



iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Mike Rinkunas '02 '08G and Canaan Kimball '26 on Lehigh Ventures Lab

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STEPHANIE VETO: 00:16 Welcome to iLLUminate, the podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. I'm your host, Stephanie Veto. It's December 8th, 2025, and Michael Rinkunas and Canaan Kimball are here to talk with us about the Lehigh Ventures Lab. Michael is the director of the lab, and Canaan is in the IBE program majoring in mechanical engineering and business. Hi, Mike and Canaan. Welcome to the show.

MIKE RINKUNAS: 00:39 It's a pleasure to be on it.

CANAAN KIMBALL: 00:40 Likewise, thank you.

VETO: 00:42 Mike, let's start with you. Describe to me what the Ventures Lab is.

RINKUNAS: 00:47 So the Ventures Lab is actually a really cool program. It's an outshoot of the Office of Entrepreneurship's Baker Institute, and we are the university's startup incubator and accelerator. So we are here to help current students, alumni, and faculty build their ventures and position them for success.

VETO: 01:07 And how does the lab support students through the actual entrepreneurial process?

RINKUNAS: 01:13 So one of the things I want to talk about and be clear here is when we think about students and venture building, we're looking for folks that have more than just an idea. The idea is the Baker Institute. That's a whole separate podcast as you've already done. But when students have an idea that they've thoroughly de-risked, we have two different ways to support them. So first is the Founders Program, and that is to help a student who's got an idea enough to say there's something here and I want to build a venture. Now we start working with them to actually look through all the elements of that, of how do you form a company? How do you look at building a business model? What does initial traction look like in terms of finding customers or letters of intent? So our goal with the Founders Program is to help the individual to start building towards launching a company. Once they actually have the startup in place and build a company, we'll switch them over to the Milestone Accelerator, which is exactly as the name says, we pick a milestone and we aim them in that direction for their post-Lehigh experience.

VETO: 02:10 That's excellent, because I was curious about the Baker Institute versus the Ventures Lab. Because I'm like, isn't this-- is this just a different name?

RINKUNAS: 02:17 No, no, it-- actually Ventures Lab is an offshoot out of Baker because what had happened, Baker's all about exploring ideas, creativity, understanding problems, how big is a problem, who has it. And that's what Baker really focuses on is that exploring the problem, looking at trying to develop solutions to match it. And what ended up happening was we had students that are like, "Hey, we've got this idea. We want to do something with it. What's next?" And that's where Ventures Lab came out of and actually spun out of the Baker Institute to be as a whole entity on its own. And now we sit side by side in the Office of Entrepreneurship.



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VETO: 02:53

Talk about the mentorship that it provides. So it's not just professors that are working with the students. We have alum, we have industry leaders, you name it.

RINKUNAS: 03:03

Absolutely. And Canaan will talk about some of the interactions he's had with several of our professors, but we-- exactly as you said, the way I like to think about it is almost there's three tiers of folks we work with. So when a team is looking to get more mentorship, first off, we have more or less what we would call our a coach or an entrepreneur in residence. Folks that have-- like me who have been there, done that, built their own companies, and can talk about helping a student in that coaching capacity. Because an entrepreneur, look, you can go from the best day of your life to the worst day of your life back to the best day in the span of a 30 minute phone call. I've been there. And so part of that EIR role is to help both coach be both the drill sergeant, they keep people on task, be a little bit of the therapist for the founder roller coaster, because they're really looking at the strategic, what is both the individual and the business needs. So we have several folks, some alumni, some industry professionals who help that because they want to give back. But that's the helping the student in the business. The next tier is our subject matter experts. And that's where we actually leverage a lot of Lehigh alumni where-- Canaan will actually talk through this in a little bit, where depending upon what they're working on, they need connections. So like, oh, I want to talk to someone who's at Salesforce. Well, there's a Lehigh alum in charge of the CVC Unit Salesforce. There's Lehigh alums everywhere. We reach out to those alums to say, "Hey, we have a student who wants to learn about your industry. Can you help them? Can you guide them? Can you help them avoid some mistakes?" And so that mentorship's a much limited duration because it's generally around something tactical.

