Silicon Valley Innovation Journal
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Table of Contents

Introduction and Initial Expectations ................................................................. 3

Day 0 – Sunday, May 20th ................................................................................. 4
Travel Day ........................................................................................................... 4

Day 1 – Monday, May 21st ............................................................................... 5
Cisco .................................................................................................................. 5
Electronic Arts ............................................................................................... 6
Motista ............................................................................................................. 9

Day 2 – Tuesday, May 22nd ............................................................................. 10
Genentech ........................................................................................................ 10
KIPP .................................................................................................................. 11
Amazon Lab 126 ............................................................................................ 12

Day 3 – Wednesday, May 23rd ....................................................................... 13
Zoosk .............................................................................................................. 13
Facebook ....................................................................................................... 14
Mayfield Fund ............................................................................................... 16
Cube ................................................................................................................ 17
Hinman CEOs Dinner .................................................................................... 18

Day 4 – Thursday, May 24th .......................................................................... 19
Accelops .......................................................................................................... 19
Google .......................................................................................................... 20
WePay ........................................................................................................... 21
Pixar ............................................................................................................... 23

Day 5 – Friday, May 25th ................................................................................. 24
Greylock Partners ........................................................................................... 24
Yammer .......................................................................................................... 25
LaunchSquad ............................................................................................... 26

Day 6 – Saturday, May 26th ........................................................................... 27
Travel Day ..................................................................................................... 27

Conclusions and Final Thoughts ...................................................................... 27
Introduction and Initial Expectations

Entrepreneurship is something I have been passionate about as far back as I can remember. Watching my father succeed as an entrepreneur indubitably pushed me to explore innovation and to create start up ventures. In high school I was passionate about robotics and computing and began writing computer programs during internships and class projects. It wasn’t long before I discovered a passion for technology entrepreneurship and to this day I follow disruptive technology trends intently and have tried numerous times to create my own high tech start up.

My interest in entrepreneurship led me to join the Hinman CEOs program at the University of Maryland so that I could work towards my start up goals in a classroom environment and with my fellow classmates. These same ambitions and Professor James Green pitching the course to the Hinman CEOs students led me to take part in the Innovation class at the University of Maryland. Very few classes offer the ability to gain an inside look and hands on approach to innovation and entrepreneurship but this class assuredly promised to do so. Furthermore, the opportunity to visit the Silicon Valley in this course, the fuel and lifeblood of the American high tech sector, meant that I could continue to understand the drive and advancement of start-ups and giant corporations alike. My goal in taking this course was to both understand the feasibility and opportunities in technology start up ventures and the path taken to success in this competitive industry. I also wanted to gain a better understanding of the traits and characteristics that make up the successful entrepreneur.

After seeing the list of companies the class would visit, I had high hopes that I would encounter the opportunity to speak to companies that were very different in function, size, and corporate culture. From the schedule I saw immediately that the companies we would be seeing ranged from start-ups like Cube and Motista to venture capital firms such as the Mayfield Fund and Greylock Partners. Based on these observations, I believed that I would get to understand how companies were started, how they were funded, how they went public, and how they eventually became household names. Based on my experiences and seeing firsthand the difficulty in starting a successful company, I also believed that I would see failure and how companies and people dealt with failure. With regards to life in the Valley, I had the idealistic view that everyone in the valley would be laid back, wear flip-flops and shorts to work and be generally content with their jobs. Additionally, seeing as we were going to California, I expected to be greeted with warm weather, palm trees, and easy living.

Despite having been to California before, this was my first visit to the Silicon Valley and it filled my mid with expectations driven by mass media representations. I was very hopeful the class would give me a better understanding of the innovation in the high tech industry and the path to meaningful and successful entrepreneurship. The week I spent in the Silicon Valley certainly opened my mind and changed the way I think about innovation. The misconceptions I had about the Silicon Valley became clear to me and the course prompted
me to reflect not only on the companies and technologies that drive how we work, play and live but also on my experiences with entrepreneurship.

Day 0 – Sunday, May 20th

Travel Day

After waking up at 3:30 AM to catch my 6 AM flight to San Francisco, my tiredness was soon replaced with excitement to be going to the Silicon Valley. As a huge fan of new technology and the societal, cultural, and economic impact it brings, I was eager to gain a first hand look at the biggest tech giants and start ups that were redefining the way we live.

When our travel group arrived, we checked into our hotel and immediately went to explore downtown San Francisco. As our taxi cab drew closer and closer to the city, we soon realized that everyone was dressed in costume with no apparent theme. People were dressed as everything, from Santa to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Our suspicions in the carefree nature of Californians were thoroughly surpassed but we soon learned that a yearly “Bay to Breakers” race was going on an it was customary to run in costume.

During the rest of the day, our travel group saw a lot of tourist attractions such as Golden Gate Park, Pier 39 and Fisherman’s Wharf but also got to meet people local to San Francisco. We ended up back at the hotel after catching a ride in a limo and finished the day in the hot tub at the hotel.

The people we met and interacted with during our first day were undoubtedly some of the more friendly people we had encountered and everyone was open to interacting with us and enduring the clichéd questions they had likely heard numerous times. My reflections this day consisted of pondering how characteristics were described as crucial to innovation in the “Innovators DNA” and whether the people I met today exhibited those characteristics. The people were very keen on learning more about us and engaging us, which correlated to the questioning, observing and networking traits. After understanding that perhaps the people in possibly the most innovative area in the world understood these key traits, I decided to try to be more active and engage the people I met during the week to improve my ability to innovate and discover disruptive innovations.
Day 1 – Monday, May 21th

Cisco

After grabbing a quick breakfast at the Holiday Inn, my fellow classmates and I quickly discussed our excitement in being in the Silicon Valley and boarded the travel vans. We were quickly immersed in the scenic route from South San Francisco to San Jose.

When we arrived at Cisco the class was immediately intrigued and in wonder over the gadgets and technologies scattered around the lobby. We then got a second breakfast courtesy of Cisco and were given a quick presentation of the businesses and clients that Cisco interacts with. It was amazing to see how Cisco had disrupted so many spaces within the Technology industry and the big problems they were focused on currently.

