Carnegie Mellon is a beating heart of that AI and robotics talent that is unique in the world," Grelli said. "We are uniquely positioned, therefore, to bring forth this new world that we're all working to create."

Barry Johnson, division director of translational impacts at the NSF, who oversees I-Corps nationally, said AI and robotics are a fast developing market the program wants to streamline.

“We’re seeing a lot of activity in the AI space and a lot of activity in the robotics space,” Johnson said. “We just see a lot of research being done. We see a lot of companies being formed. And so that’s driving it, to some extent.”

Redefining the startup process

I-Corps was founded in 2011 to “reduce the risk associated with translating technologies from the laboratory to the marketplace” by helping inventors assess the marketability of their product, according to the program’s website.

Over 30 teams from CMU have participated in the Mid-Atlantic edition of the program, per the press release, which includes universities from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina.

These three-member teams must each interview at least 100 potential customers to grasp their needs, according to Johnson.

“What we’re really trying to do is to prevent people from starting a company if they don’t have an idea that’s worthy of starting a company,” Johnson said. “And if they do have an idea, help them understand what it takes [to succeed].”

Grelli, who founded and exited Wigle Whiskey before joining CMU, said she often shares lessons with the cohort she learned from running her own startup.

“Having empathy for your customers and really trying to dive into their needs; that is a universal truth of startup land,” Grelli said. “If you don’t have customer empathy, you don’t have a business.”

I-Corps funding not yet impacted by Trump cuts

Both Grelli and Johnson said I-Corp funding has not been impacted by budget cuts from President Donald Trump’s administration.

Johnson declined to speculate on if funding would be impacted at any point in the future.

Grelli said that because I-Corp is funded off of smaller grants than other NSF programs, the relationship between Project Olympus and I-Corp has not been strained much by cuts. All of this despite Carnegie Mellon signing onto a lawsuit disputing the Trump administration’s authority to cut federal research funding.

“It’s not hard to get behind the idea of turning American innovation and ingenuity and research into world changing companies,” Grelli said. “If we want to continue to lead the world, we need the most forward looking companies. And historically, when we look at the unicorns that have come out of Western Pennsylvania, they’ve come from our universities.”

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