CSUDH INNOVATION INCUBATOR

Alpha Start

The First Inning Workbook

Four hours. Four innings. One idea you can explain by the end of the day.

Name:

Email:

Date:

My idea in five words or fewer (leave blank if you came to find one):

The four innings

Inning	Verb	What you will leave with
1 (9:00)	Direct	A problem you have watched someone have, and a one-line promise.
2 (10:00)	Attract	A first customer you can picture, five questions, and one helper.
3 (11:45)	Reward	The smallest version of your offer, with a price and a first-sale sum.
4 (12:45)	Teach	A two-minute explanation that a stranger understood.

This workbook is for working, not for reading. Write in it. Cross things out. Nothing in it is graded and no one will ask to see it unless you offer.

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Built on the DART loop (Direct, Attract, Reward, Teach), Norman (2026); interview practice adapted from NSF I-Corps.

How today works

Read this during the first ten minutes, then put the pen to work.

The rhythm of each inning

Minutes	What happens
10	A short frame and one tip from the front of the room.
35	Quiet work on your own pages. Mentors and faculty sit at the tables; wave one over when you want a second opinion.
10	Check in with your table or a partner.
5	Write your commitment, then say it to one person.

What Alpha Start is not

- Not a pitch contest. No one is scoring you.
- Not a class. There is no grade, no prerequisite, and no cost.
- Not a place where you need to already have an idea. Page 3 helps you find one.
- Not a place where big ideas beat small ones. A product you can make this week beats an app you can describe.

Three habits that make this work

1. Get out of the building. The NSF I-Corps program makes founders interview customers before they build anything; your version is five conversations this week. Talk to a real person before you ask an AI tool, and use AI after a conversation to tidy up what you heard, never instead of one.
2. Write the smallest next step, not the whole plan. Four small steps written down today will carry you further than one big one.
3. Say your commitment out loud. People do what they have told someone they will do.

People I met today

Ask every mentor or faculty member who sits at your table for one line and one way to reach them.

Name	What they know that I need	How to reach them

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Inning 1: Direct

Set the direction: the problem, the customer, the promise.

Tip: a venture starts with a problem you have watched someone have, not with an app, a logo, or a name. Direction comes from the problem.

If you came without an idea, start here

List five things that make people around you (family, coworkers, classmates, neighbors) complain, waste time, or ask you for help. Circle the one you have seen most often.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

The problem I have watched

In one sentence, what is the problem and who has it?

Three real people who have this problem (first names are fine)
Where did I see it happen? What did they do about it?

What do they do today instead? (The real competitor is usually "nothing," "a cousin," or "a spreadsheet.")

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Inning 1: Direct, continued

Turn the problem into a promise.

My one-line promise

Fill in the blanks, then rewrite it in your own words below. Keep it under 20 words.

I help _____ (who) who struggle with _____ (problem) get _____ (result).

In my own words

Why me, why now

What have I seen, done, or lived that makes this my problem to work on? (Mentors call this founder-market fit. You can call it "I have been there.")

Mentor question for this inning

"Tell me about the last time you saw this problem." Write what the mentor said that you did not expect.

Inning 1 commitment

Write it, then say it out loud to one tablemate.

Before next Saturday I will:

The person I will tell:

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Inning 2: Attract

Bring in the first customers and the first helpers.

Tip: pick the one customer who feels the pain most and can say yes without asking anyone else. Everyone else can wait.

My first customer, sketched

Question	My answer
Where would I find them on a Tuesday?	
What do they do about the problem right now?	
What does the problem cost them (time, money, worry)?	
What would they have to give up to use my offer?	
Who is the one person I would call first, and why them?	

My guess, written down (so I can be wrong on purpose)

I believe _____ (customer) has _____ (problem) because _____. I will know I am wrong if _____.