When we walked in and received a tour of the headquarters we saw giant VOIP telephones, “Stadium Vision” terminals, holographic televisions and metro terminals that looked like they came straight out of Hollywood rather than the Silicon Valley. A quick realization I had was that this environment—where the even ordinary things such as metro terminals are tinkered with—inspired and fostered dreamers. Even in big businesses such as Cisco, entrepreneurship is of foremost value and any item can be revolutionized.

Our group was also fortunate enough to see and interact with some amazing technologies currently being used by Cisco clients. When we walked to the second floor to get a hands-on view of Cisco Telepresence, a virtual secretary greeted us. It was amazing that the virtual secretary, who appeared on a giant screen, easily helped us find our way around the building. After being split into groups, we were able to sit in the Telepresence rooms that Cisco had set up. These rooms were filled with wall-to-wall televisions and huge speakers and were aimed at creating a better teleconference experience. After our quick interaction with the technology, it was incredible how lifelike the teleconference we had on the
Telepresence was. There was almost no lag and the actions and words of the other participants were easily sensed.

After our tour, we came back to the Cisco auditorium and were greeted by Vinod Peris, an engineering alumnus from the University of Maryland. He spoke to us briefly about his experiences at College Park and then about his life at Cisco and the problems he tackles on a daily basis with the Business Communications Network. He also spoke about how one big change observed by Cisco and a lot of people in the Tech industry in the “Internet of Things”. This concept involves connecting not only people and organizations with the Internet but also traditionally inanimate and non-connected appliances and hardware. For example, he mentioned that he imagines a world where hitting the snooze button on an alarm clock can trigger a delay in the coffee maker programmed for a certain time and the toaster at a certain time and so on. It is remarkable to see the focus that corporations such as Cisco have for everyday clients such as myself. It was also amazing to see once again that Cisco was able to envision solutions and apply their technologies where it would seem most unconventional and target the bottom of the pyramid with solutions to problems such as the “Internet of Things”. It seems that often times these tech companies truly envision what the modern consumer wants before they know they want it themselves.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

My key takeaways during the Cisco tour was their ability to solve problems for clients while anticipating technology and business trends such as globalization and the “Internet of Things”. Technologies such as Telepresence really allow people to be more connected and allow enterprises to not be burdened by geographical limitations. Furthermore, the fact that companies like Cisco anticipate and work towards upcoming trends such as the “Internet of Things” means that they can continually disrupt the technology space. Furthermore, surrounding the campus with Cisco technology and having Cisco history timelines on the walls really showed me how proud the people at Cisco were of their work and the innovative environment established for Cisco workers. Another takeaway that I had from speaking with Vinod Peris is to really put time into working hard and become great at something. This concept was driven home in his talk about Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Outliers” and he serves as a living example of this lesson.

**Electronic Arts**
Since just about everyone in our class had experience playing an EA videogame, there was a sense of excitement in the air when our class headed to the EA games after visiting Cisco. Our excitement was only heightened when we walked into the lobby and were surrounded by videogames and huge televisions broadcasting upcoming EA titles. Many students in the group immediately rushed to grab a controller while we waited for our tour guides. It was incredible to see how happy the employees at EA were and how much pride they took in their work—evident through the banners, statues and videogame consoles that were in the lobby.

Once we started out tour and were taken through the campus outside, it seemed that the EA campus mimicked a college campus. As my tour group walked through the EA campus mall, we remarked how similar it was to the mall at the University of Maryland (the employees sprawled out on the mall further instantiated our observation). We continued on the tour and saw the cafeteria at EA, which was very dissimilar to the UMD diners and also saw the EA gym, which was remarkable. The EA campus matched what most of the classmates, including myself, believed big companies in the Silicon Valley would be like. Coming into the Silicon Valley, my classmates and I though that the Silicon Valley would house giant corporations with an unconventional environment and this expectation was met at EA, where employees were pampered and given a low stress atmosphere. The tour guides also seemed to stress that the number of hours an employee put in was not nearly as important as the quality of the work that the employee produced.

After our tour, the whole class congregated in one room and enjoyed lunch and Q & A with one of the game developers at EA. After being asked a plethora of questions by the students, he discussed the lifecycle of games in great details and talked about how he mediates teams and people within teams to create amazing products. He also talked about a lot of common misconceptions and the attitude that EA exhibits while making crucial decisions within games. A big takeaway I had was that EA focuses a great deal on the psychology of gamers and at one point it was mentioned that sometimes video games have to be toned down in terms of how realistic there are. Also an interesting thing we learned about was how EA approached series games, where one title was released a year and how hey came up with wish lists and progressed through goals in the software development life cycle.

Next, Brad Margolis, the Director of Organization Effectiveness and Change spoke to us about how teams innovate and approach problems at EA. As a University of Maryland graduate, Brad first introduced how he got into his role and how he found what he loved doing at EA. It was interesting to see Brad go from not knowing what he wanted to do as a career, immediately develop a sense of purpose after talking to a friend about his personality traits. After learning that his interests lie within psychology, Brad has been directing change and instrumenting innovation at EA and loves the work he does. It was also amazing the amount of time that Brad gave our class and for that I am very greatful.
To give us a hands-on approach to the problems he faces with groups and the solutions he implements, Brad set up a game for the whole class to play as a team. He began by setting up a mat with electrical sensors on the ground and gave us a quick introduction to the game, which involved working as a team to cross the mat without triggering alarms that previous teammates had. The game had a money component and was meant to represent the real life challenges that teams confront when developing software at EA. Throughout the game, our team had to communicate using non-verbal cues and demonstrate our communication skills. The first time around, our group failed and did not communicate well with each other. We immediately saw how hard it was to navigate the course and work with each other when everyone was trying to talk at the same time. It was obvious also that many people wanted to assume the same roll and that a lot of people had no idea what their role was throughout the entire game. It became obvious to us after our failure what we did wrong and we listed solutions to Brad who approved of our reflections. We were then given a second chance to go through the game and succeeded.

