Investigating startup success

Anahit Hovhannisyan
Senior Reviewer

After spending almost 10 years studying online markets and consumer use of electronic commerce, Academic Director of the Severino Center Jason Kuruzovich is now focused on utilizing unstructured data to understand the success of entrepreneurs and their startups. Rensselaer Center for Open Source, or RCOS, is a community of open source developers at RPI. Specifically, Kuruzovich works on Kuberclytics—a project with the goal of developing cloud-based scalable analytics solutions based on Jupyterhub and Kubernetes—with a team of students in RCOS. Among various applications, one example includes easing the setting up of coding environments compatible with all devices. In other words, he plays a role in tool development. Another aspect of the project includes collecting data from startups. Initially exploring Twitter, a team including nine undergraduate students gathers unstructured data to observe trends in entrepreneurship behavior, with hopes to collect a pool of raw data relevant to the success of emerging businesses. Ultimately, this data could be organized in such a manner to determine the type of page most appropriate for the company.

The Cognitive and Immersive Systems Lab, better known as CISL, is a partnership between Rensselaer and IBM working toward advancing the way we think about group intelligence in real-life situations. The problem lies in tying the functionality of computers and data analytics algorithms with the knowledge and analytical capabilities of human beings. The project tackles this problem with a Situations Room—an immersive environment built in the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center to allow interactions among individuals and supercomputing services to make decisions and complete a task. In particular, Kuruzovich is working on helping shape a narrative in which investors examine potential startups, investments or acquisitions in an immersive environment. Kuruzovich works to make entrepreneurship into a team effort. The Severino Center is home to five Remselaer competitions designed to encourage entrepreneurship and help translate ideas into business models. Recently, select members were given the opportunity to travel to Boston and understand current problems in need of solutions—ones that could be turned into a business. Kuruzovich is involved in a multitude of projects and providing support for entrepreneurs. His research revolves around understanding what makes them successful and the tools that would aid in their progression, while his involvement in the Severino Center supports their growth and development. With our ever-growing online business culture, one can look to Kuruzovich for a fresh perspective.

Little Pecks offers quality coffee

Joseph Lyon
Senior Reviewer

LITTLE PECKS, TOUTED AS AN ALL-DAY CAFE FROM the culinary team behind Peck's Arcade, really lives up to its reputation. It serves Tandem Coffee, as well as a collection of baked goods weekly. brunch on weekends, and sandwiches, salads, and snacks during the evenings.

The coffee is exactly what you’d expect from a roaster out of Portland, Maine, with bold flavors and tasty, yet sweet, espresso. I ordered a pourover during my most recent visit, and was treated to a friendly conversation with the barista as he made my small cup of coffee. Ordering a pourover gives the option of several different roasts from Tandem. I have not tried every roast they provide, however, the burutkaana roast was quite good; I would highly recommend it if you are someone who doesn’t usually order coffee due to its bitter taste. The barista described many of the pour overs as “tea-like,” and I tend to agree with this analysis. I tasted fruity and sweet flavor notes, and sharp contrast from what many would consider a “normal” cup of coffee.

Little Pecks serves not just coffee, but also cocktails, tea, and many other things on its diverse menu. Although I have been several times—and ordered different things every time—I have yet to be disappointed by anything I’ve tried. The interior feels too nice to be a cafe. If you walk back into the hall behind the bar, there is seating which you could easily mistake for an extension of Peck’s Arcade. Little Pecks is unique in its position as a less expensive Peck’s Arcade. You can get food made by the team behind an extremely high quality restaurant in Troy, for a lower price and fewer “nice restaurant” expectations. Although I have not had the food, I plan to go back and sample more solely based on the quality of the coffee and the friendly service.

The chance is there, so why not take it? 

Stay safe during the winter months
UPAC EVENT

Comedy show surprisingly interactive

UPAC COMEDY HOSTED comedians Phil Hanley and Joe List in the Union’s McNeil Room.

Our next issue will be published on January 24. Feel free to change our lights at poly.rpi.edu/lights in the meantime!

