ADVANCING NEBRASKA'S INCLUSIVE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

EWING MARION KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

PREPARED BY

Authors

Josie Schafer, Ph.D., director, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Morgan Vogel, Ph.D., assistant director, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Meagan Millier Paez, M.A., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Contributors

Tara Grell, public communications and creative coordinator, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Jungmin Hwang, M.P.A., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Michael Lee, M.P.A., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Amanda Parker, M.S., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Ryan Rouse, M.P.A., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Ignacio Ruelas, M.P.P., research assistant, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Catherine Brown, Ph.D., consultant, Catherine Brown Evaluation Services, LLC

EWING MARION KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION

This is a publication funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation utilizing content and data from multiple sources and external contributors. The contents of this publication are solely the responsibility of the authors. Every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, and it is believed to be correct as of the publication date. Nonetheless, this material is for informational purposes, and you are solely responsible for validating the applicability and accuracy of the information in any use you make of it.

How to cite this report:

UNO Center for Public Affairs Research. (2025). *Advancing Nebraska's Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem*. https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-public-affairs-and-community-service/center-for-public-affairs-research/documents/kauffman.pdf

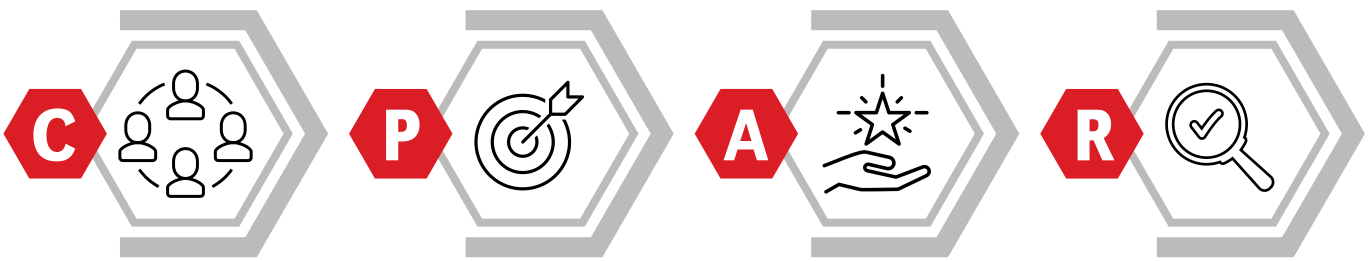
ABOUT UNO CPAR

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

MISSION

The Center for Public Affairs Research collaboratively produces and disseminates high-quality public scholarship about topics that impact the lives of Nebraskans and the region.

VALUES



COLLABORATIVE

Fostering connections between faculty; scholars; students; and community, statewide, and national partners to produce transformative public scholarship.

PURPOSEFUL

Focusing on timely topics in order to provide inclusive and actionable solutions to improve the lives of Nebraskans and the region.

ASPIRATIONAL

Leading in the application of innovative and creative methods to conduct and communicate our research to further its impact in our community.

RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Conducting objective, high-quality research to create an evidence base for decision makers in Nebraska and the region.

Ongoing projects from CPAR include policy analyses for the Planning Committee of the Nebraska State Legislature, the Nebraska Rural Transit Project, and designation by the U.S. Census Bureau as a statewide liaison for disseminating a range of data products. CPAR hosts an annual professional development program, the Data and Research Series for Community Impact, to assist state and community partners in accessing, utilizing, and analyzing data to inform decision-making.View our recent projects, publications, and presentations at cpar.unomaha.edu.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D.
Director, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

The Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is proud to share this series of studies made possible through the generous support of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. Through the Inclusive Ecosystems Grant, CPAR received $310,000 to examine Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem – its challenges, its opportunities, and the people who shape it.

Entrepreneurship is a cornerstone of economic vitality. Understanding how Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem grows, whom it serves, and how opportunity is distributed is essential for the state's long-term prosperity. Through this research, we hope to contribute insights that strengthen the connections between entrepreneurs, institutions, and communities statewide.

This work is also consistent with the goals and values of CPAR. Our mission is to collaboratively produce and disseminate high-quality public scholarship about topics that impact the lives of Nebraskans. This work exemplifies what we do best: using data from the U.S. Census Bureau to contextualize what's happening in Nebraska communities, engaging in qualitative inquiry to tell the stories of Nebraskans, and elevating the role of students in understanding and shaping Nebraska's future. Together, these efforts help communities, policymakers, and entrepreneurs make informed decisions grounded in evidence and lived experiences.

This report brings together three interrelated studies. We begin with ***The Evolution and Status of Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem***, where we revisit Nebraska's indicators of entrepreneurship, examining how the state's innovation capacity, access to capital, and workforce readiness have evolved since 2021. We then turn to ***Listening to Entrepreneurs***, a qualitative exploration of how entrepreneurs across Nebraska experience access and opportunity, highlighting both the progress being made and the barriers that remain. Finally, we close with ***Centering Students in Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem***, which centers on the inaugural Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition, emphasizing the importance of investing in the next generation of Nebraska talent.

Together, these studies demonstrate CPAR's commitment to understanding Nebraska through data, stories, and partnerships that inform action and support the state's continued growth.

The Evolution and Status of Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Overview

Entrepreneurs are central to the U.S. economy, driving growth through new business creation, job generation, increased worker productivity, innovation, and overall economic expansion (Van Praag, & Versloot, 2007; Acs, 2006). In Nebraska, multiple stakeholders have called for expanded support of entrepreneurship as a lever for economic growth (UNO CPAR, 2021). Yet starting and sustaining new ventures remains challenging. Many firms fail to launch due to limited access to capital, infrastructure, and institutional support, and those that survive often struggle to scale into long-term, sustainable businesses.

At the national level, recent trends in entrepreneurial activity are mixed — showing resilience in the number of startups but continued challenges in sustaining growth-oriented firms (S&P Global Market Intelligence, 2025; Duke, 2024; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2023). Nebraska's data, as this research shows, is less encouraging. This raises a critical question: What is being done — and what more can be done — to strengthen entrepreneurship in Nebraska?