It was amazing to see how the solutions we offered were implemented immediately and how much more smoothly our team communicated the second time. Some reflections I had was that with more and more experience together, a group can build a rapport and understand the strong and weak points that each team member might have. Also, I saw immediately that innovation and the communication of new ideas could more easily be transported in small teams where the team members knew each other intimately. Something else I saw was that often times there are multiple people who want to do the same job but for the good of the team, people have to make sacrifices. We also saw the importance of some individuals being solely in charge of communication. While this might seem counter intuitive, having people only responsible for transporting ideas and opinions from one person to another allow the team to work better as a whole and mesh.

After our session with Brad, our group headed over to the EA store and were able to purchase EA videogames and merchandise at discounted prices. We were also able to see several EA artifacts from their long history and how they have impacted and driven the way we approach videogames today. It was very interesting to see how committed people at EA were to gaming and every employee we talked to was a huge gamer.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

It was very interesting to see how communication and teamwork were held as the cornerstone of good innovation at EA. When working in huge teams to deliver big video game releases, it is easy to see how hard it can be for people to work together efficiently. Also, it can be very hard to gauge user acceptance and the amount of user testing truly signifies the dedication to disruptive innovation in the videogame industry. Another very interesting thing that we learned is the ability to accept something as a failure, scrap it and move on. Often times it can be very hard to cut losses and give up on something that you have worked on for long periods of times but the consequences of not doing so are much more. The communication between teams at EA is really amazing and we learned that often times, pieces of video games are recycled and put into other games through great communication between video game teams.
For dinner, our class had the privilege of meeting with Scott Magids, a University of Maryland alumnus and CEO/Founder of Motista. The company is responsible for aggregating and publishing consumer data to companies. This data tells corporations about purchase information of consumers and works to allow targeted advertisements and product placement. In addition to telling us about Motista, Scott was able to tell the class about his previous ventures and what he learned from them. One thing he told us was that he started a hedge fund at the age of 18 and other companies before starting Motista. Another theme seemed to be appearing which was to not be afraid to fail or expect too much from our start-ups in the early stages. This attitude of releasing ideas and just gauging response is something that was seen throughout our trip and I think that it is really a part of Silicon Valley culture.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**
A big takeaway that Scott imparted with us was about building your network. Scott mentioned that this was a big part of starting ventures and that having the right partner and one that you could trust is a huge factor that contributes to the success of a company. Scott mentioned that it was important to build up your network and have connections even before you realize that you need these connections and that you never know who could help your company succeed. It was interesting to see that Scott had started companies in so many industries and that the big network he had was indubitably a big reason why. Another thing that Scott mentioned is that San Francisco and the Silicon Valley is a very nurturing place to be for entrepreneurs and that it is easy to meet people passionate about starting their company there. He mentioned that it is ok to fail and that it is necessary to realize mistakes or to learn how to improve. I reflected on my past experiences and resolved that I would rapid prototype my ideas and gauge them with users and not be afraid to fail in the future.
Day 2 – Tuesday, May 22th

Genentech

Although our van got lost on the way to San Francisco, we were able to still admire the location of Genentech as it was right on the waterfront of the Pacific Ocean. As we came in to the campus, we were escorted to the second floor where we were seated and got breakfast. We met from a UMD alumnus at Genentech working on the financial side of producing drugs for consumers. Before we delved into the details of his work, he introduced the work that Genentech to those who did not know and went on to his journey to Genentech from Maryland.

It was really interesting to see how companies such as Genentech in the healthcare industry protect their drugs and creations with patents and the lifecycles that are associated with these patents. It was also very interesting to see the immense amount of research that goes into producing drugs and also the benefits of being first to the market with a new drug. This premium and intellectual property licensing meant that there is a very heated battle to be the first with a new product and that innovation is integral to the success of companies like Genentech.

Another thing that was shown is the distinct phases that go into researching and developing drugs for people to use. There were three different stages of drug maturity before entering a market and the legal, scientific, and economic aspects of these phases were described in detail. Continual research is also being done as to the consumer need for new drugs and the evolution of illness patterns. One last thing that was touched on was the acquisition of Genentech by the Roche group, which meant that a more global consumer base could be impacted by the drugs that Genentech produces.
**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

It was inspiring to see how the consumer always came first to Genentech and that often times, the triple bottom line and conscious capitalism was practiced to ensure that the reach of drugs was maximized. We often think of consumer electronics when we think of the Silicon Valley but the booming healthcare industry is prominent in the valley as well and the need to innovate is literally a matter of life or death for these companies. Being the first to the market for a lot of pharmaceuticals means that not only is intellectual property protected but also that higher margins can be applied and that brand and product stickiness can be achieved more easily.

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### KIPP

One of the most rewarding visits of the Silicon Valley trip was the tour that the class got of KIPP—Knowledge is Power Program. During the tour, we were able to see firsthand how technology is changing the paradigm of education and learning for students and teachers. The program is dedicated to helping underprivileged kids learn and aims on sending the kids to colleges and higher education. After a quick intro to the program, we were able to get a look at a day in the life of a KIPP student.

As we approached the computer lab, I was immediately intrigued to see how students were using information from the Khan Academy to learn since I often used Khan Academy videos to learn concepts for my courses. After I began talking to some students about the courses they were excited to tell me about everything they were learning and how the education there was made more exciting through gamification—there were badges to collect, points to earn and levels to climb. Furthermore, students were able to choose what they learned about and they could see their progress at all times. It was also apparent that the kids had high aspirations—a student I spoke with wanted to play in the NFL and be an astronaut—and that they wanted to keep learning and go to college. After seeing the computer lab, we were allowed to see the traditional classrooms that the students also were a part of.

