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VCU to Open Founder's Corner for Student Entrepreneurs

Google, Microsoft, Snapchat, Facebook -- some of the world's most successful and revolutionary businesses are the products of college students brainstorming out of residence halls, libraries, student unions and other collegiate common spaces. The college environment provides a dynamic atmosphere for young entrepreneurs to come together and collaborate ideas, but, often, students are found lacking the funds, guidance and resources needed to further their businesses.

Starting April 18, 2016, student entrepreneurs will be able to work in a new co-working office space, called Founder's Corner, located on the first floor of the University Student Commons. The space will provide an on-campus location for undergraduate and graduate student entrepreneurs, regardless of major, to grow and expand their start-ups, using funds and connections provided by the University. While the space is available to all, participants must apply and go through an interview process to be considered.

Founder's Corner is a partnership between VCU Innovation Gateway, VCU Career Services and University Student Commons and Activities. Along with providing a space for young entrepreneurs to kick-start their businesses, the Innovation Gateway program, part of the Office of Research and Innovation, has developed a series of programs for Founder's Corner focused on providing individualized guidance and resources to students who have an idea for a new product or company. These programs include a one-on-one mentor program, a pre-accelerator and a number of funding opportunities.

"Founder's Corner helped focus our initial idea, reevaluate what we could and couldn't do," Desmond Delaney, founder of sneaker resale site Eight A.M., said. "It gave us creative ways to refine our business model and get real time with real entrepreneurs."

Numerous students like Delaney are utilizing the resources provided through Founder's Corner; one such student is Haley Cowen, founder of Peace & Fluidity Designs, a hand sewing and machine embroidery yoga mat bag and organic apparel brand.

"Each week we stand up and present a pitch and then they (program mentors) ask us what we need help with and they always are willing to help and point us in the right direction," Cowen said. "With this program we are doing what we have learned in classes and put it into real life situations."

Cowen believes the program will inspire other students who may not otherwise choose to pursue their own business endeavors.

"It (Founder's Corner) has pushed me so much to constantly work on my business and progress and network as much as I can," Cowen said. "When other students see that you do not have to

be graduated with a degree to own your own business and if you are determined enough you can do anything you want at any age, then they can believe they can do it too.”

The purpose of Founder’s Corner falls in line with Innovation Gateway’s mission to facilitate commercialization of university inventions, foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship at the university, support university research through collaborative agreements and promote regional economic development as well as new venture creation. This mission is not unfamiliar to the city of Richmond, where local and startup businesses have been thriving for years.

“Entrepreneurship and small businesses is important to Richmond and many successful entrepreneurs have graduated from VCU,” Brian O’Loughlin, founder of No Stone Collective, a young-adult outdoor lifestyle and apparel brand, said. “Collectively, Richmond’s makers and doers have a major impact on the local economy and make Richmond, and therefore VCU, unique. VCU’s support will help feed Richmond’s already vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem and inspire others to start thinking entrepreneurially.”

To learn more about how to get involved with Founder’s Corner, visit their [website](#), for information about the programs Venture Creation University puts on, click [here](#).

Meet the students of Founder’s Corner

Dan Calabro, Senior, Business Administration and Management

What is your business?

My business is a carsharing service called Ridewall. It allows student to sign up with .edu or Facebook account and post/request for rides. It focuses on saving carbon footprint and long distance transportation.

What kind of resources has Founder’s Corner provided to you?

One of the biggest resources they provided besides the grant would have to be the mentors and faculty that work with us. It has been an amazing experience so far having these individuals sit down and help assist us.

How do you plan on expanding your business?

We plan on expanding across all Universities and partnering up with other ridesharing services.

To learn more about Ridewall, visit www.ridewall.com

Haley Cowen, senior, entrepreneurship

What is your business?

It’s a hand sewing and machine embroidery yoga mat bag and organic apparel brand called Peace & Fluidity Designs

What kind of resources has Founder’s Corner provided to you?

Honestly they have been more helpful than most of my capstone classes! They have provided mentors that are linked to our fields we want to pursue as well as had an entire class dedicated to the legal side of the business and what to discuss when creating this legal entity.

How do you plan on expanding your business?

Right now I have products in a few stores around Richmond and the Blacksburg area, but I hope to go into places like California and Colorado and hopefully one day having my own store front in Carytown or SOHO or even San Fran if I get lucky. I also want to be able to produce my own textiles and be a leading player in the organic handmade culture.

To learn more about Peace and Fluidity Designs, visit www.facebook.com/peaceandfluidity.

Desmund Delaney, Junior, Financial Technology**What is your business?**

Eight AM is a sneaker resale marketplace for pre-owned sneakers. We clean the sneakers, market and sell them online.

What kind of resources has Founder's Corner provided to you?

Besides the funds and the physical space, they provide the mentorship which has been really helpful since day one. It helped focus our initial idea, reevaluate what we could and couldn't do.

How do you plan on expanding your business?

Maybe one day a brick and mortar store, but right now we're just trying to expand our reach.

To learn more about EightAm, visit iconosquare.com/eightamstore.

Brian O'Loughlin, senior, marketing**What is your business?**

Our business is called No Stone Collective. No Stone is an outdoor lifestyle brand that provides apparel and gear tailored towards young adults who enjoy exploring the outdoors in their free time but don't have a ton of extra income to spend on expensive outdoor gear they'll only use on occasion. As of right now, big name outdoor brands are primarily focused on high-earning, high-performing athletes - meaning the gear they provided is both highly technical and expensive. We aim to differentiate ourselves by providing products that are affordable, durable, and look good on both the street and the trails.

What kind of resources has Founder's Corner provided to you?

By providing a basecamp for us, we're all able to share ideas, resources, feedback, contacts, and support that drive our businesses' progress. With whiteboard walls and adaptive furniture arrangements we can hold meetings, presentations, conferences, and even make private workstations.

How do you plan on expanding your business?

I see us developing more products and first capturing the young crowd of outdoor enthusiasts in Richmond. We'll need to develop a competitive advantage either through a unique product, product line, or means of engaging our customer base. Social media and online sales will be huge for us so bringing on someone to handle our social media accounts and another person to help design our website will also be important. If we can build those we'll be able to collaborate with more artists, photographers, designers, and businesses and support Richmonder's who share interests in the outdoors be it through physical activity, art, or simply everyday lifestyle.

To learn more about No Stone Collective, visit www.nostonecollective.com