This study examines how Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem has evolved since the release of *Entrepreneurship in Nebraska* (UNO CPAR, 2021). We revisit national data sources to track key indicators of entrepreneurial activity. We then evaluate today's ecosystem using interviews conducted as part of research funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, with particular attention to how programmatic gaps and resource needs have shifted over time.

2021 Baseline Indicators and Key Gaps in Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Landscape

In Nebraska, expanding entrepreneurship has been identified as a critical lever for economic and workforce growth (Blueprint Nebraska, 2019; UNO CPAR, 2021). The 2021 report *Entrepreneurship in Nebraska*, produced by the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research in partnership with the Nebraska Business Development Center, assessed entrepreneurship through quantitative indicators, identified ecosystem actors, and surveyed them on existing programs, resources, and challenges.

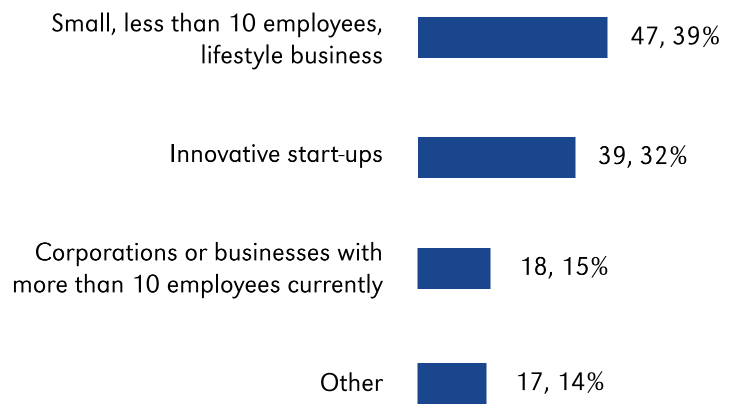
Entrepreneurship indicators from 2020 to 2021 show Nebraska gaining ground but still positioned in the middle range of Midwestern states. Nebraska's new entrepreneurship rate in 2020 was 0.27%, below neighboring states such as Iowa (0.31%) and Kansas (0.30%). Yet from 2020 to 2021, Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem expanded: the number of businesses grew by 7%, outpacing those same peers. At that time, 3.8% of Nebraska's workforce was self-employed in incorporated businesses, higher than Iowa (3.4%), Kansas (3.3%), and Missouri (3.0%), though still behind South Dakota (4.2%), Wyoming (5.0%), and Colorado (5.1%). Together, these indicators show that Nebraska's entrepreneurial

For reference, entrepreneurship includes both those who start any type of business and those who create innovation-driven ventures. Both are relevant to this analysis, but they are not the same. Entrepreneurs are often classified as self-employed, yet not all self-employed workers are entrepreneurs. Some enter self-employment out of necessity, while others pursue it as an opportunity to build something new and are growth-oriented. These *opportunity entrepreneurs* are more closely associated with high-growth activity (Naudé, 2014). The entrepreneurial ecosystem is defined as the network of organizations that support, drive, and grow new ventures.

activity increased, the state's overall standing remained mixed compared to its Midwestern neighbors.

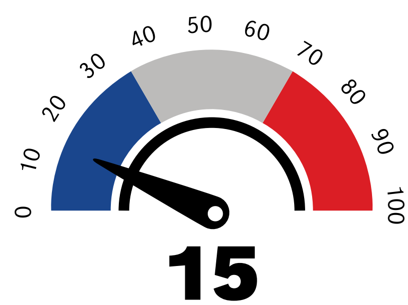
Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem in 2021 was broad but lacked a clear innovation focus. A wide range of actors supported small businesses, high-growth startups, and larger established firms. Survey results confirmed this diffusion: 39% of organizations reported focusing on small lifestyle-type businesses compared to 32% on innovative startups, which emphasize scalable growth, new technologies, or novel business models (UNO CPAR, 2021, p. 23). Survey respondents identified several central actors in the ecosystem, such as the Nebraska Business Development Center and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, which illustrate this dynamic as they work across business types rather than maintaining an innovation-specific focus. The result was an ecosystem with reach across sectors but without a coordinated agenda to advance innovation.

Which type of entrepreneur is your main focus at work?



Entrepreneurs interviewed in Nebraska in 2021 consistently described access as the greatest barrier to participating in the ecosystem. They reported difficulty locating and navigating available resources. Many pointed to the absence of an organized networking platform, often described as a "one stop shop" to connect with the ecosystem, including mentors, investors, and peers. Educational programming and institutional support were also limited. University-led mentorship opportunities were scarce, and wrap around services, such as succession planning, market research, and workforce development were largely reported as unavailable. The lack of coordinated connections and support reinforced the sense of fragmentation and made it harder for entrepreneurs to grow their ventures.

Please estimate in whole numbers, how many entrepreneurs or firms in your region have a HIGH growth business idea right now?

