

The Boston Globe

■ by D.C. Denison, bostonglobe.com

November 12

Start-up Vaxess Technologies was founded by four Harvard University students from different corners of the school's vast campus who met only when each checked out a class at the university's new Innovation Lab.

The fall 2011 course was on commercializing science, and the four principals joined forces to build a business around a new technology to stabilize vaccines so they don't need to be refrigerated during delivery. Since then, they have regularly used the i-lab to develop the business, taking in workshops and talks from visiting entrepreneurs, even using it as a base from which to raise money.

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"This is also a good place to meet prospective investors. It has a lot more credibility than a Starbucks," said Vaxess cofounder Patrick Ho, a Harvard Law School graduate. His Vaxess colleagues hail from the business school, the Kennedy School of Government, and Harvard's department of chemistry and chemical biology.

"There's no way the four of us would have met if we didn't meet here," Ho said.

Far from happenstance, Vaxess Technologies is exactly the kind of result Harvard officials had in mind when they created the i-lab, which is celebrating its first anniversary this month as a place that offers all the university's students an opportunity to tap into the entrepreneurial boom sweeping Boston.

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To that end, the i-lab offers a range of activities, including established courses taught by university professors, intensive weekend workshops, and regular office hours from entrepreneurial advisers.

"We are an extension of the classroom," said Gordon Jones, the i-lab's managing director. "Our mission is to get students to grow and learn. We're in the same airspace as the incubators and accelerators, but we're flying on a different trajectory."

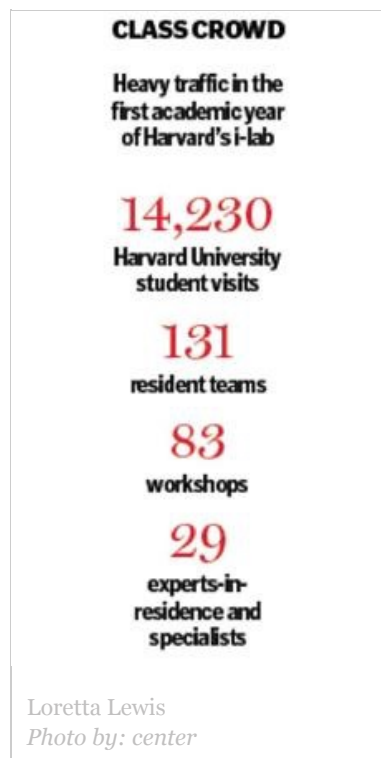
Located on the Allston side of the campus not far from the Harvard Business School, the i-lab is off to a torrid start: It has received more than 14,000 student visits over its first year, and 131 teams of students have hatched initiatives here.

“I’ve always viewed this as a start-up,” Jones added, “but it’s one that hit scale much quicker than we imagined it would. We thought we were opening a hardware store, but it turned out to be more like a Walmart.”

Indeed, on most afternoons the 30,000-square-foot space can seem as busy as a big-box store, as students scurry between long work tables and small conference rooms. Diagrams and doodles on walls and columns here and there add to the feeling of a perpetual brainstorming session.

Everything is in a state of flux. All the furniture seems to come on wheels: from tables, to whiteboards, to the bright yellow team lockers that students roll around to create instant workspaces.

“The only two locking doors are the bathroom, and the food- storage closet,” quipped Neal Doyle, the lab’s manager of operations.



The i-lab hosts 65 businesses started by students and seven started by Harvard alumni, from ActivePepper, a mobile application that helps individuals find sports partners, to

Nucleik, a system to help police better collect and manage criminal intelligence. The i-lab's tenants also include start-ups focused on the arts and social entrepreneurship, two areas that typically don't receive much interest or support from venture capitalists.

Over the past year, the i-lab has become more involved with its start-ups, instead of just providing a location and a menu of resources.

"When we opened a year ago, we were pursuing a model that resembled a farmer's market of products," said Jones. "We put a lot of stuff out there and made it available. Now we've realized that we can walk alongside the teams a little bit, and add more value. Instead of just offering options, we want to take the teams further."

Another reason for the popularity of Harvard's innovation laboratory is that it is open to the entire university, including undergraduates as well as law students and medical school students — a population of more than 21,000.

"Most university innovation programs are based in a very specific department or school," Jones said. "It's in the computer science department, or the business school. The i-lab's mission is much broader: We're here to serve the entire university, to bring everyone together in one place and encourage collaboration."

Wendy Torrance, director of entrepreneurship at the Kauffman Foundation, said the i-lab is part of a surging trend in higher education. The Kansas City foundation, which promotes entrepreneurial projects around the United States, most recently surveyed the phenomenon in 2008 and found the trend was well underway: Formal programs in entrepreneurship at US universities had nearly quintupled in the previous quarter-century, from 104 to more than 500.

The Harvard i-lab is similar in practice to more established and successful university-based innovation centers, Torrance said, including those at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, and Arizona State.

"The i-lab provides exposure to innovation at many different levels, including workshops, mentorships, and classes," Torrance said. "It is also focused on a broad set of outcomes: A student who is focused on start-ups can learn about launching a company, sure, but an engineering student who is going to work at a large company can also learn to think more creatively."

It's also a good place to get money, as Ho and the other cofounders of Vaxess Technologies discovered. Working out of the i-lab, the Vaxess team polished its business to the point where it won a total of \$75,000 from the President's Challenge, a competition sponsored by

Drew Faust, Harvard president. The competition encouraged students to develop business solutions to major social problems, such as Vaxess's solution for getting vaccines to parts of the world that don't have reliable electricity for refrigerating medicines. The Vaxess team - also got \$25,000 for winning the Harvard Business School Business Plan Contest.

Ho said his experience at the i-lab persuaded him to drop his plan to become a lawyer at a big firm after graduating last spring.

"Entrepreneurship was something that I was definitely interested in," Ho said. "I thought I was heading down a conventional track, working at a law firm. A start-up was something I thought I might get to around midcareer."

Now the young team is working on raising capital, developing its technology, and exploring partnerships with companies that can manufacture and distribute vaccines with their Vaxess technology. The company will soon move out of the i-lab into its own lab space.

In the coming year, the i-lab is hoping to launch more health and science initiatives. In its first year, ventures started at the i-lab were heavily weighted toward "consumer and technology" and "social and cultural entrepreneurship," perhaps because those types of start-ups need less development time and require less capital.

"Health-related innovation hasn't really taken off yet," Jones said. "The medical school already has a very rich ecosystem in the Longwood Medical Area around innovation. The development time is also much longer for health start-ups than for Internet and social entrepreneurship companies. As a result, we're just getting going with the medical school, the dental school, and the School of Public Health."

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