It was amazing to see that the kids were so involved in class and it was great to receive a tour from one of the students. After seeing the classrooms, we had a chance to speak again with the teachers and we saw the impact that Khan Academy had on them. We learned that both parents and teachers could receive diagnostics on student performance. With this information, teaching can be targeted to help struggling students and gauge the class understanding of certain concepts.
Key Takeaways and Reflections
It was remarkable to get a first hand look at how technology is changing the way students learn. Although many of us at the University of Maryland have been exposed to e-learning, it was interesting to see how empowering knowledge could be for kids from underprivileged locations. This experience made me understand that using technology in unconventional and original ways is really the way to innovate. KIPP does exactly this with the Khan Academy software. Also, it was amazing to see how teachers and administrators could more efficiently teach students and target areas for student growth. The opportunity for students to learn more effectively and with better diagnostics means that kids will not get left behind. I was also able to reflect on the privileges that I have had—ones that I have often taken for granted. The opportunity to have a quality education is lost on many kids but KIPP is trying to change this and is providing an innovative way for students to learn and for teachers to teach.

Amazon Lab 126

After leaving the Knowledge is Power Program Oakland campus, we traveled to Amazon Lab 126, an R&D laboratory that is responsible for many Amazon products such as the Kindle. As we approached a building with no distinction, we quickly realized that the location of Lab 126 is probably held in secrecy. When we went inside, these thoughts were confirmed as we were given RFID nametags and were under the eyes of many cameras at all times. As I saw these measures taken to protect the developments that Amazon Lab 126 has made, I realized that the security of product information is inherent in the competitive advantage that companies need to thrive in the Silicon Valley.

Although many questions our class had went unanswered, there were several things that the University of Maryland alumnus stressed. One thing he told about was his path to Amazon Lab 126, from being a psychology major at the University of Maryland. It was interesting to see how he was able to learn computer science and now worked as a software engineer for many products that have been released from the lab. It was also interesting to hear him talk about the connectedness of the technology industry and how hard it was to really keep secrets from other companies and the industry. One thing he mentioned was that for example, some times you will not see Apple employees eating at their usual spot because they are preparing for a product launch. Another thing that he talked to us about was how co-­‐opetition worked in the Silicon Valley. This concept meant that companies would often share secrets with each other in hopes that they could both improve their products and learn information crucial to bettering their offerings.

Key Takeaways and Reflections
It was very interesting to see Amazon Lab 126 and the secrecy and mystery that exist between companies in the Silicon Valley. This occurrence made sense because of the huge value of technologies and the high prices that companies spend to research and develop the products that we use everyday. It was also very interesting to see that companies do share information with each other to better themselves through what is called co-­‐opetition.
Throughout my visit to Lab 126, I felt that the company had an Apple like vibe, where product creations were guarded heavily.

**Day 3 – Wednesday, May 23**

**Zoosk**

On our third day visiting companies in the Silicon Valley, we first made our way to downtown San Francisco to visit Zoosk, an online dating site created by a University of Maryland alumnus. The founder of Zoosk went on in great detail over the entrepreneurial pursuits he had in college with his business partner and how he soon moved to the Silicon Valley to follow his dreams of creating a business. It was interesting to hear him talk about how he recommended moving to the west coast to start a business just because of the amount of support and talent that could be acquired in the technical fields.

Also during the Q&A, the founder of Zoosk mentioned that the name of the company was created because he felt that most successful software companies have two “o”s in their name such as Facebook, Google, and Yahoo. He also mentioned that he believed that the letters K and S were sexy letters and that he wanted to incorporate them into the name. This talk made me reflect on how hard it has often been for me to come up with a name for a product when I have an idea. It was interesting to hear Zoosk’s creation and I wondered how I could apply this naming framework for an idea I come up with later.

After the Q&A, we got a chance to see the Zoosk office and learn more about the organizational structure of the company. The layout of the office was not that a traditional office. The whole time I was walking around I remember thinking that the whole office seemed so open and I did notice that quadrants of the office were split up based on the
business functions that were present. Another thing we saw on a whiteboard was that there was an incentive program for employees to perform well. This was very interesting to see since this is also not a usual attribute in offices, especially outside of the Silicon Valley.

After hearing some final remarks from the speaker, it was interesting to see him talk about his experience in a business plan competition at the University of Maryland. He seemed to really emphasize that starting a company would not be easy at first but after sticking with your concept and doing some market research, Zoosk was able to have stickiness and really build upon the network effect that drives consumer adoption for the site. Another interesting thing that was mentioned was that the founder though it was important to focus on the product for a long time in the early stages and not worry about networking until the product was solid.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**
It was very interesting to see the speaker talk about brand stickiness and breaking into a market that might already be saturated. The speaker told us about his own struggles in reaching a k factor of over 1 and bringing back old users and new users. Another thing that was interesting to hear was when the speaker encouraged us to move to the Silicon Valley in order to chase our dreams for entrepreneurship. While others had told me this, it was not until I had the chance to visit the Valley that I could see the reasoning behind this. The amount of support and the numerous people with similar goals really drives entrepreneurs to the Silicon Valley. Another interesting thing was that the founder told us to not network until our products were really solid. This was contradictory to the information that Scott Magids gave us which just goes to show you the different entrepreneurs and skills focused on. While Magids was very strong in the networking skill with the Innovators DNA framework, it seemed that Zoosk’s founders focused on the other skills in the framework.

**Facebook**

As our car pulled in to the Facebook office parking lot, the excitement and intrigue on all of our faces was visible. While some of us quickly checked into Facebook HQ on our smartphones, others admired the Maserati and Lotus sports cars that littered the parking lot. When we entered the Facebook lobby we were confronted with another surprise—
huge graffiti art all over the front wall. As we could tell immediately, this was no conventional company.

After checking in and getting nametags, our group had the opportunity to make our way upstairs to a meeting room with a University of Maryland alumnus Pedro. Following the recent IPO, Facebook seemed to be in a very secretive state as was expected. As we walked up the stairs, covered in more graffiti, we were told not to take pictures of anything or wander away from our tour guide. Here we saw the phrases “Fail Harder” and “Move Fast and Break Things”, which I will elaborate on in the takeaway section.