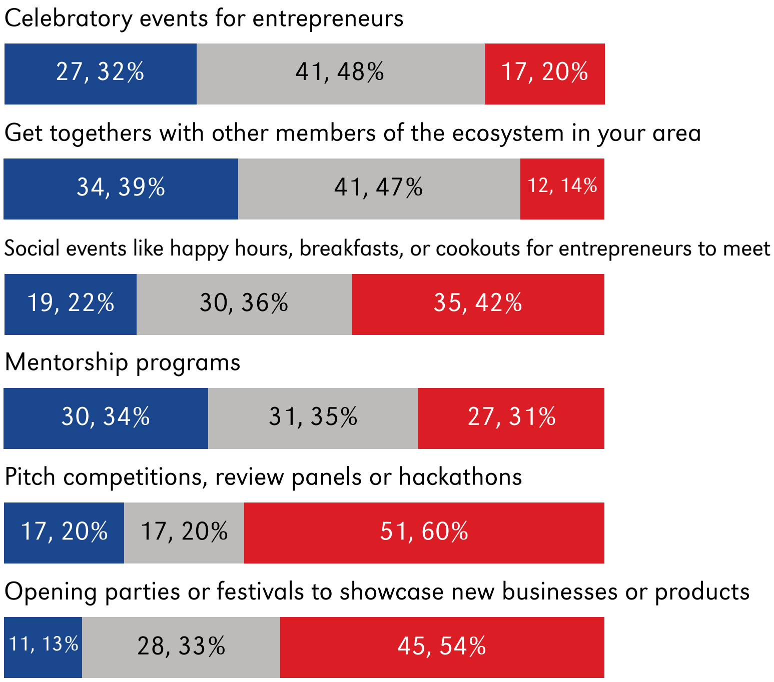


Entrepreneurs also identified the lack of incubation facilities and limited access to capital as critical barriers. They emphasized the absence of dedicated spaces such as wet labs, which are essential for startups developing products that require testing or prototyping. Without these facilities, many innovation-driven firms struggled to advance ideas beyond concept. Capital access created additional challenges. Stakeholders described uneven availability of in-state venture and risk capital, with very limited Series A and B funding for firms ready to scale. Entrepreneurs also noted gaps at the earliest stages, pointing to the need for micro-loans, seed grants, and stronger support for acquiring innovation grants. Together, these conditions restricted both the launch and growth of new ventures in Nebraska.

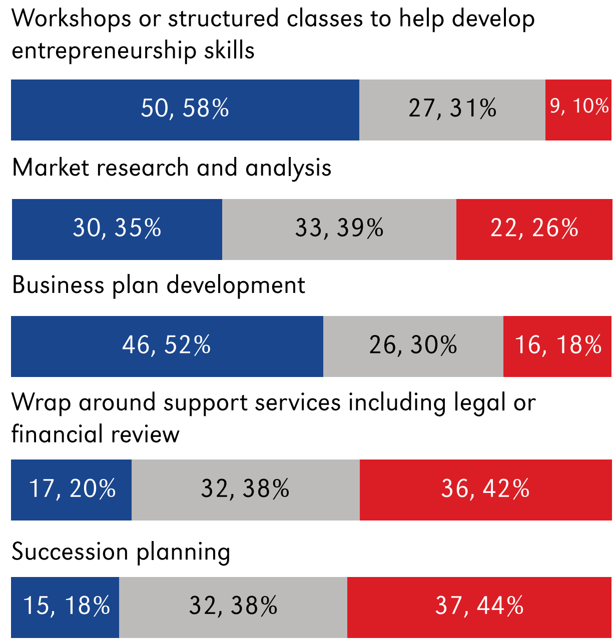
What programming and/or resources are currently offered by your organization to entrepreneurs in your region?

Yes, regularly | Yes, but only sometimes | No

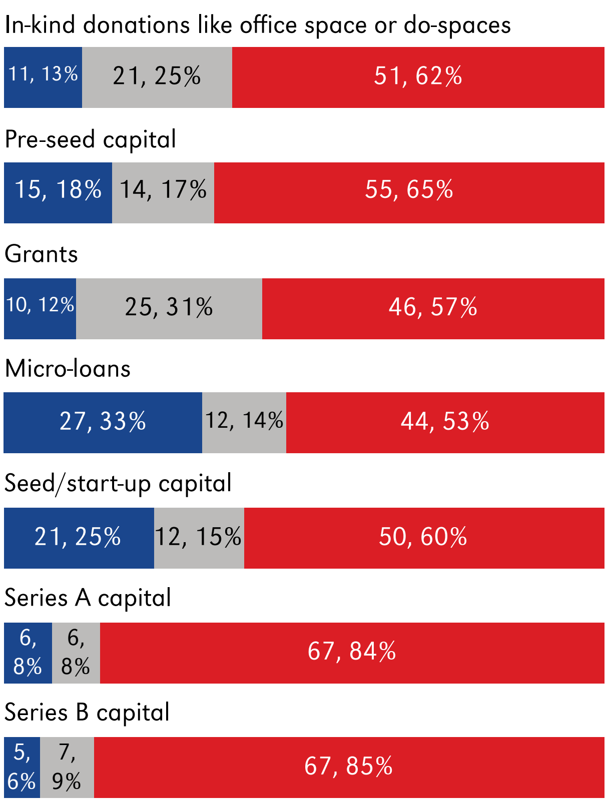
CONNECTIONS



EDUCATION



RESOURCES



Nebraska has an underground entrepreneur ecosystem that you have to go to and meet people to learn who is who.

Entrepreneur Interviewee

Entrepreneurs emphasized that these issues amounted to more than missing programs. They described feeling isolated in a fragmented landscape where it was difficult to reach customers, funders, peer networks, and service providers. Access also differed between rural and urban communities, leaving rural entrepreneurs more isolated and deepening existing divides. As one entrepreneur put it in 2021:

> *"Nebraska has the opportunity to be the first and best in early identification of entrepreneurs. If we miss this opportunity, it would be a tragedy."*

These access challenges also constrained Nebraska's pipeline of entrepreneurial talent. With a smaller workforce than many peers and higher concentration in traditional jobs, the state had a more limited pool of potential entrepreneurs. Expanding access to programming was viewed as essential for reaching underrepresented groups — young people, older adults, women, and people of color — whose participation could strengthen and diversify the ecosystem.

