

# Overview

*(Editor's Note: Rebecca Komarek was interviewed on January 26, 2018 by Philip Bouchard, Executive Director of the Entrepreneurship Advisory Center and CEO of [TrustedPeer](#).)*



Idea Forge is a design and innovation facility on the campus of the University of Colorado Boulder.

At the Idea Forge we focus on three main pillars:

1. Our first pillar is formal learning.
  - We host classes, labs for classes, and one-off classroom activities where a faculty member has a traditional lecture hall and they have some activity where they need a more open and reconfigurable space.
2. Our second pillar is informal learning; learning outside the classroom.
  - If students are working with a student group, building something, or need a place to meet, they are welcome at Idea Forge.
  - If students want to build something for their own enjoyment, for their own exploration, for fun, we welcome them to come here and build that product. Some of those products fit into the entrepreneurial space.
  - If they have an idea, we provide a space for them to meet with mentors and to meet with their team.
3. Our third pillar is connecting to industry and the community.

- Through the Idea Forge, we run the [Catalyze CU-Boulder](#) program, an 8 week summer startup accelerator designed for CU students and faculty where we connect with mentors from our local Boulder business community (more about the [Catalyze CU Accelerator](#) below).
- In the Idea Forge, we have a program called [Design Center Colorado](#), part of the Department of Mechanical Engineering.

Design Center Colorado is the umbrella organization through the University's mechanical engineering department that runs senior design projects. The students working on those senior design projects, work out of the Idea Forge. Each of the projects is industry sponsored. We have about 30 senior design project teams year after year.

Companies like Boeing or Ball Aerospace support senior and graduate design projects, defining a problem to be solved and working with the teams through the academic year. The majority of the work to design, build, and test happens at the Idea Forge. Our industry-grade machine shop supports much of that work. Undergraduate students create early-stage prototypes while graduate students' prototypes are typically production-ready.

The Catalyze CU-Boulder startup accelerator program will celebrate its fifth year this summer. We manage it as a summer program so that students (as well as staff and faculty) can focus predominately on building their business. Participants are mostly students, but we also have postdocs and faculty who are planning to commercialize their research. Currently, it's an eight week program. We generally welcome eight teams into the program each year, which typically results in 20-25 participants.

Catalyze CU benefits from the help of about 60 mentors each summer. They are experienced entrepreneurs who want to help young entrepreneurs make their way in the business. They have varying

degrees of expertise, whether it be in marketing or design or team formation. We also have a pool of attorneys interested in startup law who are willing to give advice or provide some level of consulting to our teams. Some mentors are part of the university faculty; however, the majority of our mentors come from our local business community. When we have teams asking for specific advice, we do our best to connect them with someone who is aligned with their needs. The majority of the time, we are able to find those people, or we know people who would know those people. We work on a case-by-case basis to make connections and provide the teams with personalized support.

While the accelerator is in session, we have a weekly check-in where each team has to report not only to those of us who are running the program, but also to their peers. "This is where we are this week, this is what we did last week, these are our goals for next week." Student teams define all of those things with our guidance. Other key components of the programming are workshops where we bring in mentors with specific expertise to teach on a topic and provide individualized support in that area. Generally, the majority of our teams attend these workshops.

It is challenging to provide individual support to each team. They don't all start at the same place or move at the same pace. At the check-in meetings, the team defines its own goals. If we think those goals aren't high-reaching enough, we're going to let them know. If we think they could be doing more, we have that conversation. They're defining their own goals on a week-to-week basis because it is different for a team that is a bit more established versus teams that are very very early-stage.

The final activity for Catalyze CU-Boulder is Demo Day where each team presents their 5-minute business pitch and demo their product or service. We generally have over 200 people in attendance. Last year, we transitioned from a campus location to a theater housed in the local public library. We held Demo Day in a community location, because,

although we're a campus program, our goal is to transition these ventures and entrepreneurs into the Boulder startup community and beyond.

We recognize that some students in Catalyze CU are trying out entrepreneurship. They're giving it a shot. Our goal is to provide an entrepreneurship education. We want to build businesses, but ultimately, we are educating. We're at a university. There have been instances where individuals have decided that entrepreneurship is not for them, and we have had issues where teams are so rigid in their ideas that they're not willing to acknowledge feedback to change or pivot. Overall, those people are the minority.

Some students come to the realization that their venture doesn't have a future. One team last year finished the program but presented about lessons learned rather than about moving the business forward during their Demo Day pitch. They explored their business for eight weeks and decided that it was not viable.

We do our best to track Catalyze CU participants when they finish the program to continue to provide support where we can. We encourage our companies to send update emails to all of their mentors and all of their constituents. For example, I got one of those emails recently from a former Catalyze team that was looking for legal help. I reminded them to check out the Catalyze CU mentors to see if there was a fit. We know that some of our teams have received angel funding, VC investment, or small business grants. We have a handful of companies who have moved to other accelerators. Occasionally, we lose track of teams.

We're working to build community among our alumni. For the people who are still in the Boulder area, we bring them back in every summer to do panels or to have happy hours or to just interact with our current teams. It's important that our teams have mentors who have many years of business experience, but it's also really valuable for them to have mentors who are only a step or two ahead. The mentors can remember what it's like to be in the trenches and say, "Hey, I made it this far." We like to get all those people together when we can.

The goal of the Idea Forge is to prepare students for the practice. This may be in entrepreneurship, engineering, business, and beyond. We are the place that has high professional expectations, that takes students from a university setting and transitions them into the workforce. In Catalyze CU, for example, we are transitioning people from the campus entrepreneurial community to a broader Boulder entrepreneurial community.

We continue to build our cross-campus collaboration, encouraging more students from other disciplines to work in the Idea Forge. We need to put a few more steps into place to support them in getting to where they need to be to do what they want to do.

Here are some examples:

In the fall, the Idea Forge holds a course that includes students from art, engineering, and environmental design. We want to highlight that as an engineering student, you can have a career in art. Most engineering students are unaware that art installers hire engineers. We have a resident artist, a faculty member of the art department, who teaches that course and helps to integrate art awareness into what we do.

Additionally, the Idea Forge collaborates with other cross-disciplinary entities on campus like the Social Innovation Certificate and the Space Minor. Yes, you can minor in space at CU Boulder. The students from across campus study the history of space exploration, policy around space, and more. We were the first place on campus to have multiple sewing machines and hosted a quilting series. We want to increase awareness and expand possibilities for students from all disciplines, helping them realize that they can define their own futures beyond what they study today.

Peer Topic

# University of Colorado Idea Forge Catalyze CU Accelerator

by Rebecca Komarek, February 10, 2018

[Overview](#)

[Best Practices](#)

Need help applying a Best Practice to your situation? Entrepreneurship Advisory Center Peer Rebecca Komarek is always available.

Provide workshops to support drawing and prototyping for non-engineering students to broaden the entrepreneurial student base.

BEST PRACTICE #1

Build core expertise in areas that student entrepreneurs will need to develop their business concepts.

BEST PRACTICE #2

Build a bridge to the local business community by bringing in a local entrepreneur to help run your program.

BEST PRACTICE #3

Set the right motivation by not giving academic credit for the program.

BEST PRACTICE #4

When reviewing applications for the accelerator, focus on the people.

BEST PRACTICE #5

Provide a job fair for students to intern with an accelerator team.

BEST PRACTICE #6

Provide funding for development and basic needs.

BEST PRACTICE #7

Make Demo Day a showcase rather than a competition.

BEST PRACTICE #8