AI PROJECT COMMERCIALIZATION

UTEP APPLIED AI INNOVATION INSTITUTE

UTEP MIKE LOYA CENTER FOR INNOVATION AND COMMERCE

A Strategic Pipeline for Cultivating Student-Driven AI Ventures at UTEP

Fernando Sepulveda
The University of Texas at El Paso

Introduction and Background

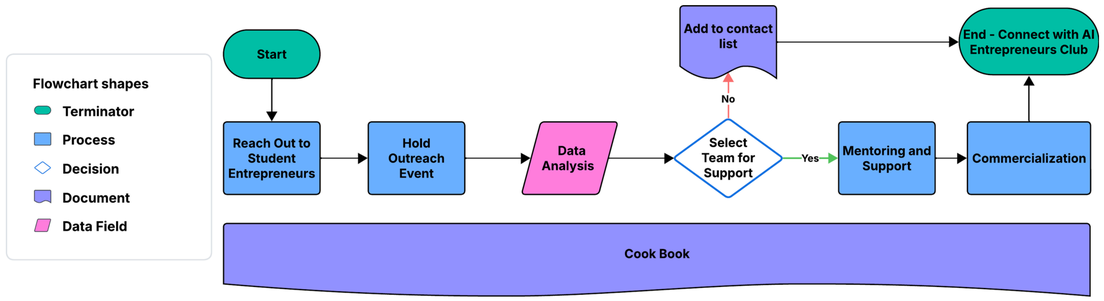
The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence across various industries presents unique technical and economic opportunities. The El Paso Region is currently undergoing investment momentum over 175B. At UTEP, students consistently generate novel AI concepts during campus hackathons. However, teams frequently encounter a "valley of death" between a weekend project and a scalable startup, lacking the specialized resources required for rigorous technical validation and professional market analysis. To prevent these high-potential ventures from stalling, the Institute for Applied AI (AAII) and the Mike Loya Center for Innovation and Commerce (MLCIC) partnered to build a targeted commercialization pipeline. This initiative provides the critical mentorship and infrastructure needed to guide early-stage student ideas toward functional prototypes, venture capital readiness, and national competitions.

Objectives

Hypothesis

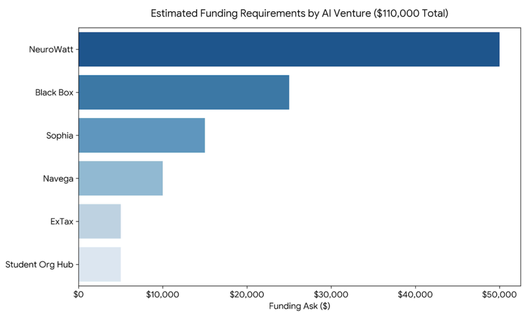
Implementing a systematized, multi-phase support model—combining structured technical intake, targeted 1-on-1 mentorship, and rigorous competitive analysis—will significantly accelerate the transition of student-driven AI concepts into functional prototypes, thereby increasing their survivability and readiness for external venture capital investment.

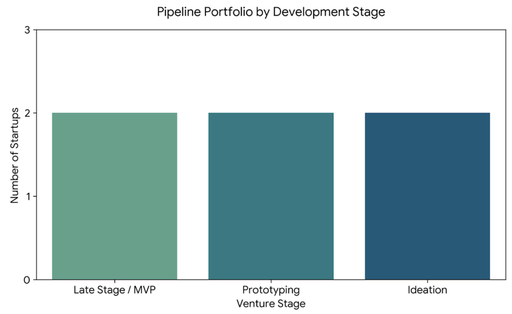
Methodology



- **Phase 1: Funnel & Intake:** Initial project leads were sourced from hackathon submissions and categorized into "High Potential" commercialization tracks or "Community Focus" learning tracks. Candidates were evaluated through structured intake meetings assessing their core vision, technical AI feasibility, and market awareness.
- **Phase 2: Validation & Mentorship:** Selected teams receive targeted 1-on-1 mentorship to address technical hurdles and build concept demonstration prototypes. A core requirement of this phase is developing a rigorous competitive analysis to establish a clear "Competitive Moat" against existing market leaders.
- **Phase 3: Ecosystem & Launch:** Launching the AI Entrepreneurs Club, will serve as a peer-led community for reverse pitches and resource sharing. Concurrently, high-potential teams are mapped to major state and national funding opportunities, while the entire pipeline process is documented into a strategic "Cookbook" for future fellowships.

Results & Analysis





- **Portfolio Progression:** The pipeline successfully identified 6 major startup candidates. Crucially, the top 3 ventures were selected to continue throughout the Mentorship Process.
- **Market Viability:** In the Spring 2026 Semester, of the ventures identified, an average funding need of approximately $18,300 per venture is needed to reach commercial deployment.
- **Mentorship:** The selected teams will continue with technical guidance and prototype advancement.

Discussion

The initial semester of research has verified the initial need for this project. Many students are creating AI based Ideas but have not formal mentorship or a wealth of resources to help them take their venture to the next level. Additionally we have also noticed a smaller presence of Entrepreneurship in the University when compared to other movements at UTEP. This first step in recognizing the active AI-founders was successful as we have currently selected a top cohort of students to mentor and aid in the commercialization of their ideas. The initiaive for an AI Entrepreneurs Club for Fall 2025, development of the CookBook, and the Mentorship Process is still to be tested.

Conclusion

The joint AAII and MLCIC commercialization pipeline establishes a sustainable, long-term ecosystem for student-driven AI concepts. Moving forward, this pipeline will offer continuous mentorship, networking, prototype validation, and access to funding while the students continue to develop their ideas into viable businesses. Ultimately, the insights, frameworks, and milestones gathered from this initial cohort will be compiled to create the eventual "Cookbook," standardizing this support model for future student entrepreneurs at UTEP.

References & Acknowledgements

- Meta Data Centers. (2026, March 26). Big things are happening, El Paso! Meta. Retrieved from https://datacenters.atmeta.com
- Project Jupiter. (2026). Project Jupiter: A proposed data center campus in Doña Ana County. Retrieved from https://projectjupitertogether.com
- Rice Alliance for Technology and Entrepreneurship. (2026). Compete: Rice Business Plan Competition. Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice University. Retrieved from https://rbpc.rice.edu/compete