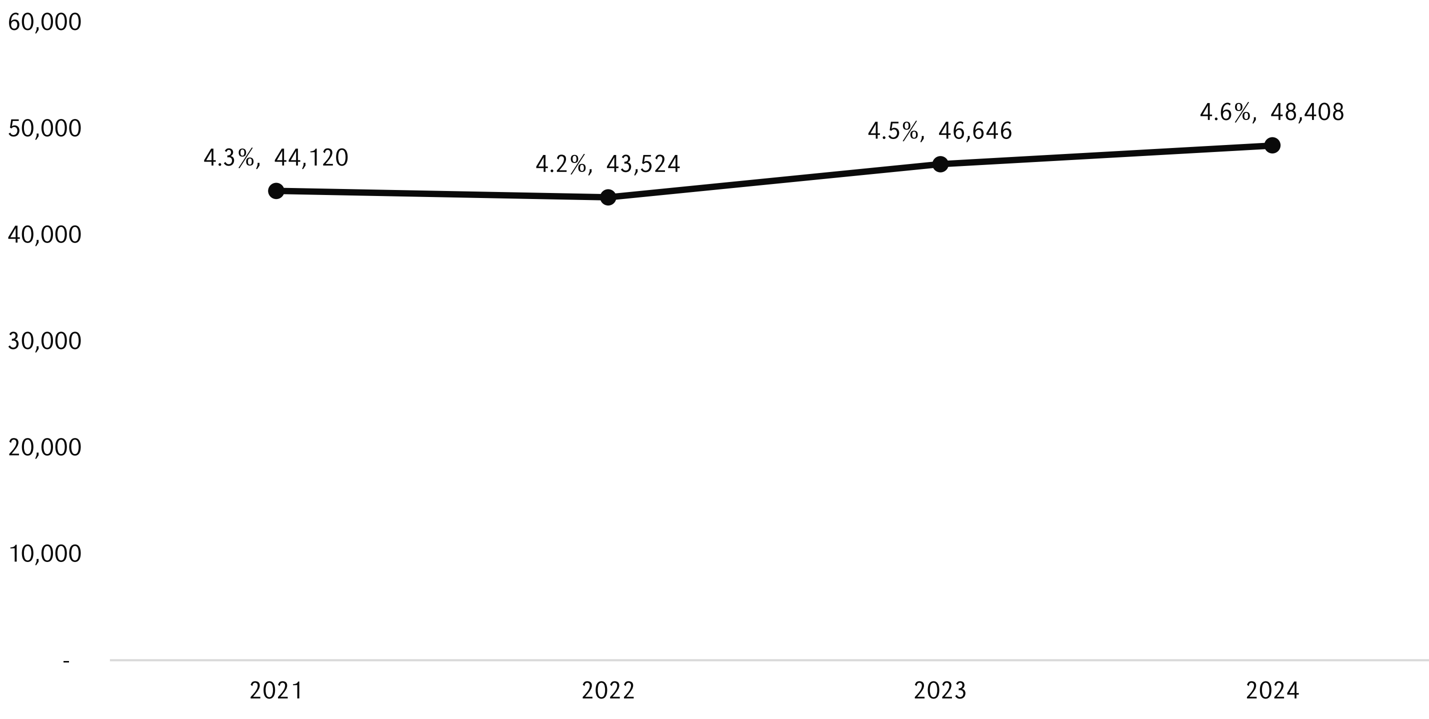
Updates to Quantitative Indicators of Entrepreneurship

The Kauffman Indicators of Entrepreneurship used in the 2021 report have not been updated (see: https://indicators.kauffman.org/indicator/rate-of-new-entrepreneurs). To address this gap, we draw directly on original data sources to refresh key indicators and add new measures of Nebraska's entrepreneurial activity today.

Self-Employment

Using one-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), the number of Nebraskans self-employed in their own incorporated businesses rose from 44,120 in 2021 to 48,408 in 2024. Though modest, this growth signals an upward trend in self-employment.

Percent and Estimate of the Workforce that is Self-Employed in Own Incorporated Business, 2021 to 2024