RINKUNAS: 04:42

And then we have other-- the last one is service providers or there are alums who are doing marketing work, legal work. We actually have another person, Gary Shaw is someone who we work with who's at Arnold & Porter. And he's a lawyer. And so he'll actually come in and talk about-- he does startup law. So many of our Lehigh teams will ask him questions so they can get very nuanced advice. So those are the three buckets we look at is again, the coaches, industry experts, and then service providers. And that's how we use a lot of Lehigh connections to say, "Can you-- hey, Alum, can you help another Lehigh person?"

VETO: 05:22

I love this path to success or successful learning, even if the venture doesn't work out. You're learning something from it because, boy, I remember being between the ages of 18 and 22, and I couldn't get out of my own way. So like you said, have that drill sergeant there to sort of keep them on track in a way that they-- or being a mentor or an emotional support in a way that-- it's like it helps get through the fog of being in your early 20s in a way. I think that's so incredible.

RINKUNAS: 05:54

And, Stephanie, I want to build on that. Look, that's one of the challenges with almost any entrepreneur. Someone actually working with another Lehigh alum and literally he said, I know we want to change the world. And because we want to change the world, that requires-- it requires a lot of effort, requires outside capital. It requires a radically different mindset. And so the trick is to change the world, you've got to climb Mount Everest. So you need the person who's got the drive, the passion that's willing to ascend the summit. But also, if you get halfway up the mountain and you see the path, a magical path up here to Shangri-La and the changing the world on the



other side, you need a person who's like, I'm so driven on the milestone that they're going to take that pathway versus, no, no, no, I'm going to climb Everest because it's there. And that's one of the biggest challenges I see with a lot of entrepreneurs, even some students, which is they'll wrap their head around the idea, the solution, what they're working on, and they don't see the forest from the trees. And that's the hard part of like-- Canaan and I have had many of these conversations and many of the other founders of wait, step back, think the bigger picture. Because politely, I've been there, I've screwed it up. I've made terrible messes of things which have cost me a lot to learn. Education and learning is incredibly valuable. Folks are going to make all their own mistakes in a different way, but if we can help them to avoid some key things to get them there quicker. So I'm glad you picked up on that idea really quickly.

VETO: 07:19

It's great right now, I'd say, because the world is so accessible with talking over the internet or Zoom or phones. And it's made everything so much smaller. And I'd imagine it makes networking so much easier because you have someone in Shanghai who could talk to a student who has an idea about X, Y, Z. But the Ventures Lab is also a physical space, right? Can you talk about why that's important?

RINKUNAS: 07:47

Absolutely. So one of the things, especially for our students, our teams have talked about having that sense of community. And especially on campus, Lehigh is a passionate learning. But there's also-- for those of you who've been to the BIB, the BIB is crowded. People are working on projects all different hours of the day. Campus, there's all these breakout rooms. They're always full. But Ventures Lab is a dedicated space where people are just working on their venture. And it's people are not studying, they're not doing classwork here. It is a separate space where people can come. The attitude shifts a little bit. It's much more professional. It's about moving towards your goals, your milestones, executing. And so there's a place where people can sit, they can talk with each other, bounce ideas off if we're having these challenges. But it's-- I don't want to call it a sanctuary, but it's more of an intentional spot for people to focus on executing. And that's the other part, Stephanie, you hit this great point of, oh, it's so easy to communicate with people. You can reach in anywhere. I'm actually going to say it's even easier today to start a company than it ever was. You think of all the great tools, Google, chat AI. But the trick is ideas, ideas are all important. It doesn't matter as much as executing. If you can execute on an idea, even a poor idea well executed will be by far better than a great idea that is poorly executed. And so that's one of the reasons why we have the spaces to allow people a place to not be distracted by the rest of campus.

VETO: 09:14

Now, Mike, you're the director of the lab. Two-part question here. What attracted you to a position like this? But also, do you find being an alum of Lehigh helps you connect with the students?