While talking with Pedro, we were able to learn about the ways that Facebook promotes innovation in its workforce. It seemed that Facebook invested a lot in creating disruptive innovation and intrapreneurship, including hosting Hack-a-thons and being able to pitch ideas to anyone at anytime. The huge amounts of innovations that Facebook has created since its inception has been a product of communication between teammates. It seemed more and more that being able to bounce ideas off of co-workers and friends is crucial to creating innovation and breakthroughs. Furthermore, we also heard that employees at Facebook have great access to the upper management including Mark Zuckerberg, who was said to frequent the campus and talk with employees about their ideas.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

I think that the biggest takeaway that I had from Facebook is that the “Move Fast and Break Things” and “Fail Harder” mentality was crucial for their prolonged success. Facebook is at the forefront of the social networking space, which is highly valued and highly contested between many companies and start-ups alike. In order for someone to not eat their lunch, Facebook is always looking to better themselves and encourage employees to “break things” in order to gain insight on areas to improve. They also encourage employees to “fail harder” because they want to try new things and change the offerings that the company supports.

Another key takeaway that I had from my Facebook visit was that communication and a sense of community is crucial for developing and fostering innovation. We saw this in EA also but it became very apparent that proper communication is what drives companies to success. This trait is also much harder for a big company to have than a start up. Another thing that we noticed is that employees in a relaxed state of mind, with not just employees but rather friends, can be counted on to think creatively and outside the box. With competitions and social events such as a Hack-a-thon, not only can creative ideas be discussed and shown off but also relationships between coworkers can be made. Its funny to think that Facebook, a company that thrives on connecting the world, spends so much time and effort to really connect its own employees and their ideas.
Walking into the Mayfield Fund, I had no idea what to expect seeing as I had never been to a Venture Capital office before. What I did know is that the Mayfield Fund is one of the most respected VC firms in the Silicon Valley and is known for its astute investments in emerging technologies such as Cloud Computing, which is a technology I have currently been working with.

As we took seats in the traditional boardroom setting, we met our speaker, Rajeev Batra. After talking to us about his course from Maryland to the Silicon Valley, Rajeev spoke with us about the process behind funding start-ups, which was indubitably a great subject for all of us to hear about. It was really interesting that Rajeev believed that Venture Capital firms do not really fund an idea or concept but rather the team of entrepreneurs behind the idea. This made sense when I thought about it since rarely had my ideas or concepts been the same as when I originally thought of them. Rajeev mentioned that concepts and ideas change and the ability for entrepreneurs to react and adapt to change is something that all Venture Capital firms want to see. I was very interested to see how Venture Capital firms broke down the technical aspects of projects and decided which technologies would emerge in the future. Rajeev also explained to us that just about all of the investment team had previously been involved in tech start-ups themselves so they were familiar with the space and how the Silicon Valley operates.

Throughout the course of our talk, Rajeev went on to tell us how gathering knowledge and going to higher studies really impacted what he wanted to do. It seemed that he like many other gained invaluable experience working for a couple of years before starting a company.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**
Some key takeaways that Rajeev imparted to us were the importance of being able to adapt to change and to see the opportunities in the future for new start ups. He also mentioned that getting experience in industry is very important and that getting more specialized training can act as a catalyst for new ideas.

**Cube**

When our class drove into the Cube office, we thought we were lost and were surprised to see that the office was in a residential area. We were equally surprised to be walking into a basement to see Cube. Although we had been seeing developed and middle stage companies in the Silicon Valley, it was interesting to see what is typically though of when a start up company is mentioned. This small-scale company had less than 10 members and worked in a basement to accomplish their dreams. Seeing this was truly inspiring to me—it showed me how great companies start up and learning about the work that Cube does was very cool. Also, seeing that a Hinman CEO alumnus was part of the company was interesting as well.

After getting situated in the minimalistic basement the team at Cube began to tell us about their experiences and what drove them to entrepreneurship. Cube had been offered Series A funding and had received a spot in the Y Combinator and aimed at allowing restaurants and small businesses to receive payments through a mobile and web platform. Additionally, the founders of Cube mentioned that they had received offers to be bought out and had declined. Amidst all this success the founders of Cube still told us that the sheer amount of work that had to be put in to get Cube to where it is today was incredible.

Recently, the founders of Cube are looking to quickly expand their operations and hired an employee from Microsoft who spoke to us about his experiences. He told us about how he was not intellectually challenged at a big company like Microsoft at all and working in a
start-up environment really pushed him to work hard and inspired him to build something that was his own. We were also able to see that the team hired a chef and that they had hired a dozen interns for the summer to help with the start-up. As we left, we saw the employees of Cube walk out the door and start a pick up game of basketball during the middle of the day. There is no doubt in my mind that the freedom associated with these start up companies is incredible and really makes you take a second glance at corporate culture on the east coast.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**
The biggest thing I got from this visit was that it is important to focus on your idea once you have one that works and just work hard. The guys at Cube spent a lot of time and effort on their product and were able to work together to create something amazing. Also their belief in their product and vision allowed them to continue improving their product amidst offers to be bought out. I think that another inspiring thing is that it was easily visible how great friends the employees of Cube are and the fact that they wrestle and play basketball together furthered this observation. Another thing that was mentioned based on this was that the members of the company really trust each other and this allows their company to function more smoothly and efficiently.

**Hinman CEOs Dinner**

Another amazing experience during the Silicon Valley Trip was the visit to Brian Hinman’s house. After being greeted by Brian Hinman and his wife, we had the opportunity to take in a breathtaking view from his patio and indulge in some great eats. As some of us were talking we all agreed that these were definitely the spoils of entrepreneurship and that the ability to impact as many people as Brian did is a remarkable opportunity. As the night went on, we also had the chance to speak with previous Hinman CEO alumni who currently lived in the Silicon Valley.
While speaking to many other Hinman CEO alumni, it was thrilling to see how successful a multitude of entrepreneurs were here in California. For a long period of time, I had the opportunity to speak with a former University of Maryland Computer Science student who told me about his current business as an iPhone developer in San Francisco. He told me about how he did not really seriously consider entrepreneurship until he joined the Hinman CEOs program and how the classes gave him business training that supplemented his technical coursework at the University of Maryland. He is currently doing well in San Francisco and is expanding his business currently to meet the high demand for the programming services he offers.