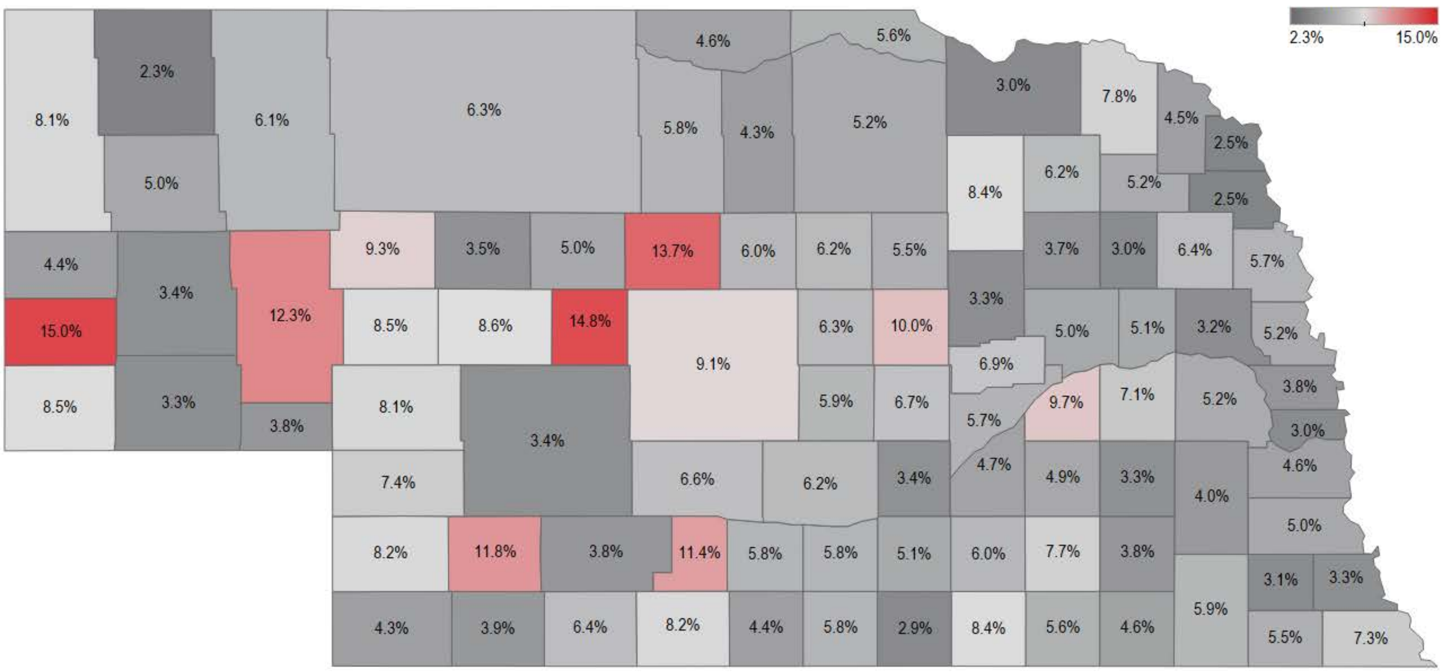


In 2024, Nebraska's incorporated self-employment rate reached 4.6%, ranking 8th among states, between Idaho and Georgia. Nebraska trailed nearby Colorado (5.0%) and Wyoming (5.3%), but outperformed Iowa (4.0%), Kansas (3.6%), and Missouri (3.1%) (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2024). Overall, these patterns mirror the 2021 findings of modest growth.

Self-employment in non-incorporated businesses showed slower growth. In 2021, 66,349 Nebraskans, 6.5% of the workforce, were self-employed in non-incorporated businesses, rising to 68,643 (6.6%) in 2024 (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2024). These enterprises tend to generate less revenue, employ fewer workers, and have limited growth potential compared to incorporated firms. For that reason, non-incorporated self-employment is less relevant as an indicator of entrepreneurial activity, despite its importance to the economy. Moreover, earnings data reveal disparities based on business structure. Self-employed Nebraskans with incorporated businesses earned a median income of $59,427, while those with unincorporated businesses earned $36,667 (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2024).

Self-employment rates also vary across Nebraska. In 2023, using the ACS 5-year estimates — the most recent available for counties — the counties with the highest shares of residents self-employed in incorporated businesses were Banner (15%), Logan (15%), and Blaine (13%) (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). All three are rural counties where self-employment is likely tied to agriculture. The lowest rates were in Knox, Webster, Dakota, Thurston, and Dawes counties, also rural counties, each below 3% (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2023).

Self-Employment in Own Incorporated Business by Nebraska County, 2023



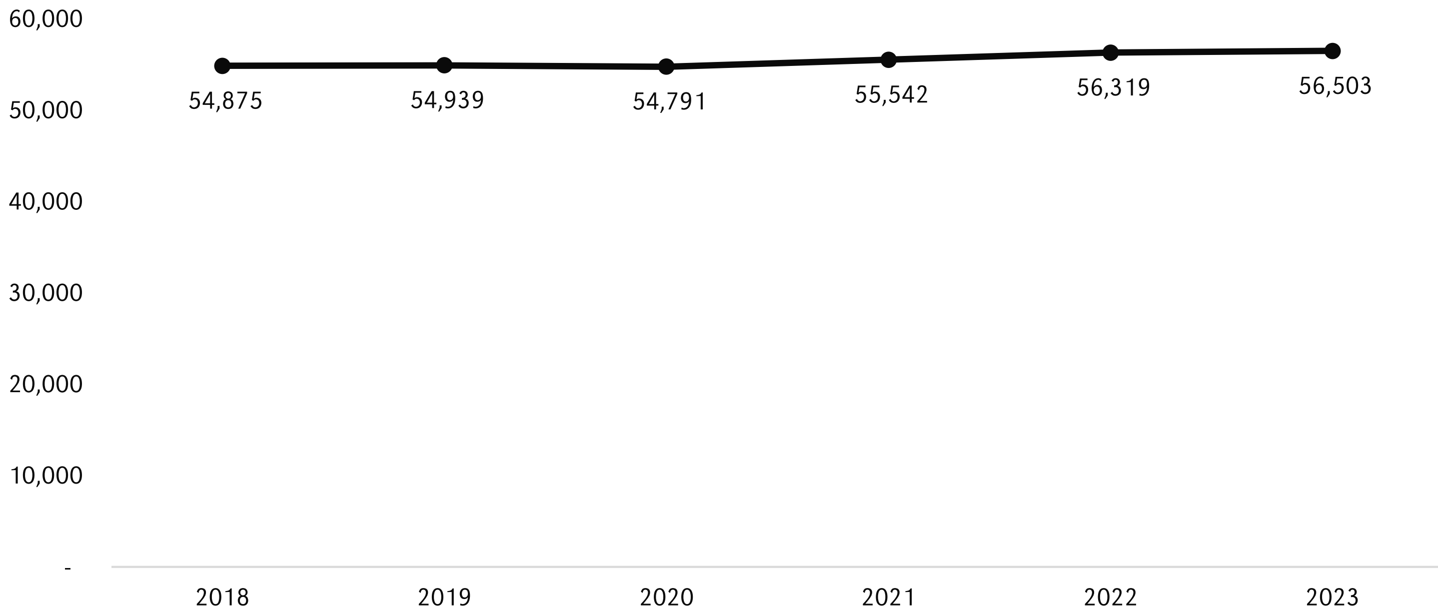
In 2023, 33% of self-employed workers in their own incorporated businesses in Nebraska were women. This rate is slightly below the national average of 34% and matches Kansas at 33%. Women's participation in Nebraska also trailed Colorado and Wyoming (both 36%) and Missouri (35%), but exceeds Iowa, where the rate was 30% (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2023). Between 2018 and 2023, the share of women self-employed in incorporated businesses in Nebraska increased (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2023). In terms of earnings, men in 2023 earned about $61,507, roughly 1.7 times more than the $37,136 earned by women in their own incorporated businesses in Nebraska. This gap was slightly larger than the national average ratio of 1.6 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). People of color were also less represented among those who were self-employed in their own incorporated businesses.

