# Start6: Building the innovation community



## Start6 connects MIT students to lasting, high-level entrepreneurship community

Start6, the IAP workshop for entrepreneurs and innovators, in its second year, finished Monday, Jan. 26, pre-blizzard — a day packed with project presentations, a talk given to a full house in 34-101 by Institute Professor, serial entrepreneur and inventor Robert Langer, and a "fire side chat" that was improvised as a Skype chat with Drew Houston, EECS alumnus and Dropbox Co-Founder and CEO, as he waited at Logan Airport to catch his flight back to California.

The wide range of the twenty-four projects that were presented through the morning and early afternoon that day by Start6 teams and single developers included new medical technology applications, educational software, photonics driven security communications, drone applications in fighting fires or rescue situations, and Internet-driven social services models, to name a few. With roughly five minutes to make a comprehensive and compelling presentation, each project group built on the previous two weeks of pitch practice, honing their value proposition and incorporating some of the many suggestions offered in the previous two weeks of the for-credit class.

EECS graduate student Colm Joseph O'Rourke put Lemnos Labs Founding Partner, Jeremy Conrad's suggestions to practice by video-taping himself before his Start6 presentation. He also heeded the public speaking lessons he picked up from Sloan School program manager Christina Chase, one of over 50 Start6 speakers, as he pitched MathMotion, a software for smart boards and tablets to help students and educators communicate and understand mathematical operations using animated steps in solving an equation.



Institute Professor and serial entrepreneur and inventor Robert Langer (photo top) spoke to a full house at 34-101 for the last day of Start6, 2015, followed by a Skype-enabled fire-side chat with Drew Houston, '05, Dropbox Co-founder and CEO (screen view photo).

Carey Anne Nadeau, has developed a service startup. Designed for non-profits and cities that publish open public data, Open Data Discourse, ODD, hosts civic challenges that invite the hacker, data visualization, and policy advocacy communities to inform civic priorities and scale solutions to improve communities. Hearing Actifio Chief Marketing Officer Mike Troiano speak about crafting a value proposition resulted in her re-evaluating how she and her team are describing their company and improve their pitch to articulate the description of their product precisely.

Whatever their project, Start6 students and visitors flocked to hear Prof. Langer's accounting of some of his experiences in creating companies based on his seminal drug delivery and biomedical discoveries. Catering his talk to the Start6 innovators and entrepreneurs, Langer suggested a formula for building companies, particularly building on platform technologies that will have multiple applications (both publishing in major journals and obtaining broad patents), engaging people who "walk through walls for you", and getting a good CEO.

When asked about time management in the follow-up Q and A, Langer said his criteria is based on impact. Asked about any failed startups, he noted that none of his now 28 companies have failed, though he repeated that choosing a CEO (with very good business sense) is key.



The Panel titled *Marketing Techniques* was moderated by Erica Swallow (Sloan MBA candidate), left, followed by panelists (from left) Jay Acunzo (Next View Ventures), Rachel Zimmerman (WBUR), Kris Bronner (UNREAL Brands), Giuseppe Frustaci (marketing professional focused on digital performance marketing for startups). Day 4 of week 1 of Start6 2015.

Skyping from Legal Seafoods at Logan Airport, Dropbox Co-founder and CEO Drew Houston, '05, welcomed the chance to fit in his Start6 fireside chat with EECS Department Head and Start6 founder Anantha Chandrakasan.  Houston described his early days both starting Dropbox and his previous startup for an online SAT Prep service.  "How did he develop his management knowhow?" Chandrakasan asked. Houston responded that he poured over books he bought online – during summers on the roof of his fraternity.  Now his most important work is recruiting for Dropbox, which has over 1,000 employees (doubled over the past year) and working with small groups of team leaders to build their products.

"We live these things everyday," Houston said about the forces that shape the direction his company takes. He noted that organizing and sharing data, such as Dropbox's photo app, dubbed Carousel, introduced in spring 2014, have been major foci. The relevance of machine vision and data predictions and security has continued to be high priority at Dropbox, Houston noted, as he described the Dropbox goal of remaining close to its customers and always looking for a deeper understanding of the problems they solve. His favorite class in Course VI?  Intro to Algorithms (6.046).

Houston noted that it has become commonplace that Internet technology companies have allowed small numbers of people to solve the world's needs. He also pointed out that patented technologies are not as strategically important in most Silicon Valley, Internet-based companies.  In response to an audience question:  How do you keep your head cool as you run a $10 billion company? "It's all a gradual process," he said. "There are a lot of things that could take us down, ...but we have a lot we want to do, so we stay on our toes."

Graduate students Monica Stanciu, in Biology and Adrian Dalca, in EECS, who are working on a project called Cromia, found Houston's talk "very down to earth, making it seem like success is within reach." Cromia is a crowd-sourced medical image analysis startup aiming for quick and accurate automatic analysis for medical imaging in clinical trials.  Stanciu and Dalca were thrilled to learn from Start6 speaker Sangeeta Bhatia, 2014 MIT-Lemelson $500k prize winner and joint professor in EECS and HST, how the science drove her entrepreneurship journey, in addition to the excitement and hurdles that she described along the way.

They also found the Start6 lateral learning sessions, such as the pitch practice "immensely helpful because of the personalized attention from a mentor as well as other students."  Start6 included over 50 mentors guiding the registered students and postdocs, from over 15 departments at MIT.

Curtis Northcutt, an alumnus of Start6 (2014) returned to a reception hosted by Paul English at Blade LLC, in Boston on Jan. 22 to share his experiences growing his startup Reverse Definition— Revdef, a new search engine that interprets queries about phrases or a word or fact, to be made available for public



Curtis Northcutt, Start6 alumnus spoke at the Blade Reception on Jan. 22.  Anantha Chandrakasan, EECS Department Head (center) and MIT School of Engineering Dean Ian Waitz are pictured in the background.

use in late spring or summer.  "It seems as though a glass wall resides between us and the 'real' entrepreneurs on the other side.  Start6 shattered that glass wall for me," Northcutt shared with the Blade guests."The biggest advantage of Start6 isn't learning how to start a company, it's the human resources and network it provides."

Although the Start6 class is over, the real work for many of the participants is ongoing and jump-started by all that has transpired since.  Many of the teams have continued meetings with their Start6 mentors.  A Start6 reunion in mid February provided the students a chance to hear Rod Brooks, Rethink Robotics Founder and CEO, talk informally about his experiences.

Through February, at least 30 Start6 students prepared for the Spring break trip to meet with several venture capital firms and startups in Palo Alto and San Francisco.  And, all Start6 students were eager to hear the announcement of the Start6 first- and second-prize winners following the selection in mid February of ten project teams to compete for a new Start6 prize.

At the Blade Start6 Alumni Reception, Chandrakasan announced the creation of the Start6 Fund made possible by alumna Haejin Baek '86, a double major in computer science and management. The 2015 Start6 prizes made possible through this funding will be awarded to two teams, which are working towards commercial launch of their startup, for $10k and $7.5k.

"Start6 this year has made entrepreneurship a focal point for students from across the Institute," Chandrakasan said.  "We are pleased that many top entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and experts in innovation services shared their time and passion with a very receptive group. There is a good chance that some impressive innovations and a new group of entrepreneurs will emerge and *all* will have benefited from this experience."