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Idea Center at Miami Dade College incubates entrepreneurs of all ages

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Posted by **Glissette Santana**

The Idea Center at Miami Dade College incubates entrepreneurs of all ages
from **Knight Foundation**

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Photo courtesy of Miami Dade College. *Video by Glissette Santana:* The Idea Center at Miami Dade College incubates entrepreneurs of all ages *from* Knight Foundation *on* Vimeo.

Marlise Urscheler, 23, considered herself a typical Miami Dade College student before she set foot in The Idea Center at Miami Dade College: She was working while studying for her associate's degree in graphic design, and had not thought about becoming an entrepreneur or pursuing a tech-oriented career. The Idea Center helped her realize that she was interested in coding.

At the same time, a class that taught those basic computer science skills, CS50x, was being developed by LaunchCode, a nonprofit supported by Knight Foundation that specializes in helping create opportunities for developers through job training and placement.

Urscheler joined CS50x's first cohort in South Florida, and now helps teach the class, while also doing freelance web development.

"It really gave me those skills that I needed to succeed in something that I enjoyed doing," Urscheler said.

LaunchCode's South Florida headquarters is housed within The Idea Center, an entrepreneurial hub sponsored by Knight Foundation, along with the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), which focuses on teaching kids with low-income backgrounds

how to start a business.

While NFTE hosts workshops and camps for high school and college-age students, LaunchCode is helping adults – aspiring technologists, information technology workers and developers – cultivate the skills needed in a real-world technology job market. Both organizations focus on improving the community around them by expanding access to opportunity, making The Idea Center an incubator for entrepreneurial and technology talent of all ages.

A space for entrepreneurship

Leandro Finol, founder and executive director of The Idea Center, said LaunchCode, along with NFTE and other programs housed inside The Idea Center, express the wholehearted mission of the space.

"The biggest need of our community is to have the talent for the 21st century," said Finol. "The vast majority of our students are much better off being the employee No. 3 or 4 for a startup that is already funded and has the experience or a person with more capital and resources to build a business and be part of the startup ecosystem. I think the community needs it more and our students need it more."

Created with the support of more than $2 million in Knight funding, The Idea Center is helping combine education and entrepreneurship to prepare students for a changing marketplace, something Finol said is vitally important.

"Traditional academic institutions prepare you for your fourth job," Finol said. "The vast majority of students need the skills for that first job, so instead of teaching strategic marketing, we can teach a certification on Google Analytics … so when a startup is looking for someone with that specific skillset, our students can say, 'I know that, and I can prove that I know that because I have a certification from Google.'"

In recent years, Miami has consistently ranked among the top markets for entrepreneurial activity, according to the Kauffman Index of Startup Activity. The Idea Center's efforts are an essential component of that network, said Matt Haggman, Knight Foundation's Miami program director.

"The Idea Center sits at the core of our efforts to create a vibrant, interconnected, innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem in Miami," Haggman said. "No institution connects to our community like Miami Dade College does ... The whole idea of placing The Idea Center inside of Miami Dade College is built on this idea that creates a way in which they are a unique network with students from across South Florida."

A pipeline for young talent

Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship opened its South Florida office after receiving Knight funding in 2007. Knight's ongoing support has helped the organization successfully train hundreds of students, said Stephanie Alvarado, NFTE's development manager.

"NFTE's ability to grow as it has in the last 10 years is because Knight directly supports us and our ability to improve internally," she said.

NFTE has expanded into Broward County and hopes to reach even more students, Being part of the offerings at The Idea Center helps its reach within South Florida's network of entrepreneurs, said Jeannine Schloss, NFTE's South Florida programs manager.

"Recruiting for volunteers back in the early days of NFTE was difficult, but by creating the ecosystem that Knight has, we have a much larger rolodex, Schloss said. "The connections and collisions are being created because of that vision."

LaunchCode, which opened in 2015 at The Idea Center, is a natural part of the ecosystem, said Matt Mawhinney, LaunchCode's South Florida community manager.

"They're experienced educators at Miami Dade College," Mawhinney said. "We're focused on getting people into jobs in technology that have been educated in both the traditional and non-traditional ways."

As part of the collaboration with The Idea Center, LaunchCode and Miami Dade College started offering CS50x, Harvard's well-regarded Introduction to Computer Science course.

"[LaunchCode] tried this experiment, and it worked out," Mawhinney said. "When we came down here and had initial conversations with Knight Foundation and with Idea Center ... Jim talked with Leandro and said 'Hey, we have this CS50 class.' And Leandro said, 'That's amazing, we need to partner and make that happen.'"

A chance to thrive

The different offerings at The Idea Center are helping to produce results that are being felt in the community. Felix Puello, 20, became part of the network while participating in The Idea Center's first Startup Challenge, a competition that helps entrepreneurs turn ideas into prototypes that could receive funding.

Puello had no experience with engineering before he started in the challenge but ended up winning with his business, OneTown Longboards, which adds technology to the classic longboard by inserting LED lights to make them easier to ride at night.

"With the reward of $5,000, I was able to kick-start my company," Puello said. "And now, I'm pitching for CREATE, another program here at The Idea Center, which shows that I've ... improved a lot within a year. I actually have several prototypes that I've developed and I'm currently in the middle of a crowdfunding campaign, so The Idea Center has definitely helped out a lot."

Puello said the opportunities that he's had through The Idea Center have improved his life.

"I'm a product of The Idea Center," Puello said. "I'm really happy that I had the chance to do this."

Glissette Santana was a summer 2016 editorial intern at Knight Foundation. Follow here on Twitter via @glissettetweets.

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