

Converging on Entrepreneurship

Students use summer incubator program to build business



Cognitive Science major Neve Foresti working on an app's user experience for the Diabetes Design Initiative at the Design Lab.

When Bolarin Lawrence first came to UC San Diego, he had planned to minor in entrepreneurship. His demanding academic workload made that impossible, but his interest in entrepreneurship never faded. Lawrence, now a third-year nanoengineering major, heard about the Converge Summer Incubator Program and realized it was a great opportunity to learn new business skills and also invest time in a venture project he'd long been interested in: supporting first-generation students in STEM careers.

Students in the Converge program such as Lawrence spend each week of the program focused on a new aspect of entrepreneurship including design thinking, creating a vision for their company, building business models, and understanding the financial and legal aspects of running a startup. Blackstone LaunchPad also hosted a series of virtual fireside chats with startup founders who shared their own entrepreneurial experiences.

“When we launched the Converge Summer Incubator Program in 2018, we realized the summer months gave students the perfect opportunity to work on developing their ideas, build business skills and learn what it means to be an entrepreneur,” said Gloria Negrete, executive director of The Basement.

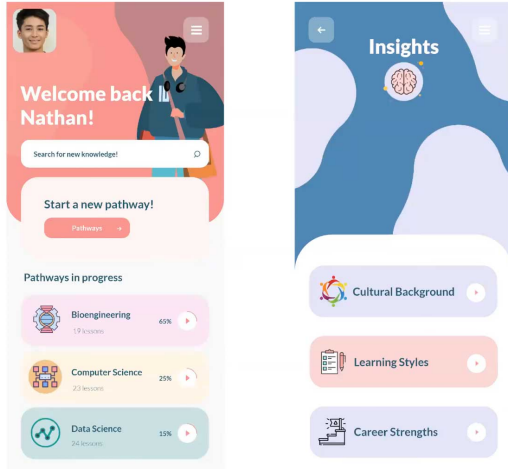
Supported by the Office of Innovation and Commercialization, The Basement is a student incubator and the home of the Blackstone LaunchPad program. Converge is also part of UC San Diego’s Summer Research Program.

Lawrence’s venture is called Project Fruition. An interactive online career technical education program for students in Grades 6–12, it is focused on helping future first-generation college students specialize in careers through STEM-centered pathways. As a first-gen STEM student himself, Lawrence knows the value of finding guidance, inspiration and a sense of belonging. Project Fruition utilizes different learning styles and key cultural and social characteristics to create a personalized experience that will guide students through their STEM studies.

Lawrence said he was surprised at how useful their session on creativity and communication proved. “It never occurred to me that theatre could help build my entrepreneurship and critical thinking skills, but through their exercises I was able to create a story for Project Fruition and connect to my audience,” he said.



Nanoengineering major Bolarin Lawrence used Converge to work on his Project Fruition app.



Project Fruition supports first-gen students in their STEM careers.

This year, classes were led by The Basement’s Director of Student Entrepreneurship Jacques Chirazi and Assistant Director of Operations Christine Liou. They often brought in guest speakers from the business world including Amazon Web Services, US Ignite, SCALE San Diego, Techstars, Intelink Law Group, and a more unlikely partner—La Jolla Playhouse.

“UC San Diego celebrates student innovation. The Converge Summer Program allows our students to develop entrepreneurial abilities that will serve them well in the future, wherever their paths lead them,” said Executive Vice Chancellor Elizabeth H. Simmons.

“UC San Diego is committed to providing critical experiential learning opportunities for students that cultivate tangible skills, complementary to those acquired through formal academic learning.”

Building a resilient San Diego

A unique aspect of this year’s Converge program is the focus on civic challenges. Working with several public and private entities around San Diego, students were presented with a series of issues affecting San Diego that can impact the region’s long-term resiliency. Challenges included finding sustainable, non-toxic alternate building materials; finding the best way to identify municipal microgrid locations; studying the impacts of COVID-19 on public transit ridership; and uncovering methods to help passengers with restricted mobility navigate the airport, made even more difficult with physical distancing requirements during the pandemic.

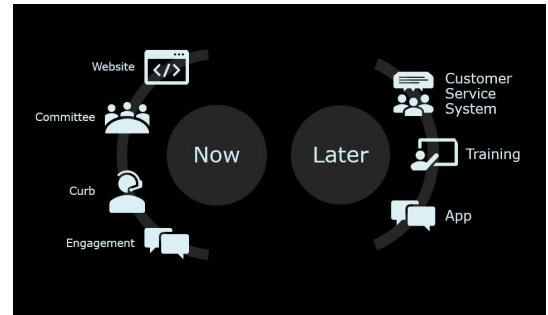
“This program helps students develop valuable entrepreneurship skills and learn what it takes to identify and solve real-world challenges in partnership with local civic organizations,” Chirazi said. “Students also had an opportunity to develop and test their own venture ideas and acquire the skills and mindset of successful entrepreneurs.”

For the civic challenges, students broke out into teams, formed venture groups and used what they learned in their Converge classes to find unique ways of tackling these issues. One venture named Flybility included Neve Foresti, a cognitive science major; Neha Sahota, human

biology; and Dennis Juanito, computer Science. Together, they took on the San Diego International Airport’s challenge of inclusivity regarding passengers with restricted mobility (PRMs).

PRMs represent one of the fastest-growing demographics in aviation and the airport wanted creative solutions to help with a perpetual challenge: how to safely and efficiently help people with varying levels of mobility get from the curb where they are dropped off to the gate where their plane is located.

Through a series of interviews, observations, surveys and research the team was able to gain an understanding of the scope of the problem and the numerous stakeholders involved—the passengers, their family, airport staff and airline staff. They found that the root cause was communication between airports, airlines and PRMs. The team provided a report to the airport that outlined a number of solutions, including improved worker trainings, an app that would allow users to request wheelchair assistance, and an Equitable Access Committee that would bring together relevant stakeholders from around the airport to discuss and improve accessibility.



Flybility provided short- and long-term solutions to help passengers with restricted mobility.



Rick Belliotti, director of Innovation and Customer Experience Design for the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority said the project was a positive experience for the airport.

“San Diego International Airport was pleased to be able to participate in the Converge Summer Incubator Program. It was an

amazing opportunity to have a fresh look at challenges facing our industry, and the students delivered some very insightful and unique ideas that we look forward to developing further,” he said.

“Research Affairs is committed to providing students with experiential learning opportunities to help them develop the skills they need to be successful in the job market and to become the leaders of tomorrow,” said Vice Chancellor for Research Sandra Brown. “We are also

committed to civic engagement and community outreach. As the name implies, Converge brings all of these things together in a unique, exciting way.”