

# Nomination for 2015 Innovation in Business Education Award

Date: July 1, 2015  
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Institution: Western Michigan University, Lee Honors College  
  
Course: Understanding Startup Communities

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## Program Overview

This course is an **entrepreneurship** course that is focused on understanding what factors foster the vibrancy of startup communities, and is offered via an experiential method. While visiting Austin, Boulder, Chicago, Detroit, and Grand Rapids and meeting with individuals and organizations in those cities, honor students from across the Western Michigan University (WMU) campus have the opportunity to engage and embrace the culture of multiple startup communities outside of their own (Kalamazoo). Through course discussions, planned meetings, and serendipitous interactions, students have the ability to compare their local startup community with the progress of others they visit. They are able to bring what they learn from their trips into their local startup community to build resources, relationships, and their own companies. *[ A summary of the purpose of the website and what information is provided on the website is available in Appendix A ]*

## Strategy

We are nominating the **Understanding Startup Communities** course at [Western Michigan University](#) for the [MidAmerican Business Deans Association-2015 Innovation in Business Education Award](#).

The purpose of the course is to learn and experience what cities are doing to foster startups in their environment and compare those environments to one's local startup scene (e.g. Kalamazoo, Michigan, where Western Michigan University is located). This is accomplished by visiting multiple startup communities throughout the semester and meeting with entrepreneurs, investors, accelerators / incubators, university professors, and government officials. In the first instance of the course in Spring 2015, [ten students](#) and the [instructors](#) visited [Austin](#), [Boulder](#), [Chicago](#), [Detroit](#), and [Grand Rapids](#), as well as the [Lowe Foundation](#).

Deliverables for the course include written and video summaries of the book each student reads, blog posts by every student throughout the semester and during the trips, and development of a framework to explain the

vibrancy of a startup community based upon their readings and experiences on the trips. This information is made available on the course web site and presented to the local startup community at the end of the semester.

The course was designed by [John Mueller](#), with the first instance of the course lead by [Dr. Mueller](#) and [Fareed Shalhout](#) during the Spring 2015 semester. Even with the semester only being completed a two months ago, a number of positive outcomes have already been seen. Students have gained a newfound confidence in understanding the culture of a startup community which has led them to creating DASH (a local co-working space) with local real estate developers, actively attending events and activities in the local startup community, deciding to become an entrepreneurship major, obtaining an internship with one of the organizations visited, being admitted into a business accelerator to move a business idea forward, and more.

The undergraduate course is sponsored by the [Lee Honors College](#) at WMU as part of the college's [Study in the States](#) program. Thus, currently the course is open to only undergraduate honor students who apply for the course through an application process. This limits the pool of applicants; however, it also means the travel costs are able to be covered as part of the honor college sponsorship. The students pay the tuition of the course, and the Lee Honors College covers the travel costs (approximately \$1,800 per student).

## Benefits and Uniqueness

The course exposes students to communities that have allowed high technology startup companies to thrive in recent decades. This is accomplished by traveling to various cities around the United States through the Western Michigan University Lee Honor College's Study in the States program. For the cities that are within driving distances, trips are one-day; for the cities that are further away, students spend spring break traveling to two cities.



For the Spring 2015 course, the students and instructors visited the following cities: **Austin, Boulder, Chicago, Detroit, and Grand Rapids**. To cap off the travel for the course, the students took a retreat to the Lowe Foundation's Big Rock Valley facility and experience activities administered by the foundation's instructors. The

**Lowe Foundation** is focused on educating entrepreneurs whose companies are in the second stage of development. *[ A schedule of the trips and a full list of individuals that were visited can be found in Appendix B ]*

## **Positive Outcomes and Potential Impact**

The purpose of the course is to expose students to startup communities around the country and to get a better understanding what factors are fostering the vibrancy of those communities. Doing so provides students a better appreciation of entrepreneurs, startups, investors, accelerators / incubators, and the involvement needed by government officials, universities, and others to support and allow entrepreneurs and startups to thrive. This could get students excited about starting their own businesses in the local community, and understand what resources and culture they need to have in their local startup community to help them make it. This enables them to build their own local startup community to be more vibrant (e.g. increase the vibrancy in the Kalamazoo startup community, where WMU is located).

