

## CourseKey's Learning Platform Gets Devices on Same Page

SOFTWARE: It Expands Learning Opportunities, Assists in Admin Tasks  
By **BRAD GRAVES**

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San Diego — It's been a busy two years for Luke Sophinos. The 21-year-old CEO has gotten a software business off to a very fast start. He has postponed his final coursework at San Diego State University. And he's attracted attention from the foundation run by internet entrepreneur Peter Thiel. The upshot? A two-year, \$100,000 Thiel Fellowship to help him build his young business, CourseKey Inc.



Luke Sophinos

CourseKey lets students and professors interact in college settings, using the technology that each individual brings to the classroom — whether it's a laptop computer, tablet, a smartphone running Android or a smartphone running iOS. "It's going to work on anything a kid lugs to class," Sophinos said.

The business got going at San Diego State. By now roughly 50 teachers and 10,000 students use the first commercial version of the software. The business plans to roll out a second version, with more functions and a cleaner user interface, on Aug. 25. That new version will serve 25 campuses and 40,000 to 50,000 students.

CourseKey lets a professor take roll quickly using technology similar to GPS. "We automate this administrative nightmare," Sophinos said. With that task out of the way, the software gives professors another way to interact with students, and a way for students to communicate with the professor.

One of the software's early adopters is Kevin Popovic, who lectures at San Diego State's business school on the topics of creativity and innovation.

Popovic said CourseKey speeds daily administrative tasks such as taking roll

(a chore in 50-student classes) and compiling grades from quizzes. He also finds it a good teaching tool.

Popovic said he will give students a brief interactive quiz at the start of a lecture to gauge how many have done the reading; knowing that, he will modify his lecture accordingly. Or he might give a quiz to spur classroom conversation, with results showing up on the screen in real time.

What's more, students can use the software to communicate with one another, even across the room. No longer is a student's peer group limited to those to the left and right, and in front and behind him, Popovic said.

Popovic said CourseKey complements other software he uses, the learning management system (or LMS) from Washington, D.C.-based Blackboard Inc.

Students pay for CourseKey as they would a textbook. The cost is \$25 for the first class and \$5 for each additional class. Professors get to use CourseKey for free.

In the spring of 2015, CourseKey filed for a patent on the GPS-like technology that determines whether a student is in the classroom.

The business has 15 full-time employees, with 10 in San Diego and three in Los Angeles. CourseKey counts two prominent Qualcomm Inc. executives — Paul Jacobs and Steve Altman — as investors. Another investor is venture capitalist Michael Stone.

Since November, the business has been part of downtown's EvoNexus incubator, and it will be leaving that space soon. CourseKey was previously part of San Diego State's Zahn Innovation Center.

CourseKey has several options to expand. Leaders in K-12 education have reportedly told Sophinos that they would like such a product. The CEO also sees potential in the corporate training market.

### **\$100,000 Fellowship**

Not to be overlooked in Luke Sophinos' two-year odyssey is the \$100,000 fellowship from the Thiel Foundation. It's a highly competitive grant for executives younger than 22 who have not yet completed college. The foundation is a project of Peter Thiel, who helped start PayPal and was an early investor in Facebook. (Thiel made headlines this summer by speaking at the Republican National Convention and telling delegates that he was proud to be gay. The entrepreneur has also been in the news for funding legal action against the web publisher Gawker Media.)

In addition to funds, the foundation gives students access to mentors and strategic introductions. Sophinos said he used its help to meet instructors and deans at colleges that had not yet adopted CourseKey.

The Thiel program also brings fellows together to exchange ideas.

Recently on the CourseKey blog, Sophinos described a moment when 11 entrepreneurs at one of those get-togethers took a break, and got their biggest lesson.

The 11 got stuck in an elevator.

They didn't panic. Instead, they started talking, and made it an unforgettable networking opportunity. The incident became a metaphor for how a business leader can face the setbacks that inevitably reach them.

### **COURSEKEY INC.**

**CEO:** Luke Sophinos

**Revenue:** Undisclosed

**No. of local employees:** 10

**Investors:** Steve Altman, Paul Jacobs, Michael Stone

**Headquarters:** Downtown

**Year founded:** 2014

**What makes the company innovative:** Offers software for college classrooms that speeds administrative tasks and boosts student engagement