We’re on a journey to learn what it takes to solve problems. The goal of this report is not to show you we have all the answers. Instead, it’s to explain what we’ve learned through our new approach, and see if you want to partner.

In partnership with The Rockefeller Foundation, we created the Future Cities Accelerator, which pulled in business leaders, investors, technical support, and experts, so 10 ventures can move closer to solving critical challenges our cities face.

The ten ventures come from New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, Denver, Boston, and Baltimore.

Individually, they’re tackling urban poverty from different angles—education, health, connectivity, food, and affordable housing. Together, they are all committed to one goal: Improve our cities.

“\nIn the 3 years since I founded CommonLit, I have participated in five accelerator programs. Future Cities Accelerator is far and away the best accelerator in terms of getting us connected to the right people and resources that we need to bring our solution to scale.\n”

Michelle Brown, CEO CommonLit
Here’s how our ventures are tackling urban poverty from different sides

**FOOD/HUNGER**

**mRelief**: A platform that allows families to find out if they qualify for food stamps. Over 100,000 families in 42 states have used mRelief to secure food stamps or other public support. (Chicago, IL)

**Spoiler Alert**: A platform that creates a collaborative, online marketplace to facilitate food donations and discounted sales. One of their customers includes Sysco, America’s largest food company. (Boston, MA)

**Propel**: A free financial management app for SNAP so users can manage and budget their benefits and access other money-saving resources. They have over 1M active users and recently closed $4MM (New York, NY)

**EDUCATION**

**CommonLit**: Digital tools to make teachers more effective and customized in their literacy instruction. They are reaching over 2 million users.

**Learn Fresh**: An NBA basketball-based board game and online app that teaches kids math. They’re currently enabling kids to perform 2.8x better at math vs. control groups.
**Storytime:** A free app that lets teachers text illustrated children’s books to families, without any extra work, improving reading rates by 1,600%.

**C4Q:** An academy that teaches coding and professional skills to adults from diverse and low-income backgrounds. Their students move from an average annual salary of $18K to $85K in 10 months.

**Thread:** A community that engages underperforming high school students confronting significant barriers outside of the classroom, providing each one with a family of committed volunteers and increased access to community resources—increasing graduation rates from 6% to 92%.

**AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

**Haven Connect:** A platform for property managers and applicants that transforms the affordable housing application, selection, and approval process into an easy and accessible one. To date, they’ve helped over 2,200 people apply for affordable housing.

**CONNECTIVITY**

**EveryoneOn:** A platform that engages governments, nonprofits, and technology to provide over 400,000 people in the U.S. with affordable and dependable internet access.

## Here’s what we provided our ventures

Throughout the 9-month program, here is what each venture received:

- **$100,000 in funding**
  - Each venture receives a $100,000 grant from Uncharted

- **Rapid prototyping**
  - Online training in rapid prototyping from former UX Lead at Google X

- **In-Person Bootcamp**
  - 5-day, in-person bootcamp in Denver, focused on building a plan for scale

- **Mentorship Team**
  - 1:1 mentor meetings, and 3–4 mentors committed to 6–12 months of formal advising

- **Social Capital Markets**
  - Access to a customized funder event at SOCAP, the world’s largest impact investor gathering

- **Financial Modeling**
  - 20 hours of pro bono financial model building from a professional financial architect

- **Executive Coach**
  - 1:1 executive leadership coaching for 3–6 months to help each entrepreneur grow as a leader

- **Fundraising Coach**
  - 1:1 fundraising coach for 9 months from For Impact, an org that’s raised over $2 billion
Here’s a sampling of progress from the bootcamp (March ‘17) until now (October ‘17)

Note: We are conducting impact reporting and will be publishing regular data findings starting in 2018. This is a sampling of short-term impact ventures have experienced throughout the 9-month program.

**COMMONLIT**

Before this program, CommonLit had 100,000 users. At SOCAP, seven months after the initial bootcamp, CommonLit hit 2 million users—partially because they improved their product development process, a challenge they addressed with Uncharted Mentor Chris Maliwat. Prior to the Future Cities Accelerator, they hadn’t talked to users to get a deep understanding of what they wanted. As a result of working with Chris, they made their product more intuitive and their literature more accessible for all teachers. *“Chris Maliwat changed how we developed products,”* Rob Fleisher, Director of Literacy

**HAVEN CONNECT**

With the $100K grant, Haven Connect made a critical hire on their engineering team, which allowed them to build specific features they needed to make the property management experience more efficient—a critical move considering they added 2,300 units in July, and landed a pilot with the 6th largest affordable housing manager.

*“Uncharted has been invaluable. Being an entrepreneur is emotionally grueling thing to do, and *Uncharted partnered with me not as a business, but as a person.* They connected me to the greatest mentors and funders, but they actually have my back in a way no one has ever supported me before. After a grueling month of fundraising, they compiled a video montage of each member of the Uncharted team sharing why they believed in me. WHO DOES THAT? Uncharted does. And if I succeed, that’s going to be one of the big reasons why.”*

Caroline Caselli

**THREAD**

Thread’s team grew from 25 to 48 people from the March bootcamp to now. With such large team growth, Uncharted mentor Will Seamans is leading their upcoming board retreat and executive retreat, coaching them through change and process management and how to scale effectively. According to Thread’s CEO, Will is “fundamentally changing our organization right now.”

