Cracking the Code of Success: The Coding Academy

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At 1647 S. Blue Island Ave., in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, sits a squat, nondescript building that looks every bit as drab as the state unemployment office it used to house. Looks, of course, can be deceiving, and one step inside reveals a bustling hub of opportunity, collaboration and just plain fun known as BLUE1647.

BLUE1647 is a nonprofit technology and entrepreneurship innovation center—a type of tech incubator but with a difference. The seven-day-a-week coworking space welcomes engineers and developers, but also provides technology education to young people and college students through strategic partnerships with DePaul, Chicago Public Schools and other organizations. At BLUE1647, a unique technology- and skills-transfer ecosystem is fostered through professional development workshops, cohort-based classes and technology-themed events designed to create a strong and vibrant workforce equipped with 21st-century skills.

BLUE, as it is affectionately known by its members, is the brainchild of CEO Emile Cambry and Chief Operating Officer Antonio Rowry (BUS ’08). The pair met on social media in 2008 through their mutual interest in technology and business. Rowry says, “We eventually met in person, and Emile said, ‘I have this idea for a bootcamp for youth I want to run by you. How would you go about recruiting students?’ I gave him a few of my ideas, and he said to go ahead and do it.’ From this first meeting, the organization that would eventually evolve into BLUE1647 was born.

Partnership with DePaul

Driehaus College of Business Professor Patrick J. Murphy remembers Rowry as “a student who had amazing vision but also knew how to execute,” and the two stayed in touch after Rowry graduated. Rowry introduced Professor Murphy to Cambry early in BLUE’s evolution to devise a way to connect Murphy’s MBA social enterprise and undergraduate entrepreneurship students with the nonprofit in an experiential learning project. The result: BLUE’s Coding Academy, a tuition-based program offered on a full-scholarship basis to DePaul student cohorts.

Murphy says, “I noticed a trend among our students—a growing interest in programming, being able to talk meaningfully with developers and think intelligently about how to build apps or websites for their businesses. We had an opportunity with BLUE to offer such training to DePaul students, but with a strong entrepreneurship theme.”

During the 2014-15 academic year, Professor Murphy assembled three teams of students to research, develop and launch a business plan for the Coding Academy. In the fall quarter, an initial team of undergraduate entrepreneurship students visited BLUE and researched similar university-based incubators in other parts of the country. There was nothing comparable to what they envisioned. Marching into unexplored territory allowed this team a great deal of creative leeway in drafting criteria for selecting students and outlining instructional needs. In the winter quarter, a second undergraduate entrepreneurship team formulated a strategy to encourage students to apply for the academy and took charge of the application and selection process. When the program was announced, more than 70 students applied for 15 spots.

In the spring quarter, a third team of MBA students, led by Moed
Khan (BUS ’07, MBA ’15), was charged with implementing the plan devised by the previous two teams. “We reached out to the cohort students as their point of contact and met with them to give them a thorough understanding of expectations,” Khan says. Khan and his team explained what BLUE was and gave them more details about some of the different projects there. “The bottom line,” Khan continues, “was that we wanted to ensure that the vision Emile and Antonio have to drive communities to success with socially driven, impactful ventures could be accomplished.”

How it works
Randy Vollrath (CSH ’15), who studied economics and psychology, was a member of the first cohort at the Coding Academy. “I’ve always wanted to have the biggest, most positive effect possible on the world. Early on in college, I identified entrepreneurship as a great facilitator of positive change and technology as an area of high growth and potential for value creation. I quickly got involved with tech meet-ups in the city and worked in various business roles at tech companies. As I went through college, I came up with a number of ideas for tech business products, but without a technical background, my ability to build them was limited.”

Vollrath attended the three-hour classes every week for about 10 weeks. “We would go down there and jump right into work,” he says. “We had a main instructor, Gabriela Voicu, and three teaching assistants (TAs) to assist us. Gabi would start with a lesson, such as teaching us version control with Git. Then she would give us a project, and we would be off to the races programming.

“It was completely independent,” Vollrath continues, “though I worked pretty closely with one of the TAs. There were homework assignments in the beginning, and she had us complete several tutorials. We had an option to go to BLUE1647 any time to work on projects.”

Voicu, a software developer at NextTier Education and lead instructor for BLUE’s HTML5/CSS/JavaScript for Mobile Development class, studied programming in high school for four years but then took a seven-year break. When she decided to explore the field again, she found BLUE. She says, “I took the mobile app development class and thought, ‘Oh, I kind of like this again.’ I love it so much here that as soon as I graduated from an outside web development bootcamp, I was back here volunteering to teach teenagers games on Saturdays.”

Of the Coding Academy class she taught, Voicu says, “Looking back, I think it was great that we had a curriculum. I was able to say, ‘This is what we’re going to do, but we’re going to do it at your pace.’ Learning to code happens at different speeds for different people, especially beginners, and is dependent on many things outside of the classroom. That can discourage people early on. So, if someone is having a hard week outside of class, I suggest they stick with something a little easier, but to keep going.”

Why BLUE1647
Rowry believes BLUE offers something for just about anyone. “We’re able to relate to people in a way that is authentic as an intentional space of diversity where people feel safe and comfortable,” he says. “Our curriculum is highly collaborative. Anyone working in business more than likely will be working with someone else and more than likely it will be tech-based. We don’t necessarily just focus on coding, but also add in platforms they’re likely to use when working with engineers and web developers. Students will be more employable with the skills we provide them. We also make sure our classes are project-based, so they have something they can make and show for anything from college applications to employment applications.”

Vollrath says, “I think there’s a lot of value to business students in gaining an intimate understanding of technology products. I’m interested in running a technology business, and the academy offered me a hands-on way to learn how to build a product.” Vollrath is already on his way to reaching his goal. He recently started work as associate product manager overseeing a team of developers at InnerWorkings, a Chicago-based tech company. “I’m applying what I learned at BLUE1647,” he says.

Khan says, “There is a lot of value, like free coding for these students through their school, which would cost about $3,000 per student otherwise. Another value is the community at BLUE, which has many entrepreneurs who have great ideas. The students network and build relationships with these entrepreneurs. At the same time, some of the BLUE members might not have the skills that our students have, so it’s a two-way street. On top of that, a lot of DePaul students are socially driven, and BLUE offers this avenue they might not have had before.”

Khan emphasizes the value of the partnership to him personally. “It offered me project management skills I needed. I still keep in touch with people at BLUE, who are a great resource for a reference or assistance. I have an entrepreneurial background and have some socially driven ventures that I want to pursue. When I need website development, I know I’ll have that resource there. DePaul has this channel of success that other schools don’t have at this point.”

Gabriela Voicu answers questions from the DePaul business students who take her coding class at BLUE1647.