

Abstract

Defense innovation in the United States remains hindered by slow acquisition cycles, fragmented programs, and underused human capital. The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) hosts operationally experienced officers whose potential contributions to innovation are not fully leveraged. This thesis examines whether an independent, third-party startup accelerator adjacent to NPS could address that gap. Through qualitative research and stakeholder interviews across defense, academia, and industry, the study assesses the feasibility and value of such an accelerator. Findings indicate that a legally separate but closely affiliated accelerator could help bridge the “valley of death,” linking early-stage concepts to fielded capabilities. With appropriate ethical and conflict-of-interest safeguards, active-duty students could provide operational insight to startups while enhancing their own learning. By connecting the DoW, academia, and industry in a triple-helix model, an accelerator could accelerate technology transition through CRADAs, OTAs, and other pathways—offering significant benefits to NPS and the broader defense community.



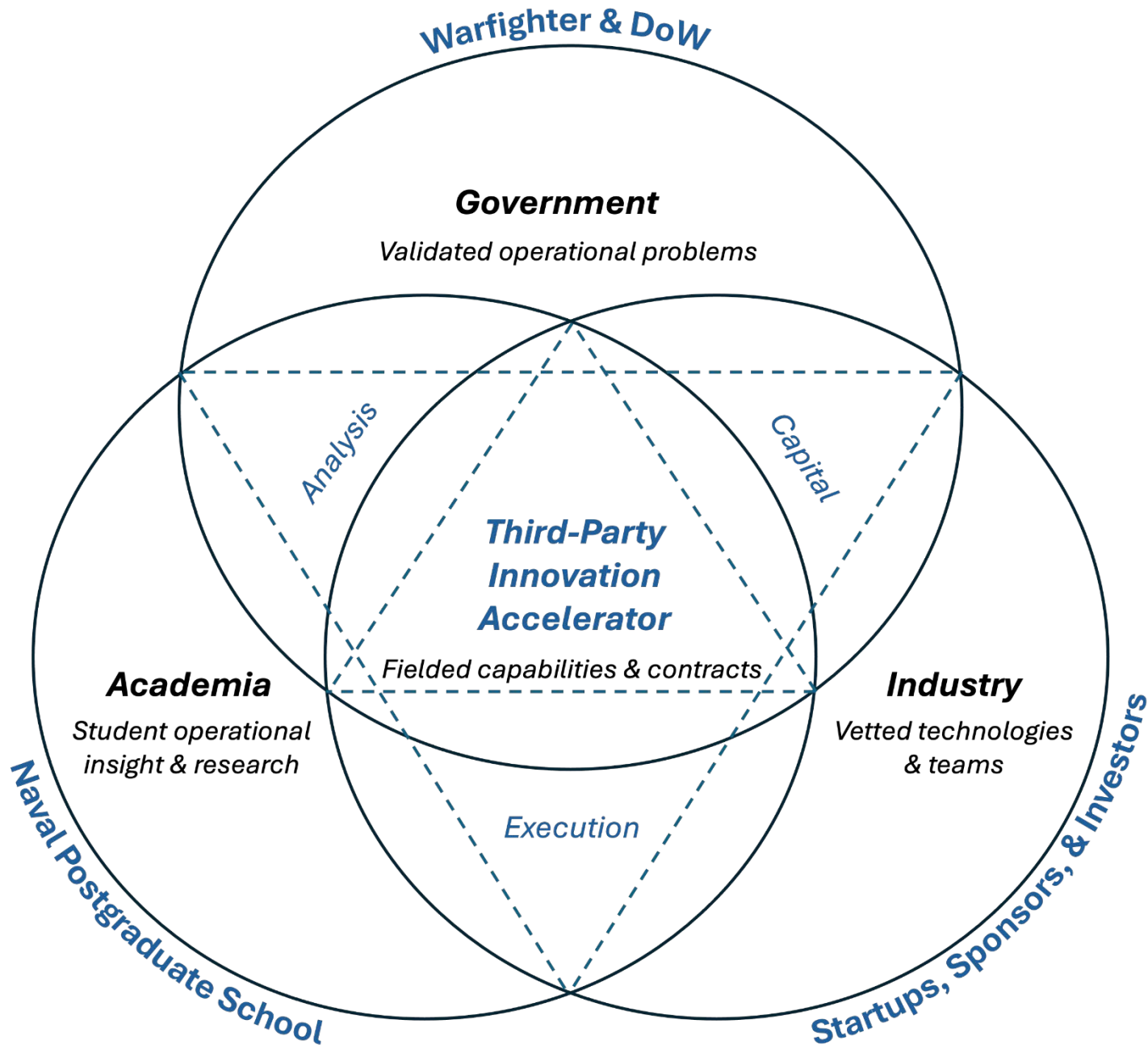
Hands-on evaluation of a startup’s immersive training prototype at their Boston headquarters.

Methods

- Exploratory qualitative design to assess how an NPS-adjacent accelerator could be structured and why it might work.
- Comparative case studies of SOFWERX, DIU, and a university accelerator to identify best practices and pitfalls.
- 65 interviews and focus groups with NPS stakeholders, defense leaders, entrepreneurs, investors, and legal experts.
- Document review of defense innovation reports, policy papers, and academic literature.
- Inductive coding and pattern analysis to identify recurring gaps, required guardrails, and design features.

Results & Impact

- An NPS-adjacent accelerator would significantly accelerate technology transition to the warfighter and strengthen NPS’s role as a defense innovation hub.
- NPS’s unique combination of operational experience and research positions it as the missing link between warfighter problems and emerging technologies.
- Active-duty students provide operational insight and credibility that materially improve early-stage technology development.
- A flexible, third-party accelerator model can bridge startups and acquisition processes while operating under clear ethical safeguards and outcome-focused metrics.



Future Research

- Measure long-term impact on transition timelines, contracting outcomes, and participant career paths.
- Refine legal and policy frameworks to fully enable academic–industry–DoD collaboration.
- Compare accelerator performance across services and explore domain-specific applications.



Kristofer DeVault, Maj, USMC
Advisors: Dr. Nicholas Dew
Kenneth Beall