After talking with some of the Hinman CEO alumni, I had the opportunity to speak with Brian Hinman itself. On top of thanking him for all of his support with the Hinman CEOs program, I asked him about his route to entrepreneurship and his current activities. He also spoke to me about his view on entrepreneurship and suggested that we take the chance to learn as much as possible. Brian mentioned going to grad school and doing research to really change the way he though about the telecommunications industry. He also spoke about how he does not believe in the traditional Venture Capital industry and how anyone can stand between entrepreneurs and a pile of money. His approach to donate money to the University of Maryland to run the Hinman CEOs program is really indicative of the disruptive thinking abilities he possesses and I can honestly say the program has changed my plans after graduation many times over.

Key Takeaways and Reflections
It was very insightful to hear from previous Hinman CEO students who moved to the Silicon Valley. Since I was planning on moving to the Silicon Valley after seeing the companies and culture, it was really great for me to talk with these entrepreneurs about the challenges they faced. Another thing that I heard from Brian Hinman and a lot of other established entrepreneurs is that it is crucial to gain experience whether through working or grad school and improve on the knowledge imparted to us through the undergraduate classes we have taken.

Day 4 – Thursday, May 24th

Accelops
On day 4, we started by visiting Accelops, a company that specializes in aggregating data center monitoring information for customers. This start-up is focused on enterprises as clients and we met with Dr. Bhattacharya to talk about his experiences developing the company. He spoke to us in great detail about the opportunities he had before being a part of Accelops. In the recent past, he was able to found Protego Networks, a company aimed at furthering the information security appliance product offerings at the current time. He mentioned that he also worked with Cisco to branch out the product and sold the company to Cisco.

It was very interesting to hear about how Dr. Bhattacharya spent time really perfecting his skills and knowledge of data centers and joined the start up crowd with a lot of knowledge and ideas for how things could be done better. We also talked to him about cooperation in the sense that Accelops works with a lot of other companies to improve their distribution and retail channels to achieve a global presence. The chance to ask Dr. Bhattacharya questions about his past and the future for Accelops was very intriguing and it became obvious that he had a lot of specialized knowledge that has helped Accelops grow quickly.

Key Takeaways and Reflections
After our Q&A with Mr. Bhattacharya, it was interesting to see him talk about the senior management at the firm and how trust between the senior management is crucial. He mentioned that he started his previous company with another person who is present at Accelops. I reflected on how I chose whom to partner with for the ideas that I came up with and it was always someone who was a close friend of mine. Another thing that Dr. Bhattacharya showed me is that it can be very important to get a high depth of knowledge in at least one subject. The companies that Dr. Bhattacharya founded worked with similar technologies but they worked because of his experience and depth of knowledge with these technologies. I resolved that I would learn more and more about the technologies that I am already familiar with and try to implement them the next time I had an idea.
After making our way to Google, all of us were really impressed by the campus and were immediately reminded of another college campus. As we walked towards the Googleplex, we saw several Google employees enjoying themselves outside and basking in the sun during their lunch breaks. We soon made our way inside a building and checked in and were offered complimentary drinks. We also soon heard mumblings that Sergey Brin would be approaching the building we were in and we all became excited immediately. Since Brin is not only a co-founder of Google but is also a University of Maryland alumnus, it was great to hear about him on campus. After waiting a couple of minutes, with our camera phones ready, we were able to see him walk down a long staircase wearing Google glasses and immediately began snapping pictures of him.

Our group then made our way to meet Jimmy Lyons, our tour guide at Google and a University of Maryland alumnus. He quickly explained that after starting his own business “Feed the Turtle” he was recruited to work on the business side of Google. Jimmy talked about how entrepreneurship was important to him and how Google is very supportive of entrepreneurship. Things such as 20% time really promote the employees at Google to go beyond the current offerings and think about how to disrupt a space that Google wants to get in. The employees we met with also talked in detail about how Google offers a multitude of perks including health insurance, transportation, and food. These employees were genuinely happy and really loved working at Google because they felt that they worked at a company where they were really cared for. It is remarkable to see how Google really believes in each and every one of their employees and as a result, many products and services such as Google New, Gmail and Google Plus have surfaced because of ideas that Google employees have had.

It is certainly harder to promote change and innovation in smaller companies but when you have a company like Google where disruptive innovation is not only encourage but also is rewarded innovation can develop consistently.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

Some key takeaways that I had from my visit to Google was that it is important to really foster employees and allow them to pitch ideas and work on what excites them. Google allows people do exactly this with numerous initiatives and really empowers its workforce by doing so. Furthermore, I think it is really cool to see that Google believes that amazing ideas can come from any employee no matter what their rank is. The fact that our class was able to see Sergey Brin walking around the campus shows you that obviously you must have pretty good exposure to the upper management at Google as an employee. My reflection on the happiness of employees was that if I ever started a company, I would treat my employees with a lot of respect and believe in every one of them.

WePay
The next stop for the day was at WePay where we talked with one of the co-founders about his experiences after college and during the founding of WePay. It was especially interesting to hear from the speaker because of his non-technical background, something that is not too often seen in founders of tech start-ups.

When talking with the speaker in a Q&A session, we were able to pick his brains about life after college, something we would all encounter in just a couple of years. The speaker talked about how he graduated with Boston University with a good friend and ended up living with him the next year while his friend was an investment banker. After his friend worked for a year and saved up around $40,000, the two of them ended up starting their business and it has taken off quickly from there. The original idea for WePay spawned from the difficulty of paying for a bachelor party that the founders were financing.