The Spring 2015 semester has finished two months ago; however, positive outcomes have been realized.

Below is a list of some of the positive outcomes from the course to date:

- Improved the connection between students and the Kalamazoo startup community; students presented and discussed confidently multiple topics with high-profile individuals in the local startup community (*all students*)
- Developed/started a co-working space in Kalamazoo: DASH Co-working; working with local real estate developers. (*Eric Carlo, Simba Chiara, Alexis Lenderman, Josie Marshall, Katie Marshall, Jill Puckett*)
- A student applied and was admitted into the WMU business accelerator: [Starting Gate](#). (*Alexis Lenderman*)
- A student became a research assistant on a [National Science Foundation grant](#) to develop a commercialization plan for a technology -- working with John Mueller, Co-PI on the grant. (*Eric Carlo*)

*[ Testimonials which support these actionable lessons are provided in Appendix D ]*

## **Transferability**

In terms of the logistics, this course can be implemented in other universities. The extent with which students can travel to communities outside of their own will depend on the proximity of the university. For example, we were able to go to Chicago, Detroit, and Grand Rapids for a day trip, and Cincinnati for a one-night, one-day trip.

One of the hurdles for other universities to offer this course is cost -- travel costs, specifically. For WMU, we are fortunate to be able to provide the course at no additional cost outside of the tuition of the course with the support of the Lee Honors College Study in the States program. Even though the Lee Honors College could fund the travel costs for the students, for future instances of the course we look to fund travel costs by connecting with local individuals and WMU alumni that want to travel to these cities. For example, if individuals provide a \$2,000 scholarship for a student, and they are then able to travel with the group to the different startup communities (paying their own travel costs). We had individuals that inquired about this during the first instances of the course because of all the quality and interesting people we were going to meet. However, we wanted to ensure the trip went smoothly the first time it was offered, and thus, didn't allow non-students to join the students and instructors on the trips. Having sponsors contribute to individual scholarships in this manner would be viable for other universities to help fund student travel costs if students weren't willing to pay their own travel costs.

## Appendix A

### Course Website

The course has a dedicated website:

- <http://broncostartup.com/usc/>


The website was used by the students in the class, the instructors, the people that were visited, and media. Information provided on the website included [course information](#), [course schedule](#), [deliverables](#), [categorizing various information resources](#), [blog posts](#), [tweets and twitter feed](#) (hashtag: [#wmuusc](#)), and [pictures](#).

Below is a screenshot of the [home page](#).

# Understanding Startup Communities

Current Session: Spring 2015

- Home
- The Course
- Schedule
- Students
- Instructors
- Blog



Boulder, Colorado - March 6-10, 2015

## A WMU-LHC Study in the States Course

[ [read blog posts from the students about their activities in the course](#) | [#wmuusc on social media](#) - [twitter](#) ]

### Course: Understanding Startup Communities

**Learn AND experience what cities are doing to foster startups in their environment. Compare those environments with Kalamazoo's startup scene.**

#### Overview of the Course

The purpose of the course is to expose students to communities that have allowed high technology startup companies (new firms) to thrive in recent decades. This is accomplished by traveling to various cities in the United States: [Austin](#), [Boulder](#), [Chicago](#), [Detroit](#), and [Grand Rapids](#). [ attitudinal trips were added — to the [Lowe Foundation](#) and to [Cincinnati](#) ]

During the trips, students will be able to engage with individuals in various organizations that have fostered a culture that allows entrepreneurial and innovative activities to happen. Students will meet with entrepreneurs (founders of startups), employees of startups, investors in startups (venture capitalists, angel investors), as well as administrators of accelerators / incubators and government officials.

By meeting the people and experiencing the environment in the cities they visit, students will be able to increase their understanding of what makes startup communities thrive. Using the knowledge they garner from the trips, students will be able to compare the startup communities they visit with [Kalamazoo's](#) startup community.

