

CASE STUDY:

USC and Techstars University Catalyst

What Is University Catalyst?

Techstars University Catalyst is a specialized version of the **Techstars Founder Catalyst** program designed to bridge the gap between **academic research/early ideas** and **investment-ready startups**.

Based on the Founder Catalyst model, University Catalyst is also a **non-equity, part-time program** focused on education and mentorship, with a focus on ecosystem building within a specific university community.

Founder Catalyst

Founder Catalyst stands apart as the only pre-accelerator program backed by two decades of Techstars' proven experience and by a network that has guided over **5,000 startups** and produced **23+ unicorns**.

While ideas are everywhere, opportunity is not. Founder Catalyst is built to meet the needs of early-stage tech communities, bringing visibility to nascent founders that may otherwise be overlooked by traditional capital deployment.

Having an idea is easy. Building a company ready for investment is hard. This program creates a support system around founders that guides them to a point where they can confidently charge the path to funding.

Founder Catalyst by the Numbers, Globally

29%

Higher chance of being accepted into a Techstars Accelerator after graduating a Founder Catalyst program

532

Total number of founders who have successfully completed a Founder Catalyst program

23

Total number of Founder Catalyst programs delivered since 2021

18%

Acceptance rate for Founder Catalyst alumni into Techstars Accelerators

The "Pre-Accelerator" Focus

While a full accelerator focuses on scaling, the University Catalyst focuses on **validation**:

- **Customer Discovery:** Moving from a lab concept to a product people actually want to buy.
- **Pitch Development:** Turning complex academic research into a 3-minute pitch that investors and partners can understand.
- **KPIs & Metrics:** Establishing the business fundamentals (Unit Economics, Product-Market Fit) before seeking major funding.
- **Founder Support Enrichment:** Increasing access to network, education and resources.

Techstars Startup Community Team



Katie Smith

Head of Ecosystem



Emily Skinstad

Senior Director, Startup Community Operations



Telesha Bowen

Program Lead
USC University Catalyst



Mariessa Esho

Operations Associate
USC University Catalyst

Bridging Research and Market: The USC x Techstars Partnership

The USC Office of Research and Innovation (OORI) embarked on a multi-year community development contract with Techstars to bridge the gap between groundbreaking research and commercial viability.

This partnership was born out of a strategic necessity: while USC leads in research excellence, **“we needed a partner to facilitate the commercialization of USC intellectual properties and the spinning out of companies—and Techstars is a natural leader in this space.”**

- Steve Moldin

This was more than a series of workshops; it was a catalyst for institutional change. While the multifaceted programming, which included annual Startup Weekends, University Catalysts, and an Accelerator, was designed to identify high-potential companies and connect them with startup resources, it was equally **“focused on changing the culture at USC—evolving our culture.”** - Steve Moldin

By navigating the complex landscape of USC departments and securing buy-in from key stakeholders, this contract established a permanent infrastructure for entrepreneurship that transcends traditional academic silos.

The program is successfully breaking silos, drawing founders from **11 different USC schools** in 2025 (up from 9 in 2024).

Key Schools Represented:



STEM & Health

Viterbi Engineering, Keck Medicine, Pharmacy, Neuroimaging.



Creative & Arts

Cinematic Arts, Thornton Music, Roski Art & Design, Kaufman Dance.



Professional

Marshall Business, Gould Law, Price Public Policy.

Key Partners



Steve Moldin

Associate Vice President, Research Strategy and Innovation (AVP-RSI) within USC's Office of Research & Innovation



Robyn Hejmej

Executive Director, Research Strategy and Innovation



Tariq Warsi

Managing Director, USC Alfred E. Mann Institute

The “Full Stack” Founder Journey

The University Catalyst program is unique because it doesn't just fund companies; it builds the "Founder Mindset."

- **The Pivot Point:** Founders are taught to prioritize market demand over their initial idea.
- **Mentor-Driven Accountability:** Weekly masterclasses and 1:1 sessions force founders to confront hard truths and refine their business models.
- **Sustainability:** By engaging faculty, staff, alumni, and students, USC has created a "sticky" innovation culture where knowledge stays within the Trojan network.



Key Success Metrics

Exceptional Founder Satisfaction:

The program achieved an elite **4.6/5 overall founder CSAT** in Year 2 (2025), reflecting the high value delivered across the two-year partnership.

Elite Mentorship & Coaching:

Founders reported near-perfect satisfaction with the program's core pillars, specifically highlighting **mentorship (4.9/5)**, **pitch coaching (4.6/5)**, and **masterclasses (4.5/5)**.

Robust Ecosystem Demand:

The program generated massive regional and university interest, attracting over **700 total applications** during the partnership.

Strong Institutional Pipeline:

The partnership successfully activated the campus community, resulting in **118 USC-affiliated applications** from students, alumni, and staff.



The Techstars Catalyst program was extremely impactful to us as founders, and certainly sharpened our focus at Jam over the past few months. The master classes were thoughtful and hands-on. The class on testing KPIs has changed the way we approach our product roadmap and marketing goals. It was a good blend of virtual and in-person, and independence and prescription so that founders could really grow and make the most of the program in their own way. I've left with new friends, new mentors to call on and a new, more sharp and disciplined approach to running our business.



-Jessica Etting,
Founder of Jam

Ensuring Collaboration

The two-year partnership between USC and Techstars has served as a critical engine for the university's entrepreneurial pipeline, bridging the gap between 'raw' student ideas and venture-readiness.

The University Catalyst program emphasizes rapid validation and mentor-driven accountability. By providing a structured "full-stack" development path, the program transformed projects like **Native**—which evolved from a vague concept into a high-growth AI language platform—into investment-grade startups that have gone on to participate in Techstars Accelerator programs.

Conclusion

By cultivating USC innovation at every stage of the entrepreneurial journey, we aren't just building startups — we are building a unified, future-ready ecosystem where USC research can reach its full global potential.



The partnership between USC and Techstars has been an extraordinary catalyst for our innovation ecosystem, providing the scaffolding, expertise, and mentorship that has enabled us to rapidly build and scale new pathways for entrepreneurs across the university.

Techstars aligns directly with USC's mission to transform ideas into real-world impact and we are seeing measurable results every year, with founders from across campus advancing from discovery workshops into pre-accelerators, accelerator cohorts, and prestigious follow-on programs.

The Techstars experience changes how founders think, prepares them to solve meaningful problems, and equips them to pursue future ventures with confidence and clarity while surrounding them with a global network of mentors, peers, and investors they cannot access anywhere else. We are grateful for the commitment and leadership of the Techstars team which has been integral to building a strong and sustainable foundation for entrepreneurial success at USC.

-**Steve Moldin**, Associate Vice President,
Research Strategy and Innovation (AVP-RSI)
within USC's Office of Research & Innovation