RINKUNAS: 09:29

So first off, the first part what attracted to me to this role was I'm a serial entrepreneur myself. I started my first company as an undergraduate in Mohler Labs. And the resources that I'm trying to build the Ventures Lab are the things I wish I would have had then, because I had to go through the school of hard knocks, learn the hard way on a lot of things. And so basically having been in our current participants' shoes many, many years ago, like it's a neat perspective to say, hey, I can give back to the institution and position it for longer term growth than I could ever do. Politely, I can do more impact here as an alum than if I could naming a building or



a room. There's the potential to help guide and do great things. And so thinking about that, the mindset, as you've talked about, call it, I don't know if it's the folks Lehigh is attracting, I don't know if there's just something in the air and in the water here in South Mountain, but there is a mindset and it's an entrepreneurial mindset in the fact that it's a problem driven. It's like, how do I tackle-- look at huge problems and create solutions to it? And so thinking that way permeates Lehigh. No, I'm not saying everyone needs to be an entrepreneur and run a company. It's not for everyone, but it's that active-- you think about our alums, you think about our students that are being taught how to look at these huge grand problems, these systems, and figure out how can I change it? Where can I put a solution on it? And that mindset is one of the things that's phenomenal that breeds a lot of entrepreneurs and leaders and change makers as we think about the current administration. And so understanding that mindset, understanding what is taught, the resources here allows me to drop in and move quicker and faster to help folks.

RINKUNAS: 11:23

Now this is me as I'm talking, I'm going to be very curious to see how Canaan talks about some of this and some of the other students, but it's-- the goal is-- what folks are working on today just may not succeed, but the trick is how do we work with the students and the alumni and the faculty to teach them the methods so that maybe this one doesn't succeed, but they could-- maybe it's the next one. Maybe it's the one after. How can we help them learn the process, iterate, move fast enough that if something isn't succeeding, politely, they move on, they kill it and move on. So that's the bigger outcome is trying to help people learn.

VETO: 11:58

Canaan, you're up.

KIMBALL: 12:00

Awesome.

VETO: 12:02

[laughter] All right. So, Canaan, you're also a Lehigh football player. Congrats on your win against Lafayette. And it's the end of the season for you, right?

KIMBALL: 12:12

It is. It's been a crazy season and so thankful that it was a part of my Lehigh journey.

VETO: 12:18

You are the co-founder of Screenwise Eating LLC. Please describe what that is.

KIMBALL: 12:25

Yeah, so Screenwise Eating is a digital platform designed to help children face feeding challenges and to also support feeding therapists who work with them. So basically, we build a mobile app that's grounded in behavioral therapy principles that actually gamifies mealtime. The idea is that kids earn structured-based screen time rewards for taking bites and chewing at the correct pacing so that they can progress towards healthier eating habits over time. Now, on the therapist side of things, we developed a therapist portal web app where therapists can adjust settings on the mobile app for their clients. And they can personalize each of their clients' progression plans and view dashboards filled with data and charts to show their clients progress over time. And this tracks important eating metrics like bite counts, disruptive behaviors, meal duration, and long-term progress over time, like body weight. So Screenwise isn't just an app, but it's a tool that connects kids, families, therapists, all in one ecosystem to make mealtimes more structured and really drive more positive progress for kids with eating challenges.

VETO: 13:34

What attracted you to the Ventures Lab, to working with them?



KIMBALL: 13:39

First of all, I absolutely love the Ventures Lab, and I'm super thankful to be a part of it. Mike is awesome, and it's truly been a blessing in my Lehigh career. And I was drawn to it because it's one of the few places where student founders are treated like real founders. When I approached Mike and had that first meeting with him, he didn't just say cool idea when I brought up Screenwise Eating. But like he said before, he helped me understand that execution is everything. He immediately pushed us to test assumptions and talk to users face-to-face and really validate the problem and understand the customer need. And actually build something that people want and not just what's in our heads. So the Ventures Lab gives you access to incredible mentors, like Mike said. And Mike connects me with incredible people every week. And that's truly been the biggest advantage that the Ventures Lab has brought me. And as a student athlete juggling football classes and startups, having a structured place to do all this and execute at a high level is just such a competitive advantage.

