

My College Startup

by Olivia Pavco-Giaccia

As our rented SUV headed north on Interstate 95, I sat sandwiched between boxes stuffed with four seasons' worth of clothes, a backpack filled with school supplies, and a life-sized Audrey Hepburn poster for my dorm suite. I was excited to head off to begin my college adventures. I imagined all the new ideas and information I was going to discover, the interesting classmates I was going to meet, and the cool cello rock band I was going to join. What I didn't imagine, however, was launching a new social venture.

During the summer after my junior year of high school, I interned in a neurobiology lab at Stanford. I had long been interested in encouraging girls in STEM, so I wrote about my lab experiences on a blog targeted to young girls. One day I posted a picture of me wearing bedazzled lab goggles. I was amazed by the flood of responses: "Where did you get those goggles?" "Where can I buy those goggles?" At that moment, a light bulb went off. Those goggles showed young girls that science could be fun, creative, and accessible. Busy with high school and college apps, I put the idea aside.

In my freshman year of college, I saw a flyer posted by the Yale Entrepreneurial Institute (YEI) announcing its summer fellowship program. I wasn't even sure if my idea for cool lab gear merited a discussion, but I went into the YEI offices and chatted with staff, who encouraged me to apply. I was fortunate to be accepted and spent the summer talking to parents, kids, educators, and scientists about how to best advance my mission of encouraging our next generation of scientists and innovators. Their ideas helped me refine our products—brightly patterned lab coats and colorful goggles, anchored by storybooks featuring spunky young girls who go on adventures, run into some wacky problems, and solve them using science—and LabCandy was born. In the summer of 2014, LabCandy raised over \$30,000 on Kickstarter to begin manufacturing our products, which are now delivered around the globe.

According to the Kauffman Foundation, entrepreneurship is one of the fastest growing subjects in the undergraduate curriculum. Over 400,000 students per year take courses in this subject. Like Yale, many universities across the country are increasingly devoting resources to teach the theory and practice of being an entrepreneur and to fund and encourage student ventures.

Based on my experiences with LabCandy, I'm here to tell you that college provides unique opportunities to create and launch a new venture. From understanding the many dimensions of the problem you are seeking to solve, to analyzing markets, you develop research skills that can't be honed in a classroom. As you develop strategies and budgets, you learn how to balance risk and opportunity. To



secure funding and persuade others to share your vision, you have to learn how to conduct strong research and effectively present it to others. Having to build and nurture a team teaches you how to be a leader who knows how to work with people. Formulating your strategic plan teaches you how to prioritize among competing factors while staying true to your core mission. Access to seed money, office facilities, and entrepreneurship training are also pretty nice perks that are offered by a lot of universities. In addition, the YEI program provides introductions to experienced mentors and alumni who are eager to offer advice and assistance.

As I look back over my past four years, I realize even more acutely how much the experiences of building LabCandy have enriched my college years. Yes, I took amazing classes and explored diverse ideas. I met inspiring people and professors and made lifelong friends. I even joined that cello rock band. But entrepreneurship provides me with a unique opportunity to transform knowledge into action. It allowed me to channel my passion for encouraging kids' interest in STEM into a real strategy that could make a difference in people's lives.

I feel lucky to have happened upon a random flyer that encouraged me to learn about what it really means to be an entrepreneur. But it doesn't have to be a matter of random luck for you. Now you know. ■

CTY alumna **Olivia Pavco-Giaccia** is a senior at Yale University, where she is completing a degree in cognitive science. A member of the Psi Chi National Honor Society, she was named one of *Glamour* magazine's Top 10 College Women of 2015 and one of HerCampus's 22 Under 22 Most Inspiring College Women. Her first children's book, *Ava and The Copper Key*, recently won a gold medal in the Moonbeam Children's Book Awards. Olivia is also a member of the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, and in her free time, enjoys riding horses, skiing, and working out on the lira.

Learn more about LabCandy at www.labcandy.com.