- [Learn more about the course](#)
- [View the course / trip schedule and pictures](#) [ [follow the course blog](#) ]

#### Recent Posts

Cincy: Where a rising tide is raising all boats, and there is a connection to the pillar companies May 5, 2015  
Back to Starting Gate March 30, 2015  
It's just the beginning! March 29, 2015  
Startup community framework and DASH March 28, 2015  
The next stage of startups March 23, 2015  
The Edward Lowe Foundation March 21, 2015  
What Comes After? The Second Stage of Startups March 21, 2015

#### Our Tweets

No tweets found.

#### Categories

[Austin](#) (20)  
[Boulder](#) (20)



## Appendix B: Course Schedule

This was the meeting and travel schedule for the course during the Spring 2015 term.

### Before Main Trip:

- Friday, January 16th: Kalamazoo (info session)
- Friday, January 30th: Kalamazoo (w/ local community)
- Friday, February 13th: Detroit
- Friday, February 20th: Chicago
- Thursday, February 26th: Grand Rapids
- Friday, February 27th: Kalamazoo (review of the books)

### Main Trip: (March 6-15)

- Friday, March 6th: Fly to Boulder
- March 6-10th: In Boulder
- Tuesday, March 10th: Fly to Austin
- March 10th-15th: In Austin
- Sunday, March 15th: Fly to Kalamazoo

### After Main Trip:

- Friday, March 20th: Lowe Foundation, in Cassopolis
- Friday, March 27th: Kalamazoo (w/ local community)

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Additional info for each trip can be found online:

- For Austin: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=78](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=78)
- For Boulder: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=80](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=80)
- For Chicago: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=84](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=84)
- For Detroit: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=82](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=82)
- For Grand Rapids: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=86](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=86)
- For Kalamazoo: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=76](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=76)
- For the Lowe Foundation: [http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page\\_id=125](http://brncostartup.com/usc/?page_id=125)



## Appendix C: List of Individuals Visited During the Course

For a full list of individuals goto the course website: [Schedule section](#).

### Kalamazoo, Michigan

Local entrepreneurs, investors, university professors, the mayor, the assistant city manager, and more

### Detroit, Michigan

1. Chris Seago, Bizdom
2. Damien Rocchi, Grand Circus
3. Sharon Shebib, Detroit Venture Partners
4. Paul Riser and Regina Campbell, Techtown Detroit
5. Philip Serzo, Bamboo Detroit

### Chicago, Illinois

1. Diana Lopez-Obaldo, 1871
2. Mindi Knebel, MATTER
3. Paul Magelli Jr., Apervita
4. Moses Hohman, Human Practice
5. Jake Gasaway, Stitch Labs <- WMU Alumni
6. David Kalt, Reverb/ OptionsXpress

### Grand Rapids, Michigan

1. Amanda Chocko, Start Garden
2. Kevin McCurren, Grand Valley State University Entrepreneurship Center
3. Deb Deters and Chris Gutek, Grand Angels

### Boulder, Colorado

1. John Tayer and Randy Schultz, Boulder Chamber
2. Daniel Epstein, Unreasonable Institute
3. Dr. Dale Meyer, University of Colorado
4. Jason Mendelson, Foundry Group
5. Jon Balck, Victor and Spoils <- WMU Alumni
6. Drs. Sharon Matsui and Erick Mueller, University of Colorado
7. Dave Cohen, Techstars

### Austin, Texas

1. Mitch Jacobson, Austin Technology Incubator
2. Kevin Koym, Tech Ranch
3. LOVOO and Mark Miller
4. Marc Ott and Sue Edwards, City Managers, City of Austin <- Marc was formerly city manager of Kalamazoo
5. Jason Black, WeeGolf, Boundless Networks, Hotlink
6. Kenneth Cho and Jason Baldrige, People Pattern



## **Appendix D**

### **Testimonials and Student Learning Points**

Below is a sampling of feedback from students and individuals that the class met with during the Spring 2015 semester. Some of the feedback includes what they learned in the course and how they will use (or have used) that knowledge.