VETO: 14:42

I have a personal question that just popped into my head. Canaan, were you always just a thinker of ideas or entrepreneurial thinker? Why go into this line of work or why make your profession being an entrepreneur, in essence? What attracted you to that? Tell me about child Canaan. [laughter]

KIMBALL: 15:07

Absolutely. Well, child Canaan was always an entrepreneur. Before I ever knew what that term really meant, I was always an entrepreneur. When I was seven years old, I had started an invention notebook. And I think my mom still has it somewhere. We got to pull it out and look at what Child Canaan was thinking back in the day. But I was always thinking of new invention ideas, new business ideas. And really, I always just was thinking of how to make money. I would sell bracelets to neighbors. I would sell my Halloween candy. I remember me and my dad snuck onto a golf course one time and stole golf balls from the forests and cleaned them up and sold them in the neighborhood. So I was always thinking of a way to make a buck or two. And that's never changed. And now I just have the ability to really create a real business and build a business. And honestly, it's addicting. It's truly my passion, and it doesn't feel like work. I work so many hours. I stay up late some nights, and I don't even realize it because when I'm building these businesses and I truly believe in the mission, it doesn't feel like work, and it's so fun to me, and that's all I want to do.

VETO: 16:15

Did Screenwise just start as an idea for you? So you're the co-founder. Were you working with someone on just like, I have this idea for this thing? How did it blossom? And how did it blossom through the Ventures Lab especially?

KIMBALL: 16:30

So the story of how Screenwise started is pretty cool. So it actually started with a conversation with my football strength coach, Eric Markovcy. So freshman year, he pulled me into his office after a football workout. And I could tell he was serious from the start. But basically, he told me a little bit about his personal story. He has a son, Ryan, who was born as a micro preemie baby at 1.4 pounds, and struggled immensely with eating. And it was tough on his family. They tried so many feeding therapists. Nothing worked until they found this one therapist that implemented a behavioral philosophy that is similar to what we've built into Screenwise Eating today. So since then, I was so-- I could see his passion for this idea that he had. And I was so invested from the start. And I really wanted to help him bring it to life. So I jumped head first freshman year in this journey with him, and now we're in the Ventures Lab. And since then, everything has changed. What started as a simple concept, we thought it might



just be a mobile app that's given out to families, has turned into an entire ecosystem and program to help everyone from the child to the parent to the feeding therapist. And Ventures Lab has just supported us through every step. And we refined the core problem, we built prototypes, interviewed so many parents and clinicians that I can't even remember all of them. And through the Ventures Lab and through Mike's mentorship, we created a business model. And now we're running pilots. And even we have research teams clinically researching Screenwise Eating, which is so awesome to see this thing really blossom into what we hope can be a very sustainable business that can help a lot of kids.

VETO: 18:16

I think back to when I was in school and trying to figure out my career or how to even navigate it. And it always felt like there was some big secret to life that I was missing or there just wasn't any direction for me. It was kind of like, get your degree and you'll figure it out. And I did eventually. And then I also realized that there's really no user's manual to life or careers, but I wish I had more in place for me, more direction, like Mike was talking about earlier. So why is a program like this so important for young entrepreneurs?

KIMBALL: 18:55

First of all, the community that the Ventures Lab builds is everything. I think being an entrepreneur can be lonely at times. It's very hard. It's like climbing Mount Everest, like Mike said. There are days where things go wrong, and it's-- to be quite honest, it can be depressing, especially when you're so invested into something and things aren't going your way, you just have to fight through it. And then there's days that are extremely, overwhelmingly great. I mean, and you have to be able to balance out where you don't get too excited on the good days and too down on yourself on the bad days. And Ventures Lab just creates an environment where you're surrounded by other entrepreneurs and advisors that can help you move through this life as an entrepreneur, which at the end of the day is everything. If Screenwise Eating doesn't work out, I've learned so much about being an entrepreneur and being surrounded by others in the Ventures Lab that no matter what I start in the future, I will feel prepared for this lifestyle and what it takes to build a business.

RINKUNAS: 19:57

Canaan, you sum it up so really well. I'm going to give you another question here. Do you feel like everything's always on fire? And then how do you prioritize?