Business Establishments

Another way to assess entrepreneurial activity is through establishment data from the U.S. Census Bureau's County Business Patterns (CBP), which track the number of business locations operating in the state. Establishments include physical sites such as stores, offices, or plants where business activity takes place. A single firm may operate more than one establishment, so these data capture locations rather than distinct companies.

Between March 2022 and March 2023, Nebraska added 184 establishments, bringing the statewide total to 56,503 (U.S. Census Bureau, CBP, 2023). Since 2021, the overall growth rate in establishments is 2.0%. However, the most recent annual increase (2022 to 2023) was only 0.3%, a notable slowdown compared to the stronger post–COVID-19 gains of 1.4% in each of the two prior years.

Number of Establishments in Nebraska, 2018 to 2023



Exploring the more detailed turnover data provides additional insight into the sustainability of establishments. In 2022, Nebraska's establishment entry rate was 8.9%, slightly higher than the exit rate of 8.4%, yielding a net gain of 0.5%. In 2023 the entry rate was just slightly higher at 9% but yielded a lower gain of just 0.3%. Nationally, the net gain was 1.9% (U.S. Census Bureau, BDS, 2022). One of the primary goals of new establishment generation is job creation. On this measure, Nebraska also lags the nation. New establishments in the state accounted for 3.2% of employment in 2022, compared with 4.4% nationally.

Taken together, these measures indicate Nebraska is sustaining its establishment base but expanding more slowly than the nation. Small businesses remain the backbone of the state's economy, yet turnover rates suggest that fewer new ventures are surviving long enough to make a sustained contribution to job growth.

Innovation and Value in Establishment Births

Beyond overall growth trends, it is also important to consider which industries are driving new establishment formation. At the establishment level, we have few direct measures of high-growth potential, a central focus of entrepreneurial research. One way to approximate this is by examining the industries in which new establishments are created. Industry is not a perfect proxy for growth potential, but sectors vary in their contribution to GDP and the value they produce. More births in high-value industries may suggest greater potential for innovative startups, while concentration in lower-value industries may indicate the prevalence of lifestyle businesses.

In 2023, the industry with the highest establishment birth rate in Nebraska was agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting, at 12.0%. Only 2.3% of establishments in this sector closed, leaving agriculture with a strong net positive rate of establishment formation (U.S. Census Bureau, BDS, 2023). Yet agriculture is a medium-value industry, contributing about $12.2 billion to Nebraska's economy in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis [BEA], 2023).

By contrast, finance and insurance ($39.7 billion) and manufacturing ($19.6 billion) contribute considerably more to state GDP but showed weaker entrepreneurial dynamics. Finance and insurance had one of the lowest establishment birth rates at 6.5%, with exits exceeding entries and resulting in a net decline (U.S. Census Bureau, BDS, 2023; BEA, 2023). Manufacturing reported an even lower birth rate of 6.0%, but with a smaller exit rate of 4.7%, leaving a net positive for startup activity in this high-value sector (U.S. Census Bureau, BDS, 2023; BEA, 2023).

Technology startups are often a central focus of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. They are classified under professional, scientific, and technical services, alongside other high-innovation firms. While not among the highest-value sectors in terms of GDP contribution ($15.8 billion), this industry reported a relatively high establishment birth rate of 10.6% in 2023, with an exit rate of 9.4%, reflecting ongoing startup activity in an innovative sector (U.S. Census Bureau, BDS, 2023; BEA, 2023).

Overall, Nebraska's entrepreneurial activity shows the strongest momentum in medium-value sectors like agriculture and professional services, while high-value sectors such as finance and manufacturing exhibit weaker but still positive dynamics.

Research and Development Expenditures

Another measure of innovation potential, not quantified in the 2021 report but discussed conceptually, is research and development (R&D) expenditures in the state. R&D activity represents deliberate investment in generating something new — knowledge, products, or processes that can create economic value. This aligns directly with the mission of high-growth entrepreneurship. While entrepreneurs may not conduct R&D themselves, their ventures often depend on the outputs of such activity, whether new technologies, products, or methods. In this sense, R&D provides the raw material that entrepreneurs translate into commercial value.

Not all R&D is captured in government spending. Many activities take place in the private sector, particularly within large firms or through university–industry partnerships. Still, government R&D expenditures are a widely used proxy for the state's overall innovation climate. Persistently low government spending signals limited public-sector commitment to generating new knowledge and may also suggest fewer opportunities for entrepreneurs to leverage public research into new ventures.

Data on state government R&D come from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics' (NCSES) *Survey of State Government Research and Development*, administered by the U.S. Census Bureau for 2019 to 2023. The survey reports three categories of research: basic, applied, and experimental. Over this period, Nebraska invested the most in applied research, at $6.5 million, compared to $762,988 in basic research and $138,200 in experimental development (NCSES, 2020 to 2024). Applied research was also the only category funded consistently each year.

When adjusted for population, the state's commitment appears even more modest. On a per capita basis, average applied research funding equaled just $0.67 per resident — well below the national average of $1.67 (NCSES, 2020 to 2024). By 2023, the state's total R&D expenditure fell to $74,500, the lowest level recorded in the five-year period. Per capita, Nebraska spent no funding on basic research, $0.02 on applied research, and $0.02 on experimental research. Nationally, per capita spending was $0.64 on basic, $1.94 on applied, and $0.26 on experimental (NCSES, 2024). These gaps place Nebraska well behind many states in government-funded R&D. Per capita values were calculated by dividing state R&D expenditures by total population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates for each year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 to 2023).

Total Research and Development Spending by State Per Capita, 2023

Taken together, these figures suggest that Nebraska is investing little in the creation of new knowledge through government R&D. While private-sector activity may offset some of this gap, the state's public commitment remains limited. This reduces the flow of new ideas and technologies that can serve as the foundation for high-growth entrepreneurial ventures and underscores a weakness in the state's innovation ecosystem.