Serving the Rensselaer community since 1885

Wednesday, December 13, 2017
poly.rpi.edu

CLUB SPOTLIGHT

iGEM team earns bronze at competition

Douglas Meadow
A Special to The Poly

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OUR UNIVERSITY’S HISTORY, Rensselaer students joined 3,000 synthetic biologists at the international Genetically Engineered Machine Giant Jamboree in Boston on November 9-13. The 2017 iGEM competition featured an amazing array of 310 student teams from 44 countries. This unique event combined the spirit of the Olympics with the rigor of a genetic engineering science fair. The first successful Rensselaer iGEM team earned a bronze medal award for our manufacturing project demonstrating that selective modification of the yeast Starmerella bombicola gene improves the efficiency of sophorolipid production.

Our iGEM mentors Professor Mattheos Koffas and Professor Richard Gross supported our team of 11 undergraduates who enabled our student team to officially register, unlocking 20,000 base pairs of free DNA synthesis from our sponsor Integrated DNA Technologies. The 2018 RPI iGEM team is now recruiting interested students.

Our first donor, Department Head and Professor Joel Piatysky, said, “The iGEM team did a great job and were tremendous representatives for Rensselaer. We in the Howard P. Isermann Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering were happy to support them in any way we could. We thought this was a fantastic opportunity to get folks from different disciplines together and working on a creative idea with a common goal.” Department Head and Professor Juergen Hahn, Vice-President for Research Jonathan Dordick, Dean of the School of Science Curt Breneman, Department Head and Professor Susan Gilbert, Dean of the School of Engineering Shekhar Garde, and the Director of the Center for Biotechnology and Interdisciplinary Studies Deepak Vashisht also provided generous contributions. Our team benefited from having access to the equipment and laboratories of CBIS. In the words of Vashisht, “the success of the iGEM team follows directly from the hard work and dedication of the student and faculty team who crafted an interdisciplinary approach at the crossroads of life sciences and engineering and worked tirelessly utilizing state of the art equipment and research cores.”

Student leader Krystyna Farrell ‘18 directed the microbial genetics committee of five students who assembled the DNA constructs used to modify the yeast Starmerella bombicola. Cameron Kee ‘18 led the culturing and chemistry committee of five students who cultured both control and modified yeasts to compare sophorolipid yields. In his own words, “iGEM represented an entirely unparalleled opportunity to design and run an experiment entirely independently.” Blossom Wong ’19 worked with Megan Gupta ’19 to create the iGEM wiki website for our project. Gupta said that “iGEM was an excellent learning opportunity for me to learn new skills such as HTML coding and work with such a great team to accomplish exciting feats in the laboratory. I’m truly grateful that I had the chance to participate.”

The key contributions of Farrell to our Interlab Study helped our team earn the bronze medal. According to Farrell, “The iGEM experience was very rewarding for me. Having never led a research project start to finish, I learned much more about the process of experimental design and enjoyed seeing the project come to life.” With the help of Stephanie Lee ’18 and Farrell, we shared our sophorolipid research with judges at our presentation and poster sessions. Our project gained from the hands-on laboratory work of our additional team members Leah Henegar ’18, Helen Merricks ’18, Genesis Moran ’19, and Maily Nguyen ’19. We also thank our advisors graduate student Fei Liu, Dr. Jian Zha, and Dr. Shekar Mekala, who said that “the most fascinating thing about my participation in the 2017 iGEM project is to work with bright students and to see their ‘curiosity’ to execute the project successfully.”

With the help of our finance committee member Ian Frailen ’18, we produced writing and graphic designs for our online crowdfunding campaign, brochure, informational postcard, banner, and team wiki. We also thank the 12 additional donors to our crowdfunding campaign who enabled our experiments and Giant Jamboree participation. Whatever your major or skill set, the 2018 RPI iGEM team could use your talents if you’d like to learn synthetic biology, perform undergraduate research, make friends, build your resume, and benefit the world. Please contact rpiigem@gmail.com to learn more about how to get involved for next year.

Jonathan Caicedo / The Polytechnic
LADY BIRD entertains with a compelling story line and developed characters.

