

The Fledge, LLC

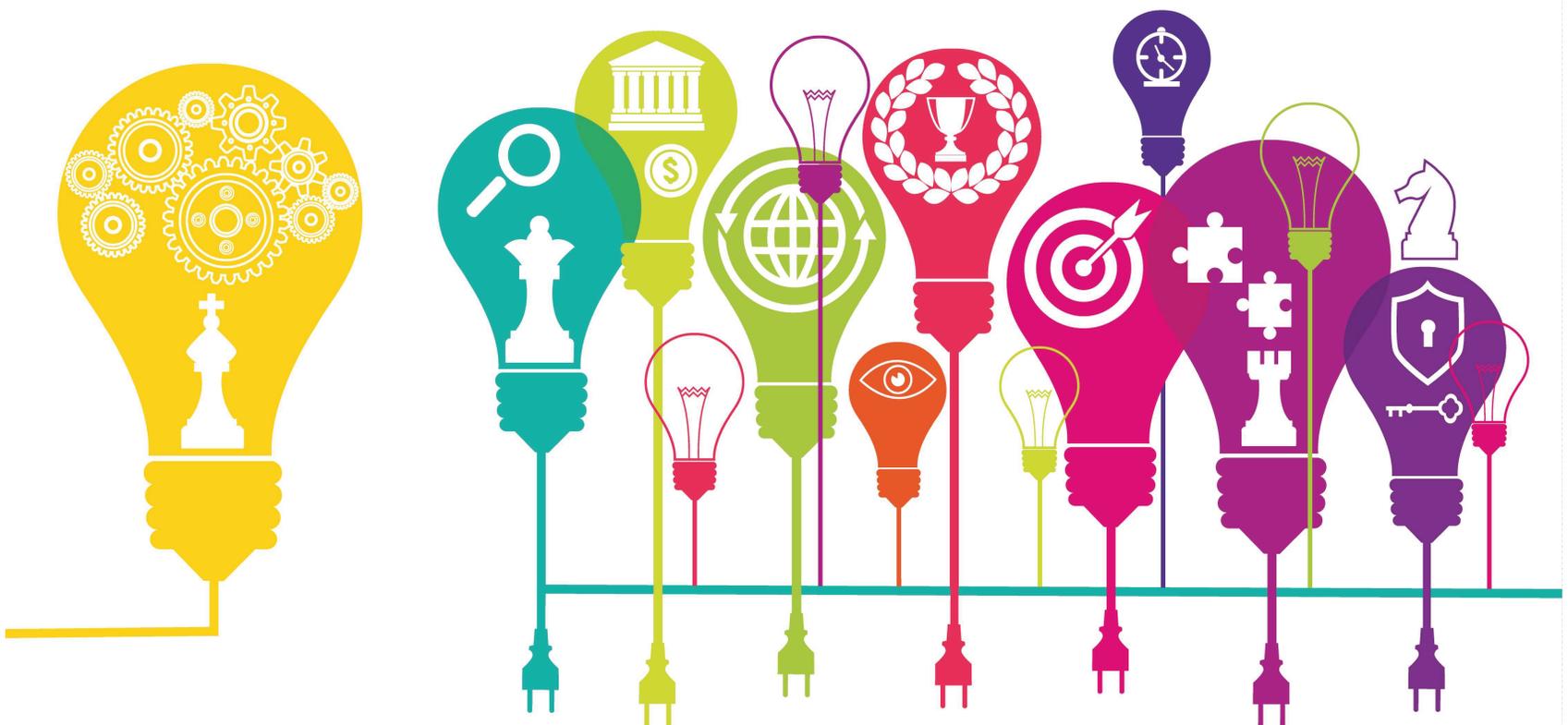
Private and For Profit Ideation

A Study of The Fledge: A Maker Space,
Incubator, and Accelerator

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2017 Co-Learning Plan Series

Michigan State University EDA University Center for
Regional Economic Innovation



This project is supported in part pursuant to the receipt of financial assistance from the United States Department of Commerce – Economic Development Administration. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of any federal agency or Michigan State University.

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EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

Center for Community and Economic Development

Michigan State University

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INTRODUCTION

As many types of spaces emerge in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the ability to create sustainable models becomes increasingly important. A failure of these spaces leads to negative impact on a regional ecosystem and the economy as a whole. The Fledge, LLC (The Fledge), which recently moved from Grand Ledge, Michigan to downtown Lansing, Michigan, is a private, for-profit space that incubates, develops, and accelerates people and companies. Located in a low-to-moderate income community in downtown Lansing, The Fledge challenges dominant narratives and traditional structures of entrepreneurial makerspaces, incubators, etc. through its closely held values of zero constraints, no barriers to entry, and hyper-inclusiveness along with its unique processes to accelerate companies and develop individual skills and talents. The success of business incubation spaces like The Fledge leads to positive impacts on an entrepreneurial system of the region.