KIMBALL: 20:06

Absolutely. I mean, I feel like I'm always juggling swords. There's so much you can do as an entrepreneur, and there's always progress to be made. And I think the biggest thing that I've taken away from my Lehigh journey-- I was quite a busy schedule with sports and classes, and it's just you have to prioritize what you think is going to be the most effective use of your time and what will really drive progress in your ventures. And I think-- I sit down weekly with Mike and we set goals and we set actionable goals, not just fake goals, oh, I hope I make a million dollars one day, but I have a goal to get this many users by this date. Things that I can really take actional steps towards. I think that's what's so crucial because there's always tons of different tasks you can do, but you have to narrow down the ones that are really going to drive the most progress. I think Ventures Lab has prepared me well in terms of time management and prioritizing the things that matter the most.

VETO: 21:10

Can you sum up any major takeaways from working with Mike and the Ventures Lab that you'll carry with you after Lehigh?



- KIMBALL: 21:20 The biggest thing Mike has taught me is to just stay ruthlessly focused on the problem, not necessarily the solution. Startups tend to fall in love with their idea initially, but Mike constantly pushes everyone in the Ventures Lab to fall in love with the customer instead. This is so crucial because being willing to pivot when necessary is so important as an entrepreneur because things don't go your way and you have to make decisions in the right amount of time before things crash and burn. But also, he taught me the importance of momentum. Like I said before, we set goals regularly and taking small steps each week so that your venture is always moving forward is probably the main thing I'll take away from working with Mike and the Ventures Lab.
- RINKUNAS: 22:06 So, Stephanie, I want a recording of this for posterity. I'm going to hold you to all of that. But no, well said. You've said it better than I ever could.
- KIMBALL: 22:18 I think so, Mike.
- VETO: 22:19 [laughter] And this falls into my next question. Mike, talk about how this program extends way past a student's time at Lehigh.
- RINKUNAS: 22:26 Absolutely.
- VETO: 22:26 How they network and you keep former students in contact with current students and how you're going to keep Canaan in contact with all of your students.
- RINKUNAS: 22:38 So, Stephanie, you've set this up really well, and Canaan did too here, but one of the things early on we talked about, there's three different audiences Venture Lab serves. We have our current students. And by the way, current students is not just undergrads that includes our graduate students. But then we have-- we support our alumni, we support our faculty. And so this is the one of the key differences between-- when I mentioned the two programs, the founders and the milestone, the milestone accelerator is really meant for people who want to transition into a full time with their venture. Now, it could be the students that are looking to graduate, create their own job, create their own venture, but we also get demand from alumni. There are several alumni that I'm working with where basically they've been in industry sector for 10 years. Like, hey, I've seen this problem. I know how to build and build a solution to do this, to solve this. How do I create a business? How do I raise capital? How do I even get started? And so part of it is also the we can also help some of those alumni think about let's venture creation as-- I don't call it as a service or as an art, but we can do this for the later alumni as well. But with Canaan, we also have the folks that have-- the recent graduates who are moving on, they want to give back. Again, exactly that sense of community Canaan was talking about, because look, it's exhilarating, but it's also lonely. It's exhausting. It's having other people that can understand this journey to talk to both-- as Canaan talks about, the previous folks who have gone through the program or other ones that are paying it forward. My expectation is current participants will be paying it to the next generation or the next class of folks.
- RINKUNAS: 24:21 So there's many ways to stay involved. One of us, again, directly working with teams. But also, I'm fully expecting Canaan, now that he said all those lessons so well, to be able to speak to some of the next folks coming in to help them understand these elements. And that's one of the biggest things. It's also, is mindset, is helping people to understand things. It may not be-- and this is where we bring a lot of mentors in



where-- Canaan gets sick of me talking and asking the same questions over and over and over. I'm like, great, I'm going to have you talk to three or four alumni and then they're going to-- a lot of times folks will go off, talk to the alumni and go, "Oh my gosh, Mike, what about this?" It's like, "Well, I've been asking you that same question for six months." But that's part of the process, hearing it from someone new, getting different feedback, getting this-- just the right time, the right place to have that idea take root. So that's the-- I think I've answered that in a long winded way of it's an entire ecosystem we're building here. It's an entire ability to have folks come-- like Canaan and other participants, I totally see them giving back. But then also, hey, maybe Canaan's next venture is like, Mike, I've got this new idea. We're running some things underground. Can you make some intros? I see this as we are-- is Lehigh helping Lehigh to change the world.

