

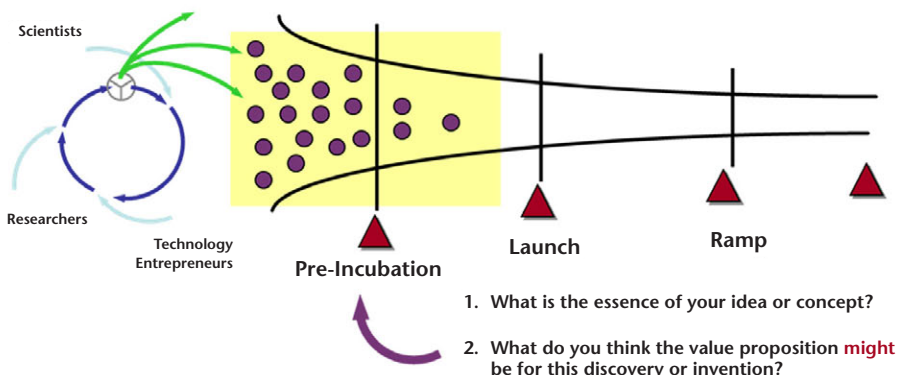


# Five Key Strategies for Pre-incubation: Priming the Innovation Funnel

Most seasoned incubator advisors have developed a sixth sense about which new businesses will thrive and the unfortunate ones that will crash and burn before the first product shipment. Usually this sageness comes after years of painful experience and trial and error or, as we like to call it now, discovery learning. Finding ways to systematically spot winning – and losing – ideas at the very early stages can dramatically increase an incubator’s success rate for backing viable businesses. At the same time, helping inventors learn repeatable commercialization skills can pay huge dividends down the road in fostering the development of a robust community of “commercial-ready” founders.

It’s not surprising, then, that many incubators are adding “pre-incubation” programs to their portfolio of services to ensure that new ventures entering the incubation process are actually ready to be developed. David Terry, director and co-founder of the Enterprise Center at West Texas A&M University recently developed a pre-incubation service to fill this gap based on the So what? who cares? why you?® methodology. “Entrepreneurs don’t know what they don’t know,” says David. “Someone with an idea who’s in love with their technology has to really get outside of that and work on the value proposition to communicate what that idea means as a business to customers who would pay for it.”

## Pre-incubation: Discovering commercial value



## So what? who cares? why you?®

So what? who cares? why you?®... is a process to help you contemplate and evaluate your ideas and start-up company concepts. It will help you abandon many ideas and concepts by identifying facts, myths, and critical assumptions, yet will provide validation for the one idea you decide to pursue.”

– excerpt from Dan Leri’s introduction to the Cool Blue Lab Journal, Innovation Park, Penn State University



Pre-incubation programs can generate a number of important outcomes for the incubator, the inventors and the economic community as whole. With an effective program, you can:

- Create a sustainable incubation model by increasing the number of successful ventures in your incubators and offering the right level of support at each stage
- Help your founders accelerate their path to market by discovering the commercial value of their ideas and effectively positioning them to investors and customers
- Inject mental models for commercial thinking into the DNA of your community of inventors

### Pre-incubation Checklist

Getting started with a new pre-incubation program requires planning, expertise and the right tools to support early-stage inventors and entrepreneurs. Here are some tips for getting your pre-incubation program off the ground.

**1 Use common frameworks and tools** that engage founders in the development of their own ideas. Visual frameworks are effective because they are easy to use for even new inventors with little or no business experience. You can harness the passion and knowledge that only the inventors have about the concept and keep them at the center of the idea development without overwhelming the process with too much business planning at the early stages. And, as inventors develop their ideas, visual tools enable them to create a mental model of the commercialization process that will stay with them beyond the first venture.

Tip to try: Choose a room for your founder sessions and mount your key tools on dry erase boards on the walls. It helps to make them real and approachable for your inventors.

**2 Get your founders** into the market early and often, using an iterative approach that allows the idea to take shape as new information is gathered. Work through one area at a time in a systematic manner – business problem, market segment, category map – and encourage your founders to test their idea at each stage with prospective customers, colleagues and peers to get comfortable with adjusting their concept in a fluid manner.

Tip to try: Use worksheets that help your founders stay focused and offer suggestions for questioning and gathering feedback. Review the worksheets at each meeting.



## So what? who cares? why you?®

“The power of So what? who cares? why you? is in the visual nature of the tools – it’s a lot easier to put your idea up on a map than to go write a business plan before the concept is even fleshed out.”

– David Terry,  
Enterprise Center,  
West Texas A&M University





**3 Foster peer collaboration** by enabling early-stage entrepreneurs to share their experiences and ideas with like-minded innovators. Being an innovator can often be isolating, and there's nothing like the energy that founders can get from one another to question, probe and develop their concepts in a comfortable environment. Formal Commercialization Clinics work well to gather small groups of founders for regular sessions with measurable outcomes, such as completed worksheets and presentations.

Tip to try: Initiate formal sessions with a regular schedule and invite one of your savvy founders to sit in and get the conversation moving.

**4 Involve your community:** Develop a common framework and language to use with your advisory team and the wider community that will support the venture once it moves to the incubation stage. Build awareness with local business communities, campus faculty and technology transfer offices about your programs, vocabulary and processes to ensure a successful transition for your inventors.

Tip to try: Host lunch and learn seminars to inform and engage your stakeholders about your pre-incubation process, tools and programs.

**5 Provide expert coaching** to guide your inventors through the often tough early stages of idea development. Coaches can help their inventors stay motivated and work independently to determine the commercial value and positioning for their ideas. Working in group or individual sessions, coaches can offer their expertise in using any selected frameworks and toolsets, suggest additional work to fill in any gaps, pinpoint problem areas and facilitate brainstorming.

Tip to try: Whether you're doing group meetings, formal commercialization clinics, or 1:1 coaching, ask your inventors to come to each session with completed work to drive the session. Incorporate a formal output, such as a presentation, to keep it action-oriented and outcome-driven.



## So what? who cares? why you?®

“So what? who cares? why you? gives founders an edge by keeping them at the center of the commercialization process. And that's a huge advantage when it comes time to engage the business community in the idea – there's nothing stronger than the knowledge and passion that founders bring to their own innovations.”

– Divyesh Patel,  
*SpringBoard West Innovations*