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At the Idea Center, innovation is everywhere, even on skateboards

◁   1 of 7   ▷   ⓘ

BY NANCY DAHLBERG
ndahlberg@miamiherald.com

Felix Puello wanted to build a better skateboard.

When Miami Dade College's Idea Center opened, the student signed up for the Startup Challenge, a competition designed to help student entrepreneurs at the earliest stages. A passionate skateboarder who custom-painted longboards in high school to make some extra money, Puello wanted to bring on technology to improve the experience and safety for the skateboarder. His first idea was mounting GoPro-like cameras on the boards, front and back. He won the challenge, and $5,000 to continue his project.

That led Puello, who is studying business at MDC, to enroll in CREATE, a three-month accelerator-like program at the Idea Center that teaches student entrepreneurs about finances, marketing, business strategy and how to use the resources they have to develop businesses. One speaker talked about crowdfunding, which led Puello to apply for Idea.me's recent South Florida crowdfunding initiative with the Knight Foundation. Puello was accepted, and through his campaign on Idea.me and Knight's matching grant, he raised $10,000.

At the end of the CREATE program, there was a competition, and Puello again won. In addition to a consultation with a branding agency, "I received a scholarship for the class I am in right now called Make1, which is where I am prototyping the longboards I am making."

In the Idea Center's Make1, Puello is learning about engineering and design tools, and has access to Moonlighter, a makerspace in Wynwood with 3D printers, laser cutters and other equipment. He's beginning to put his winnings and crowdfunding gains to work developing his product and his company, Ontown Boards, and along his journey, he has learned that cameras aren't the way to go because of stability issues. He now plans to tech-out the boards with sensors to track the rider's speed, altitude, tilt and direction. Powerful LED lights in the front and rear improve safety, something no other non-motorized longboard has built in, he said.

"That's something I thought about from experience, skateboarding home at night from school. Seventy percent of all skateboard-related deaths occur at night," he said.

From the first pitch in the Startup Challenge, "we've come a long way with Onetown Boards," Puello said. He no longer hand-paints boards, focusing instead on the quality of the decks, because so many lives depend on that. He said he dropped a pickup truck on one of his boards, and the board bent all the way down but then popped back up. The money he raised will help fund an app to allow the rider to see their metrics on a smartphone

and get small-scale manufacturing started.

> 66

WE DECIDED TO BUILD THE INNOVATION VALUE CHAIN — SKILL PROGRAMS ANY STARTUP NEEDS TO BUILD A STARTUP OF SUBSTANCE.

Leandro Finol, executive director of The Idea Center

Puello's entrepreneurial path, from developing his initial idea to learning about what goes into starting and running a business to now building a prototype, is what Executive Director Leandro Finol envisioned for the Idea Center, located on the Wolfson campus and serving the 165,000 Miami Dade College students with programs, often free, for all levels and stages of entrepreneurship, including design thinking, idea validation, building an idea, coding and prototyping, fundraising and marketing.

The 2-year-old Idea Center (ideacenter.co), Miami Dade College's hub for entrepreneurship, launched most of its programs this year and some of them this fall, including Make1, Design for Miami (design thinking), MarketHack (digital marketing), WebDev (website development), Google Analytics Academy, Insight (big data) and Puente, an entrepreneurship program for bridging Miami and Cuba. Most are open to the community.

[**Read more:** Miami Dade College's Idea Center brings on funding, partnerships]

"A key pillar of where we started was around 'How do we help student entrepreneurs with their ventures?' What we realized is that not only the students but the the whole ecosystem needs these programs to build these ventures," Finol said. "We decided to build the innovation value chain — skill programs any startup needs to build a startup of substance."

The Idea Center typically brings in experts from leading universities and companies, and "everything we do takes on the experiential learning approach," Finol said. For instance, Stanford University's D-School helped design the Design for Miami program, because design thinking should kick off any entrepreneurial journey. Customer discovery, value proposition and lean startup methodology are the next steps and there are programs for that, such as CREATE and Puente, and MIT experts have been involved in all of that, said Finol, who recently returned from Cuba where he taught Lean Startup techniques and plans to host Cuban entrepreneurs at the Idea Center.

Where's the talent going to come from? The Idea Center, in conjunction with LaunchCode, a nonprofit that matches tech talent with employers, runs a CS50x coding course, based on Harvard University's popular but demanding online course, but with in-person mentoring. For the upcoming class of 100, the Idea Center received 800 applications, Finol said.For people who don't need that level of tech skill but want to understand the fundamentals, the Idea Center created WebDev, with funding from the Beacon Council.

Travis Kalanick of Uber and "Shark Tank" star Daymond John were among the celebrity entrepreneurs who gave talks as part of a free speaker series, and the Idea Center launched two conferences this year — Startup Nation, bringing Israel and Miami in partnership with Tel Aviv University, and Innovation M, a program with NBCUniversal about millennial impact. Both will be brought back in 2017, Finol said. Expanding Idea Center programs to other MDC campuses is in the plans.

Nancy Dahlberg: 305-376-3595, @ndahlberg

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