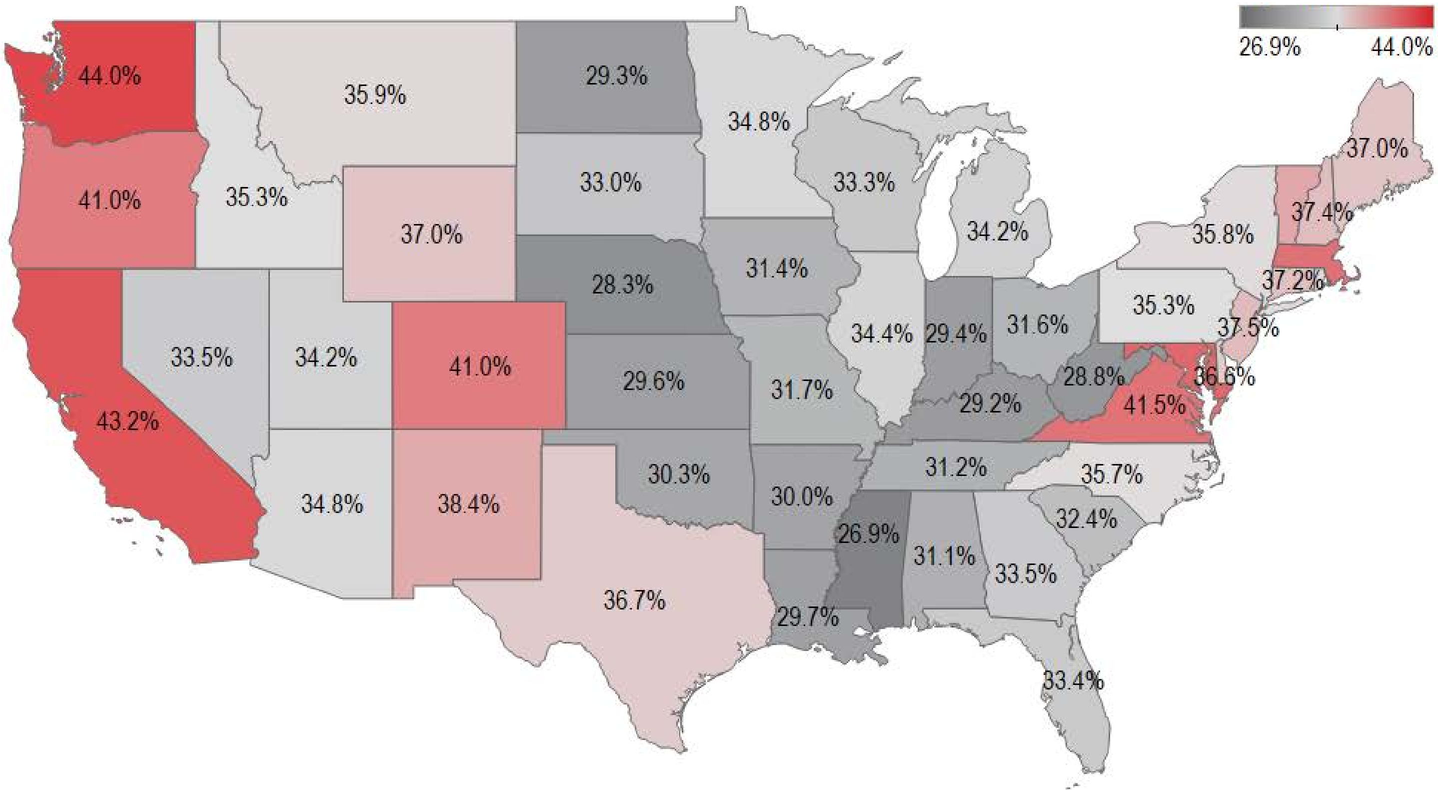
Talent as a Driver of Entrepreneurship

R&D investment provides the raw material for innovation, but its impact depends on whether a workforce exists to apply new knowledge, develop products, and scale firms. Ideas without talent remain underutilized, which is why workforce skills are as critical to entrepreneurship as research itself. High-growth ventures thrive where both conditions are met: sustained R&D activity and a pipeline of educated workers prepared to turn ideas into economic value.

On education, Nebraska again has mixed results. In 2024, 35.4% of Nebraskans aged 25 and older held a bachelor's degree or higher, up slightly from 34.4% in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 1-year Estimates, 2021 to 2024). The state ranks 26th nationally, behind Florida and just above Texas, and lower than several Midwestern peers, including Kansas (36.0%) and Colorado (47.8%).

The challenge is sharper when looking at fields of study. Only 28.3% of Nebraska's degree holders had majored in science or engineering in 2024, ranking the state 49th nationally, ahead of only Mississippi. Regional peers far outpace Nebraska on this measure — Colorado (41.0%), Wyoming (38.0%), South Dakota (33.0%), Missouri (31.7%), Iowa (31.4%), and Kansas (29.6%) (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 1-year Estimates, 2024). This points to a serious weakness in building a workforce pipeline aligned with innovative-led growth.

Percentage of Persons with a Bachelor’s Degree That Majored in Science and Engineering



Taken together, limited R&D investment and low representation in science and engineering fields create a structural barrier to entrepreneurship in Nebraska. Without more investment in both knowledge creation and talent development, the state risks seeing its entrepreneurial activity remain concentrated in lower-value, lifestyle sectors rather than expanding into high-growth industries that drive long-term economic transformation.

Access to Capital

Access to capital has historically been one of the most cited barriers for Nebraska entrepreneurs. In 2021, interviewees highlighted a lack of micro-loans, innovation grants, and later-stage capital. By 2022, the state appeared to have made progress in addressing these gaps. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration’s *2024 Nebraska Small Business Profile*, banks in the state issued approximately $1.7 billion in loans to firms with revenue under $1 million, and over $1.7 billion in total loans of $1 million or less, suggesting that more capital is being deployed than in 2021 (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2024). These figures indicate a robust lending environment for smaller firms and reflect broader efforts to expand financial access. While these metrics do not capture all entrepreneurial resource support — a measure that is not consistently available — they nevertheless highlight an improving capital landscape.