The company was based on providing groups with an easy way to pay for events and merchandise. Also, the speaker told us about the new opportunities that are available to use the tool for web merchandise and small business. The aim of the company was to provide a better way to pay for group items than PayPal and from the demo that we received it definitely looked like a better alternative. Furthermore, the speaker told us about how the security measures at WePay make sure that things like Facebook and Twitter accounts are checked too, on top of email addresses. This makes it harder to fake accounts and bypass the security procedures in place.

Another thing that our speaker showed us was the presentation they showed VC companies to receive funding. This was very interesting as some of us hope to apply for funding in the near future and the presentation that WePay showed us was very cool. Also, the presentation showed us the growth expectations for WePay, which the speaker showed us.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

Some key takeaways that I had from my WePay visit is that often times a good idea is right in front of you, just like how the WePay founders recognized the opportunity to create a better payment system while financing a bachelor party. Upon reflection, I told myself that I would pay attention to opportunities for creating ventures. Another thing that I learned from the WePay founder is that even if you do not have a technical or computer science, you should learn if you want to start a technology company. The speaker told us about how he learned basic HTML and CSS to better understand the company and it’s inner workings.
After this visit, I started to learn more programming and am working on learning as much as I can in this sense.

**Pixar**

When we were told that our next site was Pixar, just about everyone was ecstatic. Although the visit was a long way from the WePay office, it was well worth it and as we got to the Pixar office a spectacular sight of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Pacific Ocean first greeted us. Then as we walked towards the building, we saw some of the protagonists from Pixar films such as Toy Story and Monsters Inc. and we were all transported back to our childhood. After signing in and enjoying an amazing meal, we continued our tour and headed upstairs to talk with Marc Greenburg, the CFO of Pixar.

As we got to the second floor and saw even more Pixar memorabilia in the hallways, we were once again hit with nostalgia. Then, our group sat down and had a Q&A with Marc about Pixar and the films that they have produced. We had a very insightful talk about the nature of funding films and the behind the scenes action that goes into making a feature film at Pixar. It was very interesting to see the process that films go through before being made and that the ideas are screened by the upper management at Pixar. There are also writers in charge of coming up with the next films and they are given authority over a lot of the creative ideas from Pixar. Another thing we learned is that after the ideation and vetting process, the films are ball parked in financial terms and that Marc was in charge of this procedure.

Another thing that was talked about quite often was the impact of Steve Jobs and Disney on the company. It was interesting to hear how Steve Jobs had such a huge impact on Pixar and Marc went on to tell us how even the bolts that made up the building were hand chosen by Steve. Even though bolts were much more expensive than other options, Steve insisted that the company be built with a hand made feel and that the movies produced would have the same effect. Also, when Disney acquired Pixar, there was a huge dispute with Steve and Disney over the creative content and the right to control the movies that Pixar produced.

After being shown the entire second floor, I was able to see some amazing mementos from all of my favorite animated movies and also got to see some upcoming film props. As we were leaving we also got to talk to some of the Pixar employees and heard them talk about their experiences at Pixar. They told us that it was like they were kids again everyday when they came to work and the chance to speak with the employees really inspired me.
Key Takeaways and Reflections
I think that one of the biggest takeaways that I got from the Pixar visit is that it is really important to do what you love for a living. The innovative people at Pixar really reminded me of this and I could see immediately that they all absolutely loved the work that they did. Another thing that I really enjoyed seeing was that Steve Jobs had a big impact on some of the little details of the Pixar office and culture. Having that care and attention from a CEO is what I think makes a company prosper and I think that is one of the reasons why Apple is such a thriving company. Being able to see all of the amazing characters from my favorite animated films also brought me back to my childhood and is an experience I will remember for a long time.

Day 5 – Friday, May 25th
Greylock Partners

On our final day visiting companies in the Silicon Valley, we started with Greylock Partners a well-respected VC firm that has made very insightful investments in the past. I read in the past that Greylock Partners was one of the early companies to invest in Facebook so I was very excited to see the company an the environment that housed the investment team at Greylock. After getting situated in a boardroom not much unlike the one at the Mayfield Fund, we were able to speak with some of the Investment team and the head recruiter at Greylock.

After speaking with the investors at Greylock I was very eager to hear how they made investments and what they looked for in entrepreneurs. It was interesting to learn that the investment team at Greylock looks for people that have drive, passion and a truly great idea that not only brings change but sets about to change the world. Also, it was very interesting to hear about the paths that the investors at Greylock took to get there. One of the speakers was telling us that he worked as a consultant and that after a while he switched to being a venture capitalist because of his love for entrepreneurship. It was also interesting to learn that many of the people on the investment team at Greylock are former entrepreneurs themselves and that most are from an engineering background.
Our class also got a chance to speak with the head recruiter at Greylock who spoke about how companies are supported and how she helps companies grow in early stages. It was interesting to hear about opportunities for college students to work at start-ups and learn about early stage companies first hand. After speaking with the recruiter it was incredible to see how many opportunities were available in the computer science field and the vast number of companies focused on technology.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**
Some key takeaways that I had from my visit to Greylock Partners is that it is important to hone my technical skills and that it is equally important to have big ideas. After hearing from the recruiters and investment team, it was enlightening that both brought up increasing technical capacity and that in the Silicon Valley even business and financial roles require keen technical acumen. Another thing I thought was great was to hear about how key it is to dream big and really work towards an idea that changes the paradigm of how things are done.

**Yammer**

The next stop we had was to Yammer, a company aimed at promoting social networking at work. It was interesting to see how Yammer took the concept of social networking and applied it to an enterprise setting. The concept of Yammer sounded very original from the beginning and the chance to see the office was fascinating. As we walked into the office, we saw that it was unconventional as many Silicon Valley offices were. The first thing I saw was that there was a dog in the office and after me and some other classmates had the chance to play with it, we were lead into a meeting room to speak with a University of Maryland alumnus.