Tanner Vargas
A Special to The Poly

With a cunning sense of direction and extraordinary acting all around, Greta Gerwig’s first solo directorial effort transcends the genre in a vivid portrayal of adolescence, independence, and the messy relationships between prevailing aspiration and unconventional family.

It effectively rises above the tropes it could have so easily fallen into. Each and every second of dialogue is believable, so much so that you’ll likely recall specific personal memories that indirectly connect to the questions each character is fumbling to answer. Its refreshing inclusion of and focus on strong, dynamic, and genuine women was deftly executed. “There’s not gonna be one guy, there’s gonna be two, and they’re both wrong,” says Gerwig on her cast, and how she navigates her way through Lady Bird ends up in a “fuck you mom” arm wrestle to a genuine care about how they interact with the perfect dress) and heartbreaking truths about familial relationships) in equal parts.

It packs quite a few surprising punches in emotional and physical transformation—how Gerwig’s triumphant direction.

Racquetball team prepared for spring

Michael Kowalczyn
A Special to The Poly

Over the weekend of November 17-19, the Rensselaer Racquetball team traveled to Millersville, Maryland for its third meet of the 2017-2018 Eastern Collegiate Racquetball Conference season.

Following the meet, the 2017-2018 regular season standings were announced. The RPI Racquetball women’s team is in second place, the men’s team is in third place, and the combined team is in third place. Both teams have improved throughout the season, and the combined team is just 200 points out of second place overall.

Team President Will Puswald ’18 knows the 200 points can be made up in the final regular season meet. “Our whole team is very well-balanced, with seniors all the way to freshmen contributing to its success. It is amazing to see our entire team eager to go out and compete at such a high level,” said Puswald.

Babes in Troyland enjoyable, neat

Brookelyn Parslow
Senior Reviewer

This Sunday, I ventured through the snow into Downtown Troy in search of the Tata House, which was home to Babes in Troyland for the weekend. Hosted by Troy Flea, this holiday fair essentially served as a themed counterpart to the market that takes place during the summer months at Riverfront Park.

For me and many other people I spoke to throughout the day, it was a tease of how nice it would be to have the Troy Flea held year-round. The vendors and location were different, but the uniqueness and variety of items, pleasant atmosphere, and the friendliness of everyone present were all the same.

In the midst of all the stress associated with the end of the semester, Babes in Troyland was a refreshing break; it reminded me how much I love mingling at these kinds of community events. I completely forgot how easy it is to start talking to a person who is selling something she made or found somewhere. There are so many stories, and they are almost always worth hearing. (It is also perfect for people who are intimidated by spontaneous conversation, but want to get better at it. I used to be in that position, but these days I am almost always worth hearing. Because of events like these it’s now something that I thoroughly enjoy.)

I generally love holiday markets for gift shopping, and Babes in Troyland was no exception. There were tons of neat, handmade items, including lotions, candles, bowties, miniature carved pots, and rings a man made from buttons when his wife’s collection started getting out of hand. Near the entrance, there was also one woman stationed at a typewriter who sold antique-looking poetry that she created on the spot. Other vendors focused more on items that they found at auctions or in other “special places,” with assortments of pins, vinyl records, comics, drinking sets, and vintage clothing scattered throughout the entire market.

To top it all off, The Rack was set up in the main market room, Lost Highway Coffee Co. upstairs, and Monya’s Confectionery near the entrance, along with a few other food vendors placed around the building.

“Most of the course of Lady Bird’s teenage years are driven by her insistence on asserting her individuality in all aspects of her life, even though it’s clear she’s struggling to make sense of that exact desire and its implications on the ones she loves most. She dreams of New York culture, but treasures her first California drive behind the wheel. Her growing pains are relatable in that they are a result of her discovering her sense of self and navigating long-held and new relationships, but what keeps her character so interesting is how she makes decisions based on these messy prophecies. She’s a natural rebel, but she has a cause that she’s still trying to figure out and a heart that finds itself constantly changing its opinions on just how it wants to be mended and broken. Gerwig, the sole director and screenwriter, will have you clutching your stomach in laughter one moment and tearing up at a philosophical character development the next. It packs quite a few surprising punches in emotional and physical transformation—how Lady Bird ends up in a “fuck you mom” arm wrestle to a genuine care about how they interact with the perfect dress) and heartbreaking truths about familial relationships) in equal parts.