VETO: 25:42

What do you guys think sets the Ventures Lab apart from other programs for entrepreneurs anywhere, really?

KIMBALL: 25:49

I would say-- I mean, Lehigh's just an incredible place. People at Lehigh love other people at Lehigh, so willing to help everybody. I can't tell you how many Lehigh alums I've spoken to over my four years here, and they've just been so incredibly helpful in so many different areas. I've learned more from Lehigh alums, and I hate to say this, than in the classroom. And I think that's what makes Lehigh special. And don't get me wrong, the academics are great. Super thankful for that side of things, but it truly is the people at Lehigh that make this Ventures Lab community so special. Mike and I, every time we sit down, we just look through our LinkedIn networks and find so many people that I could talk to to learn about certain areas I'm either struggling in or want to learn more about, or that could help me in an area of one of my ventures. And it's something that I want to do when I graduate and when hopefully I'm a successful entrepreneur, to give back because so many people have given back to me. And I think that's what sets the ventures love apart from other institutions.

RINKUNAS: 26:58

I want to build on something Canaan said here. And one of the things that's also very important to denote is the Ventures Lab, we are extracurricular. This is not for credit. This is on top of all the classwork. And so I want to make a very important distinction here, as Canaan talked about, learning things in the classroom. One of the elements on that is this is not for grade. This is for real. You're trying to build something to-- things change when all of a sudden like, ooh, I have a real customer that is calling me at 2:00 in the morning because the software doesn't work and they've paid me and they expect results. But more, the ability here is because we're outside the classroom and folks are not just following the curriculum for a grade. Education is radically important, but this is a different mindset. This is a different focus. Things can fail and go wrong. And that's part of-- one of the things I also want to say is, this is not necessarily a sandbox. We're creating a place where people can fail in a great way and still learn and move forward. But it's also-- like Canaan, politely, if Screenwise crashes and burns here, which I hope it doesn't, you're moving on to the next thing. It's going to be a wonderful experience for you, but it's not going to hurt your grades. And so you're willing to take the risks that are needed to really run something to ground versus, oh, I don't want to potentially mess up my 4.0 GPA. Now, again, this is not being very clear. We have great relations with many professors. We're pulling folks in



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from classes. We're leveraging back. But it's just the outcomes, the mindset, and the goals in Ventures Lab are different than what's in a classroom.

VETO: 28:39

Mike, Canaan, thank you so much for being on the show and taking the time to talk about the Ventures Lab and about what you guys are working on and your incredible relationship and being professional sword jugglers and all of that. I feel like we could talk for another 30 minutes. This was incredible. Thank you.

RINKUNAS: 28:59

Canaan's going to do a demo of the sword juggling very quickly.

VETO: 29:03

[laughter] Yes, that'll be live. Thank you, guys.

KIMBALL: 29:06

Thank y'all. This was so much fun.

RINKUNAS: 29:08

No, Stephanie, thank you for the time. Also, one of the things I will be clear, please come talk to us. You can find us on the Office of Entrepreneurship's website. Entrepreneurship is for all. We have many different pathways. Just because I'm talking venture creation, the skill set that is here is something that's lifelong, whether you want to be a business leader somewhere or even just managing a project. Please come talk to the team. We can help. We can help you figure out the best pathways forward.

VETO: 29:39

That was Michael Rinkunas and Canaan Kimball speaking with us about the Lehigh Ventures Lab. Mike is not only the director of the lab, but also an alum, and he founded his first company at Lehigh. Canaan is a senior and co-founder of Screenwise Eating LLC, and in true entrepreneurial form, has another venture in the works called Deal and Dink, a fast-growing pickleball card game brand. This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business Thought Leaders or to follow us on social media, please visit business.lehigh.edu/news. This is Stephanie Veto, host of the iLLUminate Podcast. Thanks for listening. [music]