The Fledge exists to influence the mid-Michigan community towards a positive entrepreneurial economy based on abundance as opposed to scarcity. It creates an environment that encourages collaboration for sharing resources, tools, skills, technology and interests to create a cohesive system of a new economic view. The hypothesis is that The Fledge can change the culture of a community to be more entrepreneurial with a concerted focus on the pursuit of happiness by creating a chaotic system that includes no real rules, hyper-inclusiveness and an attractive space filled with shared resources. We believe we have created a support system and space that creates companies and jobs that will thrive.

This Co-Learning Plan will seek to unpack the guiding principles woven into the fabric of the space, the methods used for ideation, planning, prototyping and launching a business within The Fledge. Additionally, this Co-Learning Plan will discuss the challenges and opportunities The Fledge faces along with the revenue and equity sharing model implemented at The Fledge in order to fund the operations of the space and create a sustainable revenue stream.

In the end, the objective is for this analysis of The Fledge to be used as a roadmap and starting point for persons looking to establish a similar entrepreneurial environment within their own community. While The Fledge has experienced success in the past because of its principles and processes, this success does not have to be isolated to the Lansing area where The Fledge is located. Any community can start their own version of The Fledge to spur innovation within their particular social fabric. The way in which The Fledge operates can be used as a blueprint for your own version of The Fledge. Each section discussed in this Co-Learning Plan should be adapted and altered to fit the needs, constraints, and contexts of different communities to ensure success.

THE FLEDGE BUSINESS MODEL

The Fledge is a for-profit business incubator, and implements a revenue and equity sharing model to sustain itself. The Fledge is free for general members, guests, and those who are working on a business or business idea that has yet to generate any revenue. Once someone plans to establish their business within The Fledge, they are called Fledglings who are pre-revenue generation. This free access for guests, members working on random projects, and pre-revenue Fledglings is thought of as the marketing budget to entice people into the space and to encourage them to stay involved.

When someone becomes involved with the space, The Fledge strives to provide a creative maker place for ideation and prototyping, a series of programming to teach start-up and business concepts, and a series of community based projects. These projects allow people to experiment, learn skills and develop technologies. As the model is facilitated, businesses are created and incubated in the space with the strategy of using the network of companies, skills and technologies as a shared resource. From all of this, The Fledge hopes to accelerate a project or business to a stage where they are earning revenue.

Once a company begins to generate revenue, depending on the type of company, they will contribute a percentage of revenue and/or equity to The Fledge. These funds are then used to operate, expand and share the profits of The Fledge. For all revenue-generating Fledglings, they are required to share 2% of revenue and 8% of equity with The Fledge if they are within the high tech marketplace and 10% of revenue and 0% of equity if a Fledging falls in an industry other than high tech.

Because the ability of The Fledge to remain open depends entirely on the success of Fledglings, there is an incentive to provide an environment and an array of services to properly incubate a Fledgling so they are able to generate revenue. In doing so, this business model pushes us to ultimately serve Fledglings. To best serve guests, members, and Fledglings, a unique combination of methods, mindsets, and tactics are used to encourage involvement in The Fledge, keep people coming back, inspire business ideas, develop talents, and push businesses to the next level. Throughout this entire process, The Fledge creates a revenue stream that serves the The Fledge, LLC and helps ensure its sustainability into the future. In helping individuals reach their business and personal aspirations, they help The Fledge remain in business.

