

Idea #2: Fund ecosystem builders: Difference-makers largely unfunded by CARES

We preach a good game about supporting entrepreneurial development from the grassroots – listening to the entrepreneurs and small business owners. There are more than a few passionate professionals working to build healthy entrepreneurial communities. Kauffman dubbed them “ecosystem builders”.

Idaho has a few great ones: Diane Bevan is the perfect example. [[This](#) is a great writeup of the essence and the power of ecosystem building.]

Instead, stimulus funds went to institutions and power players who don’t get it. They do not know how to grow entrepreneur-led startup communities. Worse, ecosystem builders get shorted even more in tough times. **If there is one key necessity for productive ecosystem building – to amplify the voice of the entrepreneur, not speak for them – it is “get the right people on the bus, get the wrong people off the bus”.** Instead of handing the keys to the bus to the wrong people, why not give ecosystem builders a shot?

What if we had strong ecosystems organized when COVID-18 hit? Senator, I get tears in my eyes just thinking about how my ecosystem builder colleagues stepped up when so many of the supposedly-premier entrepreneurial support organizations underwhelmed. Dell Gines, a great ecosystem builder somehow working for the Fed, said it better than I [[link](#)]

What if the next CARES gave America’s best ecosystem builders funding like SBDCs got? What might that look like?

From Kauffman-launched ESHIP, there are at least 1000 good ecosystem builders and key allies already a known, battle-tested population from every corner of the US and every imaginable demographic. The KC Fed has another 500 of entrepreneur-focused economic developers¹. Each of them also knows who are the true bottom-up, entrepreneur-led ecosystem builders in their communities. Why not focus the bulk of any funding for them and through them? Allow ecosystem builders to have a seed fund for others in their area. Thus...

I. RFP for ecosystem building projects

Pilot grants for immediate impact, successful projects get additional funding

Ask ESHIP members² to recommend local projects in their own communities

Favor projects with some existing traction

¹ Want shovel-ready projects? The 2019 Kauffman Inclusion Grant had ~700 projects go unfunded

² Of course, many of these leaders are likely to have great ideas – so we need to avoid conflicts of interest

Support short-term experiments (MVPs) for local impact – learn fast and iterate. Make sure the right people are on the bus, not the wrong people³. This is a good way to model that!

That could be done in less than a month – start getting the money spent in communities NOW.

II. Support Existing ESHIP Projects and Priorities

ESHIP has 7 Goals akin to the UN's SDGs with multiple initiatives for each. For many of these, there are already projects proposed (some with traction). www.bit.ly/ESHIPgoals; www.bit.ly/ESHIPprojects. Funds could be allocated to ESHIP projects –none are particularly expensive. This would be a great opportunity to also engage ESHIP's existing allies (a/k/a "National Resource Providers"⁴). **Also very shovel-ready.**

III. Governance Mechanisms

Revive Commerce's National Advisory Council for Innovation & Entrepreneurship [NACIE] and stock it with a nationally-diverse roster of ecosystem builders and key allies⁵, reporting directly to the President (and/or OSTP). I would also urge a national, if not global advisory board of entrepreneurship experts to add gravitas (and expertise/experience.) **Easy/fast to do.**

IV. Infrastructure to Support Ecosystem Builders Nationally

We can also support ecosystem builders by providing tools to continue/enhance their efforts.

- a) **Make ecosystem builders the keepers/maven of ecosystem information:** Develop and provide communities with an entrepreneurship/small business **dashboard** that allows local ecosystem builders to be their community's hub for information. Share current & historical **metrics** about their community [ESHIP Goal 5 = expert on that]. The dashboard can also share great local **stories**. This could be combined with a comprehensive **calendar** of events [think Techstars' Startup Digest] and **news** [think Montana's MATR.NET] (This would be a great job for Idaho's own EMSI!) Finally, the dashboard could be home to regular surveys that take the pulse of local entrepreneurs & small business owners (and could be aggregated regionally & nationally). **Could get started ASAP.**
- b) A **national regular survey** both of ecosystem builders and for them. This could be akin to existing large-scale surveys like NFIB's, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, etc. Via our friends at ICSB.org we have access to the experts who build all of the major surveys in entrepreneurship realm like GEM. They would happily engage on this. [These are reflected in existing ESHIP projects for Goal 5 and in Goal 7.] **Shovel-ready!**

³ We will need to have language that limits funding to actual bottom-up ecosystem builders (e.g., exclude any state-level or federal entity [or prior CARES or Kauffman funding?])

⁴ We already have brilliant partners like Techstars, Sourcelink, SSTI.org, and Global Entrepreneurship Week and prospective one like EMSI & Tableau. Everyone of these is already a Friend of Idaho!

⁵ For example, the great Tom Sullivan at US Chamber (yet another friend of Idaho)

- c) **Training and support for stakeholder management.** Most ecosystem builders need significant help in mapping their own competitive arena, identifying and assessing all their local stakeholders (e.g., how to develop a great value proposition for even hostile rivals in the ecosystem!) **Shovel-ready.**
- d) **Travel support and other professional development.** Travel would be a small budget item but being able to **share lessons learned** is vital and once COVID permits, it's a small item but invaluable to underfunded ecosystem builders. Similarly, we should budget for **training options** as needed. For example, train ecosystem builders to coach local entrepreneurs on **grants and on government contracting.**)
- e) Drawing on academics, ESHIP, et al., create a **cutting-edge webinar/MOOC** to train ecosystem builders. Potentially use to create a formal certification. Eventually, a college course! **Shovel-ready.**

V. Policy Initiatives to Support Entrepreneurship & Small Business

Have you looked at the large www.StartUsNow.org coalition's "America's New Business Plan", a comprehensive set of policy and legislative ideas for the federal, state, and local levels? Evidence-based and bipartisan. Victor Hwang, formerly of Kauffman, is leading that charge. I would urge funding Victor and this coalition – given an election year, this is imperative.

VI. Support In-Depth Rigorous Research

Academic research relating to entrepreneurship and innovation has been dominated by top-down, institution-led research approaches but the tide is turning, especially among younger scholars. A small investment here to **generate and acquire data** (see item IVb!) Provide free/inexpensive **access to data bases** such as EMSI's. Travel expenses once COVID relents. Create a **small fund to support research projects** as requested by ecosystem builders. For example, a "what works clearinghouse" to support assessments of whether a purported best practice really is & testing metrics (see Goal 5.2 project). **Shovel-ready.**

VII. Entrepreneurship and Innovation Education

One area that is sadly neglected in ecosystem development is entrepreneurial learning. What if the **best 10-15 entrepreneur educators in the world convened to develop best-in-class K-12 entrepreneurship programming?** That is already underway. Ask them to create **MOOCs to enhance the skills** of other educators? Develop a **critical assessment tool** to quantify impact (Also underway, see <http://epic.ecorys.com>). **Why not have the Senator convene a national/global summit on K-12 entrepreneurship education?** Shovel-ready, existing traction!