Five questions I will ask them

I-Corps rules for the conversation: do not pitch, do not sell, do not explain your idea until the end. Ask about the past, not the future. "Tell me about the last time…" beats "Would you buy…" every time. Fifteen minutes with one person is enough.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

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Inning 2: Attract, continued

Customers first, then the people who help you serve them.

Conversation log

Use this page during the week. Write down what people said in their own words, not what you wished they said.

Name and date	What they do now	What they said (their words)	Supports or breaks my guess?

Conversations so far: ____ Goal before next session: 5 (I-Corps teams do 100 in seven weeks; five honest ones will change your idea.)

My first helpers

Most first ventures need one maker, one seller, and one teacher. Which are you? Who could fill the other two for an hour a week?

Role	Me? (yes/no)	Who could help, and what I would offer them
Maker (builds, cooks, sews, codes, designs)		
Seller (talks to customers, posts, asks for the sale)		
Teacher (explains, trains, writes it down)		

Inning 2 commitment

Write it, then say it out loud to one tablemate.

Before next Saturday I will:

The person I will tell:

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Inning 3: Reward

Make the exchange worth it for the customer and for you.

Tip: a flyer, a sign-up sheet, a text thread, a sample, or a sketch counts as a first version. A finished product does not come first.

The smallest version I can show someone this week

Draw it or describe it. What would a customer see, hold, taste, or click?

The exchange

The customer gets	The customer gives	I get (besides money)

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Inning 3: Reward, continued

First-sale math and how a customer finds you.

First-sale math

Estimate. Round numbers are fine. The point is to see whether ten sales leave you ahead or behind.

Line	One sale	Ten sales	One hundred sales
What I charge (price)			
What one unit costs me to make or deliver			
Shipping, packaging, platform or card fees			
What is left (price minus the two lines above)			
Hours of my time			
What is left per hour of my time			

How a customer finds it

Pick one channel to try first. One, not five. Where does your first customer already spend time?

Channel I will try first	What I will post, say, or hand out	By when

Mentor question for this inning

"What would you show a customer tomorrow if you had to?"

Inning 3 commitment

Write it, then say it out loud to one tablemate.

Before next Saturday I will:

The person I will tell:

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Inning 4: Teach

Explain it so others can repeat it, and learn from what they miss.

Tip: when you can teach your idea in two minutes to someone outside your major, you understand it. When you cannot, you have found the next thing to work on.

My two-minute explanation

Four sentences. Read it aloud to a partner, then listen while they tell it back to you.

1. The problem, and the person who has it.

2. What they do today instead.

3. What I offer, and what it costs them.

4. What I will do this week to find out if I am right.

What my partner heard

Clear (they repeated it correctly)	Missing or muddled (they could not repeat it)

Pivot or persevere

I-Corps teams end every week with this call. Circle one and give the reason in a sentence.

PERSEVERE (my guess held up) **PIVOT (change the customer, the problem, or the offer)** **NOT SURE (I need more conversations)**

Because:

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My week

Everything you promised today, on one page you can tape above your desk.

Inning	What I will do before next Saturday	Who I told	Done
1 Direct			☐
2 Attract			☐
3 Reward			☐
4 Teach			☐

Next Alpha Start

Date and time:

What I will bring to show:

Where to get help between sessions

Resource	Good for	How
CSUDH Innovation Incubator	Mentors, workspace, the next session	toroinnovation.com, or stop by
Small Business Development Center (SBDC)	Free one-on-one advising, licenses, loans	Ask a mentor for the South Bay or LA office
Campus library	Industry and market data you would otherwise pay for	Ask a librarian for business databases
A mentor from page 2	A second opinion on this week's step	Use the contact they gave you, within seven days

Before you leave: four questions

Tear this strip off or hand the whole page to a student staff member at the door; we will copy it and give it back.

1. What did you make or decide today? (one sentence)

2. Did you leave with a next step you plan to do this week? ☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

3. Will you come to the next Alpha Start? ☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

4. One thing we should change:

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