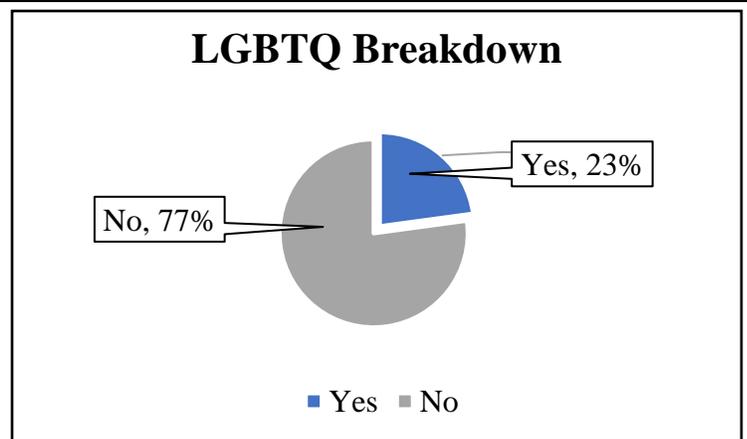
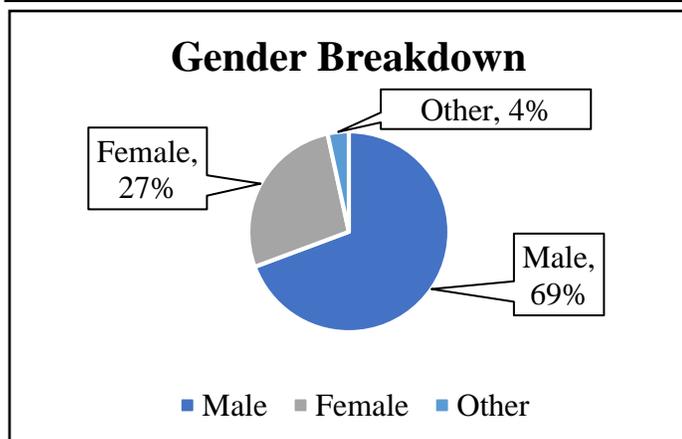
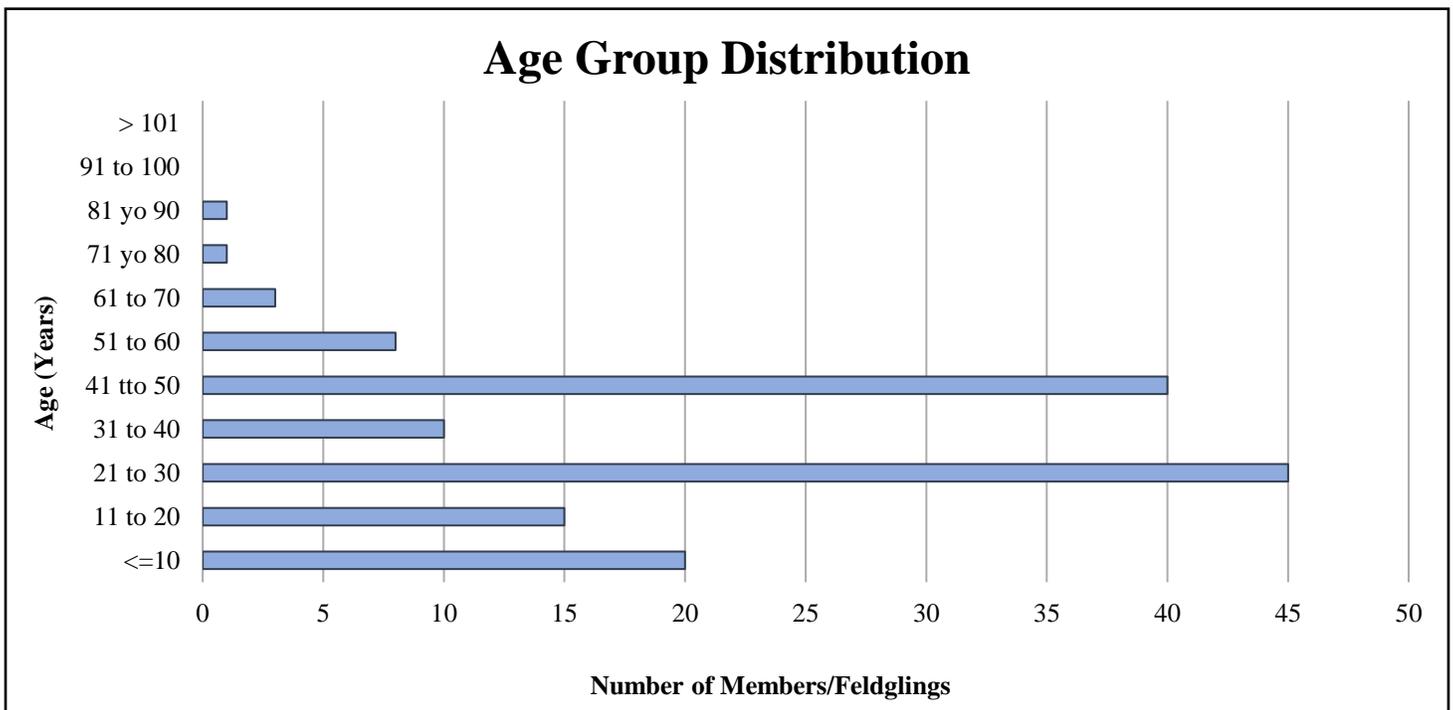
OUR PRINCIPLES

HYPER-INCLUSIVITY

An important element of the Fledge model involves the understanding that diverse backgrounds (zip codes, racial makeup, spiritual beliefs, genders, sexual orientation, education, age, etc.) create a larger pool of knowledge and experiences. When compared to a non-diverse organization, inclusivity and diversity create a more effective organization that supports and empowers everyone at The Fledge.

Inclusivity and diversity helps us to influence more people to join The Fledge’s rank, which in turn creates more talent. Eliminating barriers to entry ensures a greater proportion of people will have a chance to succeed. Hyper-inclusivity removes a barrier to entry: fear of immediate rejection or in some cases a fear of acceptance (the elimination of excuses people use to not start their endeavor). By removing this initial barrier to entry, The Fledge increases the probability of someone joining their effort, which increases traffic through The Fledge.

Below are graphs depicting some of the inclusivity present at The Fledge. One graph represents the age distribution of Fledglings while the other two graphs further break down gender identity and sexual orientation. These representations stem from data collected at our initial location in Grand Ledge, Michigan.



