



Partnering innovative students with medical start-up companies

Kylie Landa '22 wasn't sure about the path she wanted to take after college.

Her academic interests cross the spectrum: she is majoring in mathematics, race and ethnic studies, and Spanish and has thought about going to medical school.

When she came across Innovation Partners — an interdisciplinary program that groups students together to work with medical start-ups in Minnesota — she thought it would be a great fit based on her interests.

“Innovation Partners was really exciting to me because it had a really cool combination of health sciences, but also the business side of medical technology as well,” Landa says. “That was something that I just really hadn't been exposed to, so I was really interested in learning more about it.”

The program is based on the successful Mayo Innovation Scholars Program, which was started in 2006 by St. Olaf alumnus John Meslow '60. The program brings students of different majors and academic interests together to work on a team project for the Mayo Clinic.

When the pandemic started, the Mayo Clinic put the program on hold. Meslow, a former Medtronic executive, saw an opportunity to partner with start-ups in Minnesota's medical field. Instead of working with the Mayo Clinic, students would work with these start-ups on projects centered at the intersection of science, business, medicine, and entrepreneurship.



Kylie Landa '22 says when she starts the job she's landed as a consultant at McKinsey & Company this spring, her time with Innovation Partners will play a key role in how she approaches her work.



John Meslow '60 worked with the Piper Center for Vocation and Career to expand St. Olaf's suite of innovation Interim and summer programs to include the new Innovation Partners internship cohort.

The Piper Center for Vocation and Career oversees the program at St. Olaf. Piper Center Director Kirsten Cahoon '98 said the idea to start a program working with non-traditional, dynamic healthcare companies was “the answer” during the pandemic.

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It was initially piloted during the 2021 Interim and continued with a cohort of students over the summer. And while it was created in the throes of the pandemic, it won't be ending anytime soon.

After the successful pilot, the Innovation Partners program officially launched in October 2021, and final presentations will wrap up in early March 2022. St. Olaf is one of 12 private institutions in Minnesota to participate in both Mayo Innovation Scholars and Innovation Partners.

“It's just a real win-win-win,” Meslow says. “The student wins, the colleges win, and companies win.”

Each Innovation Partners team is composed of four liberal arts undergraduates — with at least one economics major and one STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) major — from the same school plus one MBA graduate student. By having each team include people with different majors and academic interests, everyone provides a different perspective.

Nursing majors can use their clinical experiences to help explain what it might look like to use a product. Science majors can use their lab experiences to explain the testing results. Business majors may use their skills to do a deep dive into the marketplace. Those different perspectives rub off on the entire group, opening their eyes to different ways to view and solve a problem.



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Iya Abdulkarim '22 says there is so much each student learns from one another, and the interdisciplinary experience sets the program apart from others.

“It’s really what affords this program the success and the uniqueness that it has,” says Abdulkarim, a biology major who plans to pursue a career in medicine. “Bringing all those different mentalities and backgrounds to tackle the same question is what makes it especially conducive to innovation.”

Her favorite part of the program was the final presentation to the company’s executives. She says that after spending weeks solving problems, researching the market, and preparing the deliverables, it all fits together “beautifully” at the end.

It’s not just the fellow students who provide wisdom and learning lessons to each other.

Each participating school has faculty mentors who talk with the students each week to check in and provide guidance and advice. Like the makeup of the cohort, the mentors also come from different academic backgrounds.

At St. Olaf, those mentors go above-and-beyond for their students. St. Olaf Professor of Biology Kevin Crisp, who chairs the college’s Health Professions Committee, is spearheading the Innovation Partners program on campus. He estimates that he spends two to three hours per day, five days a week with his students in the program.

Jake Olson '23, an economics major, says the mentors were incredible to work with and helped elevate the program and his experience.

“To be able to work with these professors and kind of pick their brains as we went throughout the program was huge,” Olson says. “It was really, really huge. They guided us through and gave us help when we needed it but also pushed us to come up with our own ideas and use our own judgment.”

Crisp says students benefit from mentors who push them while supporting them as well, and that’s what he and the other Innovation Partners mentors do during the program. He says watching the students grow in their confidence and resourcefulness, as well as their abilities to analyze problems, is a treat.

“They’re learning to take their classroom skills and apply them to real-world problems and to do the kinds of work that they can be employed to do later on,” Crisp says. “I think that that’s something that’s quite powerful for them. In many respects, interdisciplinary education is at its most effective when students are actively using those interdisciplinary skills and mindsets to tackle a real-world problem that needs solving.”



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Landa is a prime example of that. She really enjoyed her time in the program, from the fast-paced nature of the job to working with executives to collaborating with her teammates.

It helped center her on what she wanted to do next after graduating, and her experiences played a huge role in her interviews for different positions.

And when she leaves St. Olaf in the spring and starts the job she’s landed as a consultant at McKinsey & Company, her time with Innovation Partners will play a key role in how she approaches each problem.

“It was not only an inspiration for my career choice, but it also really helped me during recruitment,” Landa says. “The experiences that I had from Innovation Partners were extremely meaningful.”