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WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY



CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AWARDS PROGRAM

2024
CASE
STUDY

IEP CATEGORY - INNOVATION

Wayne State University

**TechTown: Where Detroit's entrepreneurial
community converges**

TechTown was founded by Wayne State University and opened its headquarters — a historic, renovated automobile dealership — in the Wayne State Innovation District in 2004. Twenty years later, TechTown is where Detroit’s entrepreneurial community converges. It welcomed more than 125,000 visitors in 2023 alone — up 42% from 2022.

CO-WORKING AND OFFICE SPACE

TechTown is home to the TechTown administrative offices, a 300-member co-working space (Detroit’s largest), and 76,000 square feet of private office and lab space — 25,000 square feet of which is occupied by Wayne State and Henry Ford Health researchers. During the pandemic, TechTown shifted the mix of building uses to accommodate increased demand for private workspaces. And in a moment where occupancy rates for office space are falling in downtowns, creating new challenges for cities, the occupancy rate for those spaces at TechTown has remained steady at 90-100%.

In addition to the 62-member TechTown team (who have access to both the TechTown offices and co-working space), researchers, and entrepreneurs who call the building home, the TechTown co-working and office space serves many nonprofits. From Outlier Media — a nonprofit newsroom designed to center and respond to Detroit’s needs — to Global Ties Detroit, which hosts international exchange programs that promote global exchange and citizen diplomacy. The demand for space from nonprofits is so great, TechTown is studying the feasibility of a new nonprofit hub.

MEETINGS AND EVENTS

In addition to its own spaces, the TechTown team manages meeting and event spaces in two other buildings in the Wayne State Innovation District: The Industry Innovation Center and 6001 Cass. Together, these spaces offer meeting rooms for as few as 4 and as many as 30 people and event spaces for up to 250 — including a 130-seat auditorium with a stage designed to showcase a car (Detroit is the Motor City after all, and growing our advanced mobility sector is a regional priority shared by TechTown and Wayne State).

The TechTown team managed 3,548 meetings and events across the Wayne State Innovation District in 2023 (up 54% from 2022). These include events organized by TechTown, like its 2023 and 2024 Black History Month conferences. The first, Detroit on the Move, honored Black leaders in the mobility industry. The second, the Black Business Reunion, paid homage to the quintessential reunions of Black families by celebrating Black businesses of the past, present, and those to come.



TechTown also organizes showcases for graduates of its Retail Boot Camp (RBC) program and the annual Comerica Hatch Detroit Contest, which awards one entrepreneur \$100,000 to open a brick-and-mortar business. RBC Showcase winners receive up to \$6,000.

TechTown regularly hosts events for local and national partners — events like the 37th International Conference on Business Incubation (ICBI37). Held by the International Business Innovation Association (InBIA), a global nonprofit that leads entrepreneur support programs in 30 countries around the world, ICBI37 helped solidify Detroit’s place in economic development on an international scale. Attendees heard from representatives from both TechTown and Wayne State, toured TechTown and I2C, and had the opportunity to attend the Comerica Hatch Detroit Contest Hatch Off (the finale in a series of contest events).

Black Tech Saturdays — a recurring event created by two TechTown alums designed to build Detroit’s Black tech community — and the upcoming Sports, Tech, and Venture Summit are two more examples of the high-impact events TechTown often hosts. The latter seeks to leverage the anticipated traffic in Detroit created by the 2024 NFL Draft to bring together entrepreneurs, investors, athletes, and entrepreneurial support organizations and brands for a mix of panels, local startup pitches, and parties.

MISSION ALIGNMENT

The revenue TechTown generates through its space helps to support its programs and TechTown leverages its space to support its clients. The TechTown team organizes lunch pop-ups in its communal kitchen each week. The vendors are guaranteed a minimum sales number with TechTown making up a gap, if there is one. Vendors that have a gap more than once receive coaching from TechTown business strategists.

TechTown also hosts a monthly retail pop-up called The SHOP. Similar to the lunch pop-ups,



Participants in TechTown’s summer 2023 Start Studio Demo Day

The SHOP allows entrepreneurs at a variety of business stages to test their retail concepts and products. Vendors are given access to TechTown’s custom fixture library in order to create engaging 360-degree displays, plus in-the-moment coaching from TechTown strategists. Participating in The SHOP can also lead to other pop-up opportunities.

OFF-SITE COLLABORATIONS

The Small Business Services team at TechTown manages food and retail pop-ups in other locations around Detroit — pop-ups like the Downtown Detroit Markets and Mission Café.

Funded by the Gilbert Family Foundation and managed by the Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP) with support from Bedrock and TechTown, the Downtown Detroit Markets give small businesses the opportunity to pop up in the heart of Downtown Detroit during the holiday season. TechTown offers specialized training for participating vendors before, during, and after the market season. Vendors also have the opportunity to work one-on-one with a TechTown retail strategist on a weekly basis for the duration of the season. To date, the Downtown Detroit Markets have offered a launchpad to more than 130 small businesses generating nearly \$4 million in overall sales. Over the years, 19 small businesses have taken part in the markets more than once, and some have gone on to open brick-and-mortar storefronts.

Mission Café is a much smaller and more recent collaboration between TechTown and Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency, a nonprofit organization that works to promote quality housing, family stability and economic opportunities. The mission of Mission Café, programmed by TechTown, is to provide a learning environment for a variety of rotating local food entrepreneurs. It opened for business in April 2024.

TechTown has also been approached about opening additional hubs (complete with co-working, office, meeting and event space) in other parts of Detroit, often by place-based organizations that want to leverage TechTown’s expertise to meet an identified community need. It is targeting opening two new locations in the next five years.



LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

Supporting Information:

- [Comerica Hatch Detroit Contest 2024](#)

Articles:

- [TechTown Detroit hosts conference geared toward Black mobility entrepreneurs](#)
- [Black Tech Saturday hosted by TechTown in Detroit](#)
- [Meet the Spring 2023 Retail Boot Camp Showcase winners](#)
- [Downtown Detroit Markets and Cadillac Lodge Extend Season](#)
- [How Wayne Metro's Cade Creates a Welcoming Space Where Folks May Least Expect it](#)



ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

ABOUT THE IEP PROGRAM

APLU and its [Commission on Economic and Community Engagement \(CECE\)](#) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP Program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP Awards Program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- Talent and workforce development
- Innovation, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- Place development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: www.APLU.org/IEP