FAIL FORWARD FAST

Every opportunity, if taken, will ultimately lead to some degree of success. Learning is an integral part of The Fledge philosophy and so is failure. If one does not take risks, then learning, and ultimate success will never be attained. One could be handed a business and all the tools to keep it afloat, but if no risks are taken and the opportunity to learn, grow, or develop is dismissed, the business could fail over time due to irrelevance.

At The Fledge, all ideas are encouraged even though they may fail. Knowledge and development come with the initial opportunity to try or test something. Though an idea may never come to fruition, the experience itself and learning process involved may become the success story. Like all efforts, The Fledge strives to be sincere. The Fledge says “yes” often, works with everyone and tries to mature all ideas. For example, if someone comes in with an idea for a perpetual motion machine that will surely defy the laws of physics thus limiting the possibility of it working, The Fledge will still accept the project. The worst-case scenario is everyone will learn something about physics, electronics, statistics, human nature and so on....

So, fail forward, do it fast, and keep going.

NO BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Put together, The Fledge’s mission is to promote hyper-inclusivity, and failing forward fast creates an environment where there are no barriers to entry for anyone coming to The Fledge. Whether you come to tour the space or want to start a business, The Fledge wants to ensure there are no constraints when it comes to race, criminality, gender identity, soundness of a business idea, etc. when interacting with The Fledge. This provides an ecosystem where people from different backgrounds, socioeconomic strata, experiences, and thoughts feel welcomed and openly able to interact and collaborate with one another. This helps to incubate minds, knowledge, projects, business, skills and talents. Though this principle may seem similar to hyper-inclusivity, creating a culture of no restraint and no barriers combines both hyper-inclusivity and no fear of failure. Put together, these principles lend themselves to another core principle of The Fledge: intentional chaos.

CHAOS

Within The Fledge, principles of hyper-inclusivity, education in failure, and reducing barriers to entry cultivate an environment of disarray and unpredictability. The Fledge models this ecosystem after chaos theory, which teaches us to expect the unexpected. For The Fledge, chaos means cultivating an environment of unpredictability, disorder, mixing, and surprises to connect things that were not connected before. In the end, the hope is to spur random, yet intentional innovation as people with a diverse array of passions, experiences, skills, and interests interact with each other to produce music, build a ramp for a skate project, or screen print shirts.

The future of what a group of people can do together is always unknown, but therein lies the excitement and uniqueness of The Fledge. The Fledge attempts to set up initial conditions for the incubation and acceleration of individuals and projects. From there, chaos takes over.

SYSTEMS

The principle of systems is a combination of two things emphasized at The Fledge: patterns and replication. Patterns references the repetition and overlay of the different processes and methods to effectively incubate and accelerate entrepreneurial ideas and companies.

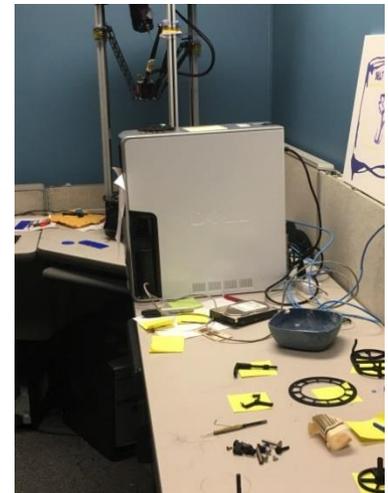
TOUR OF THE FLEDGE

Whenever you enter The Fledge, you are greeted with an environment, feel, and experience typical of shared spaces: chic colors, cool table, art on the walls, etc. However, the physical space of The Fledge carries much more significance than simply looking edgy and artistic: each piece of art, equipment, and layout have a purpose or message that reinforces their core values and contributes to the successful incubation of personal skills and entrepreneurial aspirations of anyone and everyone who comes to The Fledge.

THE TWO SIDES

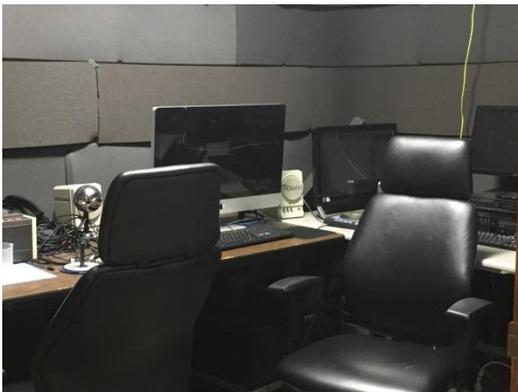
There are two basic sides to The Fledge: the creative side, including all the arts and entertainment resources and the technological side including all the hardware, software and machinery resources. Each of these sides includes distinct spaces to fill a variety of needs no matter the pursuit, whether intellectual, hands on, or creative.