As we settled into the room and talked with the speaker, we learned some really cool facts about Yammer. We also saw how it delivered a clear competitive advantage over traditional office communication software. Through its intuitive communication applications and employee productivity monitors, the company has been able to receive more than $85 million in funding. Furthermore, we saw that Yammer is a company that eats it’s own dog food and tests out all of the software produced in house. The company also maintains a start-up feel and as we walked around, we saw personalized cubicles, snacks and very happy employees. The employees also seemed very connected with each other probably due to the social networking tool’s wide use at the office. Also, the speaker
informed us that there are several retreats that the company takes as a whole since there are only a couple hundred employees in total. This allows for a connected and friendly environment and allows people to collaborate and communicate ideas with each other very effectively.

After leaving the Silicon Valley, we later learned that Microsoft bought Yammer to integrate into its enterprise offerings. The tool is very useful for transforming a very vertical company to one that is very flat.

**Key Takeaways and Reflections**

A big takeaway that I had from visiting Yammer was a first hand look at the Blue Ocean model for a business plan. While many companies and start-ups are focused on creating a new Facebook or social network for consumers, not many people are focused on an issue like enterprise social networking. However, Yammer is a creative company that fills this void and does it beautifully. Speaking with the engineers and alumni firsthand also let us learn about how communication and connectedness really makes a workplace a home for people and allows workers to feel happy and empowered by the work that they do. I think that it is very important to maintain a start-up like feel in order to promote a relaxed environment for contributions and ideas to be shared as well.

**Launchsquad**

Our last visit in the Silicon Valley was to Launchsquad, a Public Relations and Marketing firm aimed at small businesses. As we sat down for a Q&A with Mr. Throckmorton, a University of Maryland alumnus, we began asking him numerous questions and were not sure what to expect about a PR firm.

One thing I remembered that was very interesting is that Mr. Throckmorton mentioned that employees at Launchsquad were hired because of their ability to write and persuade. For this reason, him and other employees often Googled the name of applicants to the firm before they were hired, in order to look for articles and blog posts that conveyed these skills. Another thing we noticed is that the office was very modern and that it was very open, like many of the other offices we saw.
After speaking with Mr. Throckmorton for some time, we noticed that WePay was a client of Launchsquad and asked him about this. The speaker went on to tell us about WePay and how the team at Launchsquad came up with a clever campaign in order to convey to people that WePay was a better choice than PayPal. The campaign was very blatant and was very original. This helped WePay really expand and get their message across. This story reminded me of the benefits of thinking differently and the ability to really innovate when doing so. Mr. Throckmorton went on to give us some lessons he has learned and some accompanying anecdotes. One of the overlying themes was to take chances and to take risks and see where they take you. This was really interesting to me and I think this personality really embodies what the Silicon Valley is all about.

Key Takeaways and Reflections
Some of the takeaways that I had after visiting Launchsquad were that it is important to take risks and to really think differently. I think that especially for a PR firm this is a very important thing. Without being able to take chances on unproven ideas or concepts, there would really be no innovation. I think that thinking differently means that inherently you have to take chances and just see what happens from there. I think that also more and more, it is important to have an online presence and be able to persuade people to open their mind.

Day 6 – Saturday, May 26th
Travel Day
After the group finished our company tours, most of the people in our class were exhausted. Since my flight did not take off until 4 PM the next day, I was able to get a lot of sleep and got to the airport early to grab some lunch. I then headed back to Maryland after a thoroughly satisfying trip.

Conclusions and Final Thoughts
After taking this course and reflecting on my experiences, I really believe that this course has not only educated me but has also changed my life. I think that the opportunity to see entrepreneurs and life in the Silicon Valley is something that I could never get from another course at the University of Maryland. Furthermore, I think that while the trip was a lot of fun, I also learned a lot and gained valuable insight into modern day entrepreneurship and how technology trends and disruptive innovation is fueled. While the trip definitely excited me and it was great to see a lot of entrepreneurs doing well in the Silicon Valley, I think that also hearing about the amount of hard work, effort and dedication put into these ventures brought about the sobering realization that creating a start up is hard yet rewarding experience.

I think that I would definitely be prepared to talk and will talk to recruiters about the educational experience of the Silicon Valley trip. For me the biggest realizations were that communication is key to innovation, creating something beautiful takes effort and
dedication and that technical skills and business skills need to be combined in just the right amount to succeed. A big theme I saw in a lot of companies was that communication is a big factor of being able to innovate because it simply leads to the dispersion and good ideas and thoughts. These ideas and thoughts are then cultivated through communication from one team member to another and the next big product or start-up is created. Often times team members of start-ups are friends because of their ability to communicate with each other and compensate for shortcomings within each other. Another thing I noticed is that creating something big takes a lot of work and something I saw especially at the start-ups that we visited was the dedication and effort that people poured into the work they were doing. To me this belief in the work people were doing was breathtaking and was symbolic and quintessential of the entrepreneurial spirit. I thought that this was seen in Cube when they decided not to sell the company for a value that was in the millions. One last thing I noticed was the huge emphasis on technical skills especially critical thinking and computer science. I think that no matter what start-up you are creating in this day and age, there is a computer science component and being able to deliver on that end is crucial to spreading the word about businesses and drawing in more customers. I think that it is certainly true that one the web every company has the same chance and is the same “size” which is something I think is really amazing. After talking to the speaker from WePay it was interesting how he compared asking someone to code your project to asking someone to write a book for you.

On top of learning some really inspiring lessons from the Silicon Valley, it was great to learn about the culture in the Silicon Valley. From what I saw, the Valley is very results oriented and risk rewarding, a stark difference from the 9-5, risk averse environment that is often seen on the east coast. I think that the culture in the Silicon Valley also taught me to network with others and surround myself with other entrepreneurial-minded people. It was also great to talk with previous Hinman CEO alumni and the opportunity to see that many of them were successful really pushed me to join them in the Silicon Valley next year. In conclusion, the Silicon Valley trip was a very educational experience that was enlightening in ways that traditional classes are not. I am very thankful to have had the experience to visit the Silicon Valley in my undergraduate career and I think I was really able to think reflectively and introspectively about the experience.