An opus of emotion worthy of all the awards it gets, Lady Bird is a must-see film of the year. If not for the excellent direction and during performances, it’s for all the intrinsic philosophical gold to be mined from its distinct yet recognizable characters. You won’t soon forget it.

Lady Bird is in theaters now, currently reigning as the highest-reviewed film on Rotten Tomatoes and already nabbing awards for Ronan’s bold performance and Gerwig’s triumphant direction.

The Poly wishes you good luck during finals and a wonderful winter break!
IN ITS LAST MEETING OF THE SEMESTER, THE STUDENT SENATE DISCUSSED the need for more informal study spaces on campus.

While originally the committee wanted to focus on expanding the annual research symposium, it has now switched focus and wants to expand the number of undergraduates involved with faculty doing research and showing research by connecting them with various clubs and organizations.

The update by the Academic Affairs Committee covered what's going on in our paper? Email ads@poly.rpi.edu.

EXECUTIVE BOARD

Jonathan Caicedo
Senior Reporter

The Executive Board continued the budgeting process for Fiscal Year 2019 on Saturday, December 8, after addressing five budget appeals from various clubs and organizations. According to President of the Union Matthew Rand ’19, the Board was able to provide an extra $50,000 to clubs this fiscal year compared to last, partly due to growing class sizes. Rand emphasized the Board’s need to take into account what students need in their budgets.

Rand said that the Board needed to take into account what students need in their budgets. At the same time, Rand emphasized the need for more informal study spaces on campus. Rand highlighted plans to provide more advanced tools in the Union's Club Management System to make budgeting more efficient for both clubs and the Board. Rand said that the Board will always do what it can to accommodate clubs and give them what they need to operate, especially over the summer.

For the future, Rand highlighted plans to provide more advanced tools in the Union’s Club Management System to make budgeting more efficient for both clubs and the Board. Features like tagging would allow clubs to distinguish between line items that are “necessary for the club’s operation” and ones that “would be nice to have.” Otherwise, Rand said clubs should continue their good work and cooperation with the Executive Board, and make sure they ask for everything that they might need in their budgets.

The Executive Board will meet January 18, 2018—the first Thursday of the Spring semester—at 8 pm in the Shelnutt Gallery.
Hello everyone! I hope you’re all doing well and finishing the semester on a high note.

Congratulations, the semester of life here at RPI is in the books, and the only things standing between us and winter break are a few finals. This past month, we have notched up some significant accomplishments. We have made a massive, complex organization that is terrifying to attempt to break into, people struggle to find ways to fill their time meaningfully outside of schoolwork. I know that school is why we’re here, and that should always remain the priority. However, a great deal of learning can take place outside of the classroom and, in terms of maintaining happiness, it’s important to have an expanded focus. It is well worth it to take advantage of the opportunities that exist for students on campus and look beyond the classroom. When all you do is school, it becomes too easy to get caught up in the little disappointments. All of a sudden it becomes the end of the world if you fail a test or receive a not-so-great grade on a paper. A constant single-minded focus on coursework also brings with it the trap of monotony. When all is said and done, I still do my best to jump up, go to study, and then go to sleep to start all over again in the morning, life very quickly gets boring and hard to maintain. Participating in things outside of the classroom gives you something to work on and move forward with. You can see improvement of the world if you fail a test or receive a not-so-great grade on a paper. A constant single-minded focus on coursework also brings with it the trap of monotony. When all is said and done, I still do my best to jump up, go to study, and then go to sleep to start all over again in the morning, life very quickly gets boring and hard to maintain. Participating in things outside of the classroom gives you something to work on and move forward with. You can see improvement of the world if you fail a test or receive a not-so-great grade on a paper. A constant single-minded focus on coursework also brings with it the trap of monotony. When all is said and done, I still do my best to jump up, go to study, and then go to sleep to start all over again in the morning, life very quickly gets boring and hard to maintain. Participating in things outside of the classroom gives you something to work on and move forward with. You can see improvement.
The expectation I had with the man I was dating when I enrolled in the two degrees. It never came near the expectation set when I enrolled. Federal student loan payments were 17% of my salary, my salary was eliminated benefits, and my salary never came near the expectation set when I enrolled.