Kerry Suddes is Thread’s fundraising coach, and helped their team at a pivotal moment. It was a Friday, she was on vacation, but got on a phone call with their team who was about to go into a meeting with their largest ask yet: $4M. *“Kerry was life-changing. She gave us specific language to use, calmed us down, and made it possible to go into the meeting. We felt so prepared because of Kerry’s direct coaching.”*
Our Learning

We are still learning what it takes to build an incredibly valuable program and how to make dents in big issues. Here were our program bright-spots.

1. Fundraising and sales support

Getting capital isn’t simply an ask. We deployed an effective, four-step approach to get ventures investment ready.

- Equip them with the tools and resources they need via workshops, such as pitch practicing, strategic messaging, and sales workshops
- Match organizations with fundraising coaches to help entrepreneurs apply these fundraising tools immediately and over time
- Connect organizations with financial architects to build the financial model and assemble the key financial documents needed to get investment-ready
- Provide connections to investors via events like SOCAP, the largest impact investment gathering in the world

After working closely with an Uncharted fundraising coach, one venture secured three major gifts since March, raising over $8M.
2. Mentorship

The most effective piece of our curriculum is long-term mentorship. The process to get mentors and entrepreneurs to connect for the long-term is based on our team deeply understanding an organization’s needs and future plans, and the mentor’s expertise and experience. We executed a customized mentor recruitment process so we had specific mentors for specific ventures, which led to long-lasting relationships.

“We are going to be raising a Series A in 6 months, and SOCAP has been perfect for generating a handful of really important leads.”

Ricky Ashenfelter, Spoiler Alert

“We’re so grateful to be here at SOCAP. We’ve had a lot of opportunities to connect with a full range of people—especially prospective funders—who are directly relevant to what we do and could be potential partners for what we’re trying to grow.”

Lea Ferguson, Thread

“The mentorship is exceptional. They are primed to have a long-term engagement, and many other programs don’t have mentors that are prepared to work with ventures long-term. The mentors seem to be here for the right reasons. The fact that we knew that mentors were going to be around for longer, made for more effective meetings because they knew they would have more meetings in the future.”

Michelle Brown, CommonLit
3. Community

We received feedback that the community we created—evening happy hours, housing everyone at the same hotel, and strategic breaks throughout—fostered collaboration and learning opportunities.

“The environment you guys create is truly unique, where everyone is treated entirely equally. Mentors feel approachable, staff is a ton of fun and very eager to engage. This elimination of traditional hierarchy or formality creates a sense of openness that feels like the core of why this all works.”

Jeff Kaiser, Propel

“The quality of connections I’ve made here is 2x better than any other program I’ve participated in.”

Khalil Fuller, Learn Fresh

However, it’s more than just bringing great people together:

The peer connection between organizations has been so valuable that it forced us to reconsider the role of a cohort. Is a cohort just a group of companies that can be an encouragement to each other, or is it actually the glue that can create a collective movement?

We learned that accelerating individual ventures is great. But accelerating individual ventures towards a singular goal, and seeing how we can work together from different angles to tackle that goal, could be a new way to solve problems our world faces.
Future Cities Accelerator was a transition program from our old model to our new model

DURING THE PROGRAM, WE WERE MORE FOCUSED ON HELPING ACCELERATE INDIVIDUAL VENTURES VERSUS BUILDING A COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE TO TAKE ON URBAN ISSUES, TOGETHER.

However, we learned a lot, and made some important observations around the issue of urban poverty. We learned about its complexity through the eyes of our ventures, and how building a coordinated movement of people who tackle it from all sides can help us chart the course toward urban transformation.

For example, CommonLit builds customized training for teachers to address students of all skill levels, and Learn Fresh makes people 2.8x better at math through an engaging math-based board game. Thread realizes there’s a host of outside-the-classroom factors that inhibit graduate rates, and is addressing it through providing each one with a family of committed volunteers for 10 years. Storytime proves if you can help teachers and parents coordinate after-school reading, it dramatically improves literacy.

What would our education system look like if the same students got outside, educational support from Storytime and Thread, and more engaging, customized internal support from CommonLit and Learn Fresh?

In another example, Spoiler Alert is addressing an acute hunger need by re-routing surplus food to those in need. EveryoneOn is facilitating a new infrastructure that connects people to the internet. mRelief and Haven Connect are improving the UX of the internet by making it more intuitive to access food stamps and affordable housing, respectively. Propel is helping people understand and manage the public services they are eligible for, and with upward mobility, people have a safety net and could enroll in C4Q’s intensive coding course, which could 5x their salary.
What would a person’s economic situation look like if Spoiler Alert, EveryoneOn, mRelief, Haven Connect, and C4Q worked together? What if people could have their basic needs met through Spoiler Alert, gain access to the benefits they qualify for through EveryoneOn, mRelief, and Haven Connect, utilize a better way to manage these services with Propel, and in turn earn a better living through C4Q?

We understand there are other gaps and drivers needed to address the larger problem of urban poverty. But this program opened up our eyes to the potential when you put people in one room who are addressing a single issue from different sides, and the power that could unfold if they collaborated.

**AFTER THIS PROGRAM, WE REALIZE HOW FAR WE HAVE TO GO. BUT WE BELIEVE WE’RE MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. AS WE CHART THE COURSE FROM URBAN POVERTY TO URBAN TRANSFORMATION, HERE IS WHERE WE ARE.**

JOIN US.

*Please contact us* if you have any interest in deploying this model in other parts of the country.

We want to learn from experts who have led coalitions, and proven practitioners who have made a dent in urban transformation. If you have experience in this work, *we’d love to hear your wisdom!*

*Subscribe here* to get our next learning update on how the Future Cities Accelerator cohort is making headway on this problem.

Thank you.