The technical side of the space includes the main conference/common room with computers with various software capabilities, a technology and electrical tinkering room, and a mechanical space which currently includes an Xcarve machine, a 3D printer, sewing machines, an ink printing press, and a table saw. The tinkering room boasts a constant influx of electronics to disassemble, harvest components from, and learn to repair. Anyone is welcome to use, reuse and repurpose the resources found onsite. Pictured below is the tinkering room and some of the equipment that constitutes this technical-focused side of The Fledge.



The other side of the space lends itself to the arts. The Fledge can help any artist begin, continue, or finish a project. There is space for painting, screen printing, drawing, writing, recording music, mixing music, performing and gardening. In addition to the space itself, The Fledge provides various art media free of charge to visitors, often due to generous donations from past visitors.

Gifting The Fledge with materials may not seem sustainable, but the spirit of The Fledge, once experienced, tends to draw people to the concept of communal property, sharing, and providing for others in their pursuits of creative expression.



THE MURAL

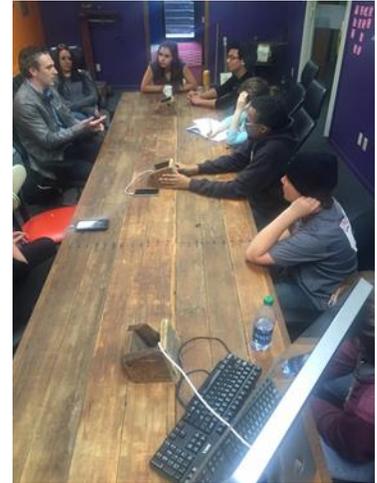
The Fledge mural was created shortly after The Fledge was founded. There was a desire to make a statement that the space belonged to anyone who wants to be free to fly with their dreams, passions, and ideas. With the help of a local graffiti artist, an iconic eagle in flight on a 20-foot wall within The Fledge was born. It serves as a constant reminder to guests, members, and Fledglings to do what makes you fly and provides a backdrop for shows. Graffiti is art, and this form of expression is recognized and valued at The Fledge.

Over time, every visitor has signed, or ‘tagged’ the walls surrounding the Fledge mural, including children who can barely write. Some have even added more depth to the story by writing quotes, poems, observations, and dreams on the walls of The Fledge, giving evidence of the vast array of things that people would like to communicate with others.



THE TABLE

Yet another feature of The Fledge that serves multiple purposes is the conference table. Calvin McGlinchey and Kyle Peterson, both members of The Fledge and Basecamp Lifestlyes, developed a company to repurpose wood from dilapidated buildings and other structures. A project they brought to The Fledge was the building of a conference table. The wood came from an old barn and the construction of the table was a community building experience open to all interested members at The Fledge.



Though the table serves a functional purpose during workshops, meetings, and countless other events at The Fledge, it also represents fundamental concepts routinely implemented at The Fledge. Not only was the table created from something considered useless waste, but it became a project for folks, regardless of their skills, to help complete. At The Fledge, the concept of a community-based project is pivotal in developing skills and incubating companies. For example, the construction of the table served as a way for people to gain hands-on experience on a project they have very little to no previous experience with. In the end, this is meant to cultivate skills, knowledge and interests. This process is further discussed in the “Our Methods” Section.

When people enter a space, they want to feel comfortable, and safe. The Fledge provides a space that almost anyone will find a niche and feel at home. Within the walls of The Fledge, there are rooms designated for certain activities, but again, The Fledge is a fluid space and areas can and do change. For anyone looking to establish an incubator, it is crucial to first determine guiding principles and then design a space with a layout and features that will ultimately advance and convey this meaning to each person who comes in the door.

OUR METHODS

In addition to The Fledge’s guiding principles and characteristics, several different methods are employed at The Fledge to attract guests, incubate project ideas, and accelerate businesses. The Fledge’s methods can be broken down into three main steps: (1) attracting people to The Fledge, (2) incubating business ideas and projects, and (3) applying a shared revenue and equity model to businesses once they are off-the-ground and are able to generate revenue.

In conjunction with The Fledge’s core values of hyper-inclusivity, failing forward fast, no barriers to entry, and the array of tools at one’s disposal, these three levels of methods we use at The Fledge help contribute to an environment that allows for random, chaotic innovation that incubates and accelerates both individual skills and the capacities of businesses.

METHODS OF ATTRACTION

Before any innovation or incubation can occur, people first have to know and understand what The Fledge is. Thus, attracting people to The Fledge is the first step. There are two specific methods, known as beacons and trapping, that are employed to bring in as many people through the doors of The Fledge as possible.

THE BEACONS

Beacons refer to the different methods, events, and campaigns The Fledge uses to attract people. Specifically, The Fledge allows groups to hold conferences and meetings at The Fledge, host various music shows and events, manage clubs, facilitate classes to learn new skills and talents, and screen print on shirts. The Fledge hosts a variety of shows and performers. The Fledge has hosted anything from full day music festivals (Fledge Fest) to comedy shows and improv nights. Sound systems, ample seating and a welcoming atmosphere provide any group or individual a space to perform. There is even a Bitcoin ATM.