I learned something about post-traumatic stress disorder, too—it makes you seem scary, like the goon inside a lava lamp. Parts of the memory will grow or shrink or combine with others in a kind of feedback loop. It is hard to make sense of the events. I was able to recount full events of the last 10 years. It was during a therapy session, and I spent the following four hours vomiting, and most of the next week, too. I knew I could never press charges against this man. The combination of trauma and shifting memories meant I could neither preserve the process, nor would I be able to see my witness in securing a conviction. I also learned that PTSD can be triggered from a wide range of relations and situations connected back to the event, such as when someone acts menacing, a person behaving in a controlling manner, or feeling2. They can all trigger a wave of terror. For me, it feels like a blowtorch blazing my face whilst somebody pours ice water down my arms and neck. Construction is somewhat notorious for menacing characters and random acts of violence. My days are blowtorch and ice water, for me.

Whilst I’ve knocked my loans around, I’ve never even considered closing them off after more than 10 years later, and it’s repeatedly come at a horrid price. I have to pay extra federal payments. I lived in cheap, unsafe housing to free up money—both things piled stress on stress. I liquidated my pension to pile that onto the debt; it was so small it only made a dent. I’ve attempted suicide three times, because the combination of being a sexual assault survivor and debt and trauma in the industry was sometimes unbearable and death was the only sure-fire way to both clear the debt and escape the industry. The flashbacks sometimes meant I can’t work for weeks at a time— again, impacting my income and the speed at which I can change careers. I graduated at the top of my class—I am exceptional at this. I did not want to stay mentally capable of doing it all. Rape isn’t an accepted excuse for defaulting on student debt and abandoning your modestly paid career for one that pays a fraction of that, and a smaller fraction of what you expected to make when you were 17 or 22. Rape doesn’t get you a scholarship or pay your bills so you can re-train in a different field, nor every sector thought to put themselves through a meat-grinder of a legal process to even attempt to recover some financial loss. I’ve done nearly everything I could try to get out of under that debt so that I could leave this industry and build a new life, doing something more therapeutic, supportive, and far-removed from a cut-throat, macho environment. After 10 years, I finally have to accept that I am likely to fail in that endeavour. At less than 6.5 percent interest, interest is not going to save enough to save myself financially and emotionally. I have to chose one or the other. Either irrevocable financial ruin, by defaulting on debt I can’t discharge in bankruptcy, that has limited forgiveness, and retraining for a lower-paid position which won’t even cover half the interest; or risking a terminal breakdown whilst attempting to function in an environment which became unbearable before I even got the second diploma in my hand.

This is a message for those of you taking on massive debt to launch yourself into your chosen career, particularly with the help of companies and shifty future. Please remember, that there are things that may happen which are entirely outside your control. The behavior of others is outside your control. Global financial realignments are outside your control. Rapidly increasing automation and shifting, empire-building landscapes are outside your control. While how you handle your finances is entirely up to you, sometimes—for whatever reason—your choices for remedial action may be limited. Your future has no guarantees—it’s always a risk. Having debt which is stripped of considerable consumer protections, with interest rates at the mercy of a chaotic Congress, and which is leveraged on the expectation of a salary of a previous generation which the following generation may never achieve, just adds to that risk. I hope you heed this as a warning, so that what has become a nightmare for me and many others in my generation does not turn into a nightmare for you too.

Be very careful about taking on debt to get an education that may or may not pay your way for the foreseeable future. Federal loans, while not as bad as private loans, are terrible traps in their current state, and a devastating financial mechanism which has obliterated the future for many generations in which we were foolish enough to believe the advice we were given by our parents: “It’s the best debt you’ll ever have.” They were wrong; it’s the worst. It’s the only debt you can never, ever, escape. Not all women can leverage their gender into a nine-million-pound a year salary—for some of us it will be a devastating financial liability.