"I was in the Understanding Startup Communities class with John Mueller, and I can't express how much fun I had, and what a great learning experience it was. Getting out of the classroom and meeting so many wonderful people is like no other class! Not to mention the awesome cities we were able to visit, and my classmates were top of the line. Overall, I had a beyond wonderful time, and some of us were so inspired we are now opening a co-working space in Kalamazoo called Dash."

*-- Josie Marshall, student in the course, Spring 2015*

"Transparency was an important element that Jason Mendelson of the Foundry Group attributed to the success of Boulder's community. The trips allowed me to truthfully understand the importance that transparency has in relationship building. I have gained meaningful relationships with the organizations that I have met as well as the classmates I shared this experience with as a result of transparency. The final point I would like to mention that I learned from this trip was the importance of accepting failure."

*-- Adam Roth, student in the course, Spring 2015*

"I got to see the real world of an entrepreneur, and what it really takes to be an entrepreneur. I learned the motivations and worries that plague the daily lives of the members of the entrepreneurial world, something that could not have been effectively learned in a classroom. The best way to learn something is by truly experiencing it and talking to people that live that which you are looking at, and this course proves this point. I made friends in this class also, connections with people, which is not possible in almost any course I have taken; for me that's one of the goals of going to study to an institution like WMU, and this course offered me that."

*-- Eric Carlo, student in the course, Spring 2015*

"I also figured out that Entrepreneurship is a true passion of mine, hence why I changed my major to it within the first week of class! I wouldn't of ever done this or work towards my dream of opening R U Cereal and being apart of Starting Gate without it. I loved that it was very hands on and not just in a classroom setting."

*-- Alexis Lenderman, student in the course, Spring 2015*

"Prior to this in my home country of Zimbabwe, I had been taught that you first need to raise capital for you to start a business. As David Kalt advised, I plan on creating things in the meantime, keep learning, be consciously aware of my surroundings and keep thinking of new ideas."

*-- Simba Chirara, student in the course, Spring 2015*



"The experience of talking to entrepreneurs also better prepared me to speak on the rotary panel. I think it helped me to go out of my comfort zone within the class before going out of my comfort zone with speaking on the panel. The class showed me that speaking in front of people and asking and answering questions wasn't nearly as scary as I had always thought it to be."

**-- Jill Puckett, student in the course, Spring 2015**

"SMART class. Love what you are doing for them!"

**-- Jason Mendelson, partner, Foundry Group, Spring 2015**

"Happy to help! Always lend a hand to folks forging their own paths. I'm thrilled to see more students engaging with entrepreneurship."

**-- Eliot Peper, author, Uncommon book series, Spring 2015**

"Thanks for the opportunity John... truly appreciated it and the conversation + the group was a ton of fun. enjoy the rest of your travels!"

**-- Daniel Epstein, co-founder, Unreasonable Institute, Spring 2015**

"I am so impressed that you personally and WMU collectively would invest this much into these students. What an awesome gift."

**-- Scott Weiss, CEO, OCEAN Accelerator, Spring 2015**

"Same from me - really enjoyed speaking with your students. Have a great rest of the trip. And a company called Lush Nuts has to be good...look forward to enjoying them."

**Erick Mueller, Professor, University of Colorado, Spring 2015**

"It was great hosting you and the WMU students today at TechTown Detroit. Hopefully they enjoyed the time spent as much as we did."

**-- Paul Riser, Director, Technology-Based Entrepreneurship @ TechTown Detroit, Spring 2015**

"Thank you for your kind note and for passing along the link to your blog and photos - I really enjoyed looking through both! It was our pleasure to host you and your students and I hope that we can do it again for you next group. Enjoy your time on the rest of your travels and I will be sure to follow along on your blog :)"

**Mindi Knebel, Director - Operations, MATTER, Spring 2015**

"Thank you very belatedly for the very kind note, John. I really enjoyed speaking to the group, and you've inspired me to write up some of the things I talked about (whenever I get around to that!)."

**Moses Hohman, Founder, Human Practice, Spring 2015**

[Additional testimonials](#) can be found on the course website.