Put together, these events, organizations, and equipment are all meant to bring people into The Fledge to learn the mission of the space, explore the possibilities and hopefully continue returning. If you are looking to adapt this strategy of using beacons to draw folks into a space similar to The Fledge, it is crucial to understand effective beacons will differ across communities. It is important to have a solid foundation of knowledge about your community and what services or products will bring the highest volume of traffic into the space. While beacons are important in sparking initial interest in The Fledge, there is yet another strategy called “trapping” The Fledge implements in an attempt to keep someone engaged after they make the initial step of visiting the space.

TRAPPING

There is a long running joke that The Fledge is a trap. In drug dealer culture, a “trap” is known as a house

into The Fledge. Once people are in the building, we use our diversity of services, projects, equipment,

METHODS OF INCUBATION AND INNOVATION

As people become more involved with The Fledge, they often desire to get involved with ongoing projects, or have their own ventures they would like to pursue. At this point, The Fledge breaks people into three general categories based on their skills: (1) people with no startup ideas but want to develop their skills and interests, (2) those with a vision for a business, and (3) those with an established business.

For each of these buckets, The Fledge employs different methods to incubate and accelerate both individuals and companies. Keeping consistent with the culture of The Fledge, differentiating people into these groups is merely a strategy The Fledge implements to provide the necessary resources and support.

PROJECT BASED INNOVATION

For those who interact with The Fledge but have no entrepreneurial idea or project they wish to pursue within the space, a method called project based innovation is implemented to develop their skills, talents, and interests. The method follows the below diagram, and consists of providing a creative maker place for ideation and prototyping, a series of programming to teach start-up and business concepts, and a series of community based projects. The projects allow people to acquire, and develop skills, interests, technologies. The goal of project based innovation is to allow those with limited experience and skills to develop their interests and abilities by working on a larger, more generalized project.



A community is a social group of any size whose members usually reside in a common locale with a shared government and typically have similar cultural experiences, but it can also be defined as a group sharing common interests, characteristics and goals that are viewed as distinct from the larger society. The Fledge is a community in and of itself in keeping with the latter definition, but the goal is to bring the community members into The Fledge’s smaller community in hopes of creating a better, more innovative society. When there is a community present at The Fledge, it is crucial work with them to identify a project they can work on to develop their skills and interests. An example of this is the conference table that Calvin McGlinchey and Kyle Peterson built. Put together, this strategy exemplifies what is meant in the diagram with “Community” and “Project”.

There are always ongoing community-based projects at The Fledge at any given time, so when a Fledge member wants to get involved with something, but is unsure exactly what, they are placed on a community project to simply get them working. Once you have joined a community project at The Fledge, there will be countless requirements for the project to be successful. This is what The Fledge defines as “Resources”, and includes things such as welding, woodworking, painting, engineering, etc. The Fledge helps people both identify the needs of the project and then works directly with project members to secure or develop the required resources. It is at this stage where skills are developed. As needs become identified, The Fledge provides the opportunity for members to learn how to fill the needs of the project and become a valuable resource complete with knowledge and skills.

The last step in project based innovation is the “magic button”. This term describes the intersection of a community project and the guiding principles of The Fledge (hyper-inclusivity, chaos, systems, fail forward fast, and no barriers to entry). The ultimate hope is to encourage skills, interests, and passion development. As people gain new abilities and insight, they may realize hidden interests and talents. In the end, this could lead to an entrepreneurial endeavor, or propels project members into a career path where they may possess valuable skills.

BUSINESS INCUBATION (PRE-REVENUE)

People who have a distinct business idea, but have yet to establish a company represent the second set of criteria we use to distinguish people who are involved with The Fledge. Examples of how The Fledge identifies individuals who fall within this categorization could be someone who comes into The Fledge with a vision for a startup, or it could simply be a business idea generated from participation on a community based project.

At this stage, The Fledge leverages general business consulting strategies to incubate the business idea and map out the next steps. The goal is to help analyze competition, market demand, target customer, price, marketing strategies, product differentiation, etc. Depending on the idea, The Fledge can offer prototyping. In the end, this method is critical in supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, as The Fledge helps individuals specifically map out all of the intricacies in implementing their business idea(s). A good indicator of a project in the incubation stage is if they are pre-revenue, or rather if they have yet to launch their business and begun to generate revenue.

BUSINESS ACCELERATION (POST-REVENUE)

The last group consists of people who have an established business, and come to The Fledge to accelerate their business. At this stage, The Fledge first evaluates and identifies the needs of the business. What resources do they need in order to grow? What problems are they currently facing? From there, the second step is to connect the business with solutions. Depending on the business and their needs, these solutions are accessible either at The Fledge or somewhere outside The Fledge. An easy marker to identify those within this stage of business acceleration is if they have an ongoing revenue stream. If The Fledge can provide remedies to the business and the business chooses to accept our services, this opens the door for The Fledge to gain equity and revenue from the company. Because of our wide range of expertise, equipment, environments, etc., we offer a unique and effective atmosphere for companies looking to expand.

