



What I did this summer: started a company



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Blake Sims founded a summer program that teaches teens business concepts.

By Brooke Jackson-Glidden | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 10, 2016

In July, a group of entrepreneurs will introduce their vision of the future to investors. After a weeklong innovation sprint, working through a concept with the advice and mentorship of business owners across Boston, the small group will present a new app, website, or gadget in the startup incubator where they've been working.

From ^{Comments} Mozhiah Bridges, the 13-year-old founder of Mo's Bows (an Instagram favorite), to Tavi Gevinson, who became a celebrated blogger at 12, the next big thing is often coming from younger and younger minds. And a growing number of summer programs in the Boston area offer crash courses for entrepreneurial teens — from a big-name business program with international influence to weeklong sessions founded by a startup CEO herself.

“It’s very meta,” admits Blake Sims, founder of a startup summer program called epiic solutions, crafted in a Boston incubator called Impact Hub. Sims teaches her weeklong sessions herself, targeting high-school students with an interest in business. Each day starts at Boston incubators, universities, and businesses, where kids work on pitches; in the afternoon, students venture into the city for field trips, visiting experts in their chosen field.

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Sims, a former teacher and Harvard Graduate School of Education alum, came up with the idea for her program while getting her master’s degree. She further honed her skills teaching an entrepreneurial business class at St. Paul’s Advanced Studies Program in New Hampshire, which hosts its 59th summer this year. St. Paul’s allows students to focus on one field, which they study for around 100 hours. In the entrepreneurship program — the course Sims taught — students followed a model similar to epiic solutions: Find a problem, brainstorm ideas, seek out mentors, and pitch solutions to investors.

Michael Richard, the director of St. Paul’s ASP, remembers Sims fondly.

“She did a lot of field work — she got [students] into the local community and provided a hands-on element to the course, where it wasn’t simply classroom based,” Richard said by phone. “They were working with real people trying to solve their real problems, instead of working in hypotheticals.”

Still, Sims decided to build her program differently.

“A lot of programs that exist are based on university campuses, which are really fun, but I don’t think the kids really understand what it’s like in the real world and how 21st century jobs could look,” Sims says, sitting in a 17th floor office of 50 Milk St., home to Impact Hub. She says that from experience: building epic solutions sends her all over town, and it means working small side jobs to fund her dream.

Then again, the startup life is not always glamorous. Some summer programs focus on successes as opposed to the hit-or-miss startup process. The prestigious Boston Leadership Institute’s STEM Entrepreneurship program offers a three-week intensive at Simmons College, introducing students to leaders around the city, with speakers from companies like Vertex Pharmaceuticals and Staples. Students come from around the world, and go on to colleges like MIT and Harvard.

“There was a need among really, really bright kids for competitive research programs,” says Jane Bybee, PhD, a founding partner at BLI. “These kids, you should see where they’re going. With a background like this, with credentials like this, they really could be the next Bill Gates.”

At BLI, students spend most of their time working on their ideas -- building a business model, crafting a prototype, and preparing to pitch at the end-of-session showcase. Students enter the community as well, touring biotech labs and meeting with local inspirations.

“We thought we’d play to the strengths of the Boston area,” Bybee says. “If we’re getting a kid from Singapore, like we do, we wanted to provide something you couldn’t find in Chicago. We’re giving examples of Boston-based companies, using

Comments
BLI's STEM Entrepreneurship program is very engineering and computer science heavy, and the applications are rigorous for that reason: BLI candidates are expected to succeed in honors, AP or IB math and science courses, and participate in extracurricular clubs like Future Business Leaders of America. BLI has also started to introduce startup figures -- per students' requests.

The real difference, then, between BLI and epiic, is that one plays with the idea of startups, and the other lives it.

Either way, chances are the businesses you build will beat the lemonade stand down the block.

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