



Photo: Mary Ellen Sinkus

Nicola Corzine, executive director of the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center in San Francisco, spoke with StartMIT participants during their intensive two-day trip.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ACTION — ON TWO COASTS

StartMIT participants see innovation up close during whirlwind tour of Bay Area business ecosystem.

By Anne Stuart | EECS

For some students and postdocs, the StartMIT experience extended well beyond Cambridge and Boston — about 3,000 miles beyond.

In late March, 25 StartMIT participants traveled to California for an intensive two-day entrepreneurship program in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. They visited established high-tech companies, startups, and venture-capital firms, including some founded or led by MIT alumni, as well as a three-year-old nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting both current and future entrepreneurs. They even stopped by the historic HP Garage, the one-car structure in Palo Alto where William Hewlett and David Packard launched their famous company.

Several students said the expenses-paid trip provided an important complement to the StartMIT workshop held during MIT's Independent Activities Period (IAP) in January. "The IAP class gave me a chance to start looking at possible startup paths. The trip was a good incentive to continue," said Oscar Moll, a PhD student in EECS. "Understanding the Bay Area ecosystem is important for anyone considering startups as a career path."

Participants appreciated the chance to interact directly with executives and entrepreneurs, especially those with MIT connections. One such opportunity came during a reception hosted by MIT alumnus Michael Cassidy (SB '85, SM '86,

aerospace engineering), a serial entrepreneur, Google vice president, and project leader on GoogleX Project Loon ("balloon-powered Internet for everyone"). More than 200 people attended the event and heard StartMIT participants present their ideas. "One important takeaway for me was how willing alumni are to listen to pitches and offer feedback," Moll said.

For junior Ihssan Tiwani, a group session with Dropbox co-founder Drew Houston '05 was a trip highlight. "It was so casual that it felt like we were getting candid advice from an upperclassman at MIT who really cared about our success and understood the experiences we were going through as MIT students," said Tiwani, who is double-majoring in computer science and engineering (6-3) and economics.

Tiwani also found value in reconnecting with IAP classmates during the trip. "It was nice to get updates on the latest things they are working on and the problems they are facing in launching their new ventures," he said. "I think it also solidified our friendship, making us feel like we are part of a community of entrepreneurs at MIT."

In San Francisco, in addition to Dropbox, the group visited Cisco Meraki, CodeFights, Lemnos Labs, the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center, and Thunkable. In Silicon Valley, participants visited Andreessen Horowitz, Apple, GoDaddy, and Lightspeed Venture Partners. Accompanying the group were StartMIT lead organizer Anantha Chandrakasan, EECS department head and

Vannevar Bush Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; EECS Administrative Officer Mary Ellen Sinkus; and EECS Program Coordinator Myung-Hee Vabulas. Also on the trip was Jinane Abounadi, executive director of MIT's Sandbox Innovation Fund Program, which provides seed funding, mentoring, and other support for student-initiated ventures.

Melody Cao, a graduate student in EECS, said she would highly recommend the trip to future StartMIT participants, adding: "You will get a ton of first-hand insight from stepping out of the academic bubble" and into the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Tiwani agreed. "It's a free trip to the Bay Area in which you meet some of the most accomplished and smartest MIT alums," he said. "How could anyone possibly say 'no' to that?"

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—Oscar Moll, PhD Candidate, EECS



The StartMIT group also visited Cisco Meraki, a cloud networking company, along with several other major technology companies in San Francisco and Silicon Valley.