INCORPORATING THE FLEDGE BUSINESS MODEL

Any business, whether it be generated from a community-based project or comes from outside The Fledge, faces a decision once they start to generate revenue: either to stay within The Fledge or run things on their own. If a revenue-generating business incorporates itself in The Fledge, they are required to share a portion of revenue and equity with The Fledge. For all revenue-generating Fledglings, they are required to share 2% of revenue and 8% of equity with The Fledge if they are within the high tech marketplace and 10% of revenue and 0% of equity if a Fledging is in an industry other than high tech.

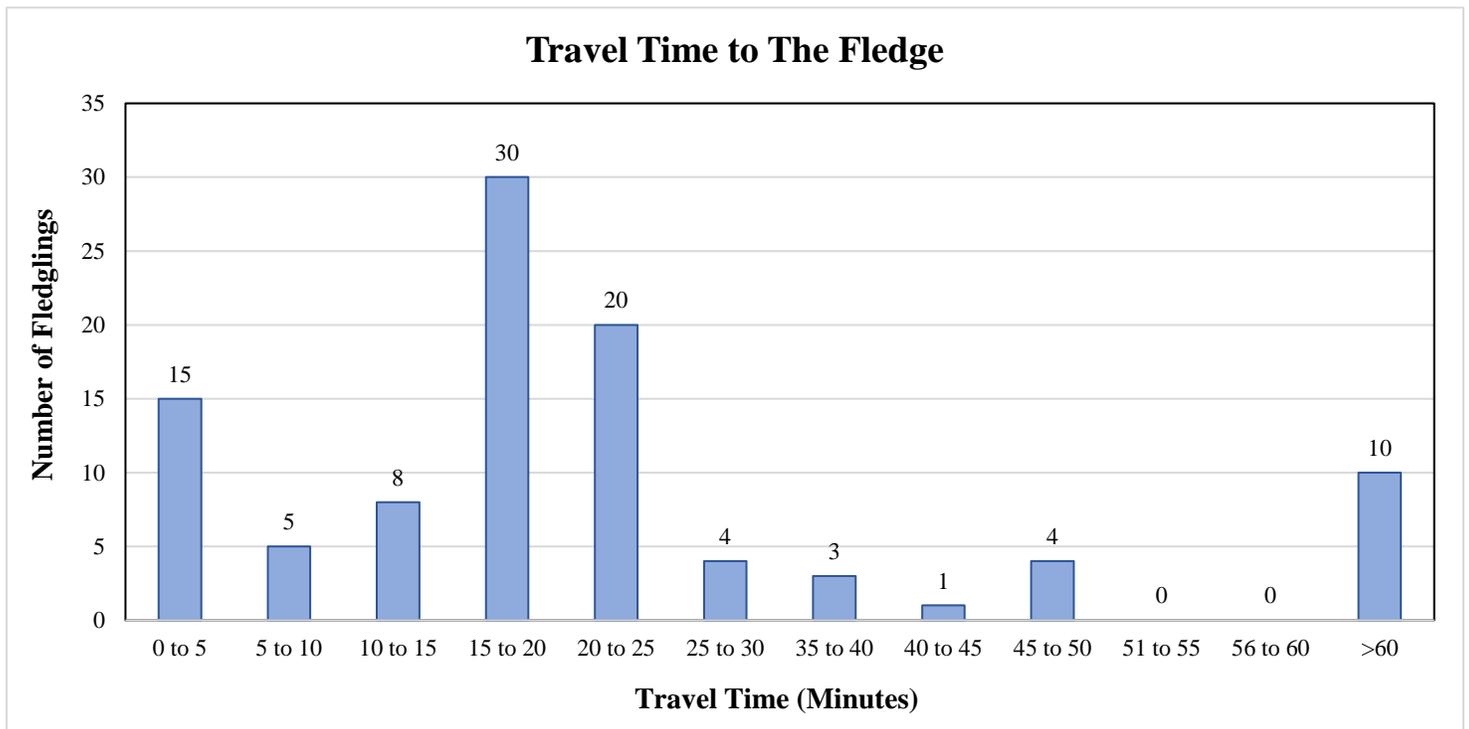
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

Understanding The Fledge’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats is key to understanding how The Fledge is positioned within the greater Lansing area economy. Where there is opportunity to improve processes, capitalize on strengths, and protect The Fledge against potential threats. Analyzing The Fledge through this framework also provides the foundation for others looking to establish their own incubator spaces to learn from the mistakes, successes, and how The Fledge has positioned the mission of the company within the local entrepreneurial market to serve others.

Strengths of The Fledge lie in the hyper inclusivity. The inclusiveness and diversity at The Fledge first breaks down any potential barrier to entry and allows for a welcoming ecosystem for anyone. As a result, there is a lot of opportunity to get closer to our population through more effective “trapping” and increasing the diversity of those who come into The Fledge. Yet another opportunity lies in the expansion of The Fledge itself along with the incubation model The Fledge operates under.

Weaknesses can be broken into two main buckets. One, identified opportunity for growth is simultaneously constrained by the dispensable cash available to purchase additional real-estate in order to offer more services to the community. Two, Fledglings face obstacles in obtaining transportation to The Fledge. While The Fledge strives to create a barrier-free environment where ideas and projects can be incubated and accelerated, some may face a logistical hurdle in physically coming to The Fledge’s new location in downtown Lansing.



CASE STUDY: BROKEN GLASS EVERYWHERE

There was never a thought that the hyper inclusivity promoted at The Fledge would backfire. The Fledge especially targets the people who society deems as useless and/or threatening—the kids whose potential is dismissed by teachers, the homeless, the felons, the impaired, and the people whose interests are dismissed by the affluent. All that is asked of those who come into The Fledge is to respect the staff, the mission, their peers, and to use the space for what it is meant for.

It all started out with a young individual who had no place to go or stay. Naturally, he was welcomed into The Fledge with open arms. As time went on, this person began to bring in numerous extra people and the space was soon taken advantage of. First, food was taken, bikes were temporarily stolen, and cigarettes were smoked inside. Second, it was discovered donation money was stolen and another entrepreneur's skateboard had been torn apart and used for parts. Ultimately, the associated individuals were told to leave and never come back. After all of this, they came back and broke through the window.



Immediately after the door was destroyed, it was decided to be made into art. The transformation was then shared across social media outlets with the following quote from Chief Seattle:

“Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Anything he does to the web, he does to himself.”

The person who vandalized The Fledge hurt the web, and by extension, hurt himself. We strengthened the web, but lost a strand of it. Almost immediately after posting about the incident, countless messages of support and outrage came pouring in from the community and Fledge alumni along with some priceless testimonials. A few are listed below:

“This is our home, where all of us can collaborate with likeminded people that we love and appreciate. The Fledge for us is family which we don't take lightly, meaning an incident such as this is an act of violence against our family.”

“Do not be discouraged or angry. Doors can be replaced.

What The Fledge really is can never be damaged, hurt, or broken, because we ARE The Fledge. For every destructive person, there are dozens of creative people ready to help.”

“Smash the door of a place with the beautiful concept to leave it open for anyone. Don't ever change guys. You disarmed my anger by saying chaos spawns innovation. I believe in what you're doing and it affects the way I think”

“The Fledge was such an influential part of my life. I spent months from morning till night in here and had the option to do whatever I wanted to this place, because that's the beauty of the fledge...exist as you are and create at will...but never once did defacing the property even come to mind.”



The point here is this: The Fledge runs a slightly tighter ship now, but this was bound to happen at some point because of the hyper-inclusivity of the space. In the end, the door may have been shattered but the resolve and commitment to the values that drive The Fledge have been strengthened. Hating people who have wronged The Fledge does not make the space itself better. Being nearly unconditionally trusting does not make The Fledge weak. In a sense, this incident has presented a chance to reiterate what The Fledge stands for. Hopefully this will bring a new wave of creativity that will make the people who want to take advantage of The Fledge feel out of place.

CONCLUSION

There are countless aspects that contribute to the success of The Fledge in developing businesses, individuals, and talents. No single principle, method, or piece of equipment singularly yields success. Rather, it is the resulting synergies between all aspects of The Fledge that positively impact businesses, individuals, and society. While The Fledge is unique in how it interacts with the community and those who enter the space, it can be successfully replicated in both urban and rural environments. The Fledge is simply one model of how a business incubator and accelerator can operate to effectively serve its members, businesses, and community. Thus, recognizing the complexities of the surrounding populous in which The Fledge operates represent the true genius of the space.

Beyond taking into account community intricacies, establishing a sustainable business incubator and accelerator similar to The Fledge will depend on a stable business model that can support the space itself. Lastly, a leader dedicated to upholding the decided-upon values, principles, and methods of the space represents the common thread tying it all together. If there is no leading force who drives the values and the operations of the incubator forward, the path to success becomes more difficult. Jerry Norris, the founder and current director of The Fledge provides the lifeblood for the space. Day in and day out, Mr. Norris continually devotes himself to the mission and members of The Fledge.

Though Mr. Norris cannot be easily replicated, an entrepreneurial ecosystem similar to The Fledge can thrive in every community. The key to replication of The Fledge is understanding that each part of The Fledge discussed in this Co-Learning Plan must be adapted to fit the local conditions, economy, and makeup of the target community.

About REI

The MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) seeks to identify and develop new economic development tools, models, policies and practices to support innovative economic development high-growth enterprises and job creation in distressed regions across the state. REI has established a new economic development ecosystem to cope with the ever-changing global and regional dynamic(s). Through this ecosystem, we engage innovative and creative minds which result in new economic development practices.

The REI University Center was established in 2011 with support from the U.S Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration, and in collaboration with the following Michigan State University offices:

Office of the Provost

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University Outreach and Engagement

MSU Extension Office

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