Accounts from founders, collected through interviews conducted in 2024, reinforce this shift. Several entrepreneurs emphasized the expanding role of in-state funding efforts and local angel investment. One founder explained, “We’ve raised a Series A, and that primarily was from investors in Nebraska… all our money was from angel investors, and local individuals as well.” An ecosystem leader remarked, “We could probably go in a corner right now and come up with an idea that would garner some type of investment.” These perspectives contrast sharply with 2021 interviews, when discussions were more focused on risk aversion and limited funding opportunities.

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of Department of Economic Development Prototype Grants and the support of Invest Nebraska as key sources of capital. In addition, many noted the new visibility of angel investors, particularly in Omaha. Together, these statements illustrate the growing viability of Nebraska's early-stage funding environment and point to an emerging culture of blended capital, where institutional backers and individual investors play complementary roles.

Programming, Education, and Additional Support

Another encouraging trend since 2021 has been the emergence of highly accessible startup support programs. The Startup Collaborative and Pipeline Entrepreneurs were frequently cited by founders interviewed in 2024, despite going largely unmentioned in 2021. Participants consistently described these programs as valuable for refining business models, preparing for pitches, and building relationships with mentors and investors. Unlike more traditional or academic incubators, they are flexible, responsive, and designed to meet founders where they are. Several entrepreneurs emphasized that these programs provided a gateway to both capital and expertise. One founder explained that she would not have known about funding opportunities or investor contacts without her involvement in The Startup Collaborative, while another described how a $10,000 grant received through a fellowship gave her the confidence and capital to move forward with her idea. These experiences illustrate how programmatic interventions, when designed with founder needs in mind, can have significant impact.

Entrepreneurs highlighted specific features of these programs that set them apart:

> *"The fact that the Startup Collaborative was free, and it was kind of on your own timeframe...they give you a contact who checks in, connects you with outside people, helps facilitate meetings...you're kind of just given this book of resources that you would have never had before... for example, you know, connecting to Ben Williamson...one of the biggest investors in the State of Nebraska...You just have access to resources that I would have never been able to find on my own."*

> *"I ended up going through like a four- or six-week intensive. It was called a FinTech fellowship... at The Startup Collaborative...they were partnering with First National Bank... at the end they awarded some grants, $10,000 grants...I got one of those $10,000 grants. And that was kind of like, 'hey, we can use this to actually start the company.'"*

> *"[The] Startup Collaborative...putting us all together in that same space was the single biggest catalyst to the venture community and the startup community in Omaha..."*

These quotes demonstate that since 2021, some progress has been made in connecting entrepreneurs to talent resources, particularly through non-academic programs that act as entry points for mentorship, training, and networking. Interviewees noted that more entrepreneurs are now being funneled into programs that serve as the “one-stop shop” so frequently demanded in 2021. These programs provide centralized access to coaching, connections, and occasionally capital, helping founders overcome barriers that previously required navigating multiple fragmented resources.

Several new initiatives also aim to strengthen ties between entrepreneurship and workforce development. For example, the Governor’s New Venture Competition seeks to cultivate entrepreneurial skills among students and connect them to Nebraska’s startup community (State of Nebraska, n.d.). Such efforts highlight the growing recognition that workforce development and entrepreneurship are deeply intertwined. The Governor’s New Venture Competition was explored in greater detail in a related case study in this series.

These benefits, however, are not uniformly distributed. Founders operating in rural areas or without proximity to major program hubs often report missing out, underscoring persistent geographic gaps. Moreover, while non-academic programs have become more effective, partnerships with higher education institutions remain underdeveloped. Mentorship opportunities, capstone projects, and student engagement were often described as inaccessible or difficult to integrate into the realities of fast-paced, digital startups. Workforce development resources continue to be fragmented, with some founders reporting that they conducted their own market research due to the lack of centralized support services.

> *“You can go through a, b, c, d program where you can learn how to start a business, and what the normal things are to do. But then, when do you get past that kind of initial startup phase? I think that’s where there could be more resources because you have specific, different challenges that you’re trying to solve.”*

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that while Nebraska has made progress in integrating entrepreneurial and workforce development resources, significant opportunities remain to broaden access, deepen higher education partnerships, and create a more cohesive pipeline for entrepreneurial talent.

Connectivity and Statewide Inclusion

Perhaps the most consistent theme across both 2021 and 2024 data is the uneven nature of ecosystem access. Urban founders reported more frequent interactions with funders, mentors, and program administrators, while rural entrepreneurs and those from underrepresented backgrounds struggled to access the same networks. This divide continues to shape who gets funded and who receives critical support.

> *I suppose I think there's a pretty big divide, though, between, the Omaha and Lincoln community. So, I live halfway in between...I think that's really good for me and the company, cause we're kind of in both places. But I think if we weren't, if I wasn't like closer to Omaha, I don't think we'd have any connections in Omaha.*

Several entrepreneurs also emphasized the role of informal networks in facilitating access to resources. One noted that a conversation at church led to a key email introduction and eventually a funding opportunity. Another described a chain of personal connections that resulted in a successful grant application. These examples underscore how opportunity is often mediated through personal relationships rather than formalized ecosystem supports.

These dynamics highlight the importance of strengthening statewide connectivity and ensuring that programs reach entrepreneurs regardless of geography or background. While progress has been made in building resources, access remains uneven — and in many cases dependent on who founders know rather than the ecosystem itself. Issues of access are explored in greater detail in a related study within this series.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to evaluate the strength of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem and its capacity to support innovation-led growth. The findings show clear signs of progress since 2021, but overall growth remains slow and continues to trail national benchmarks. Establishment formation and startup job creation have increased only modestly, with activity concentrated in medium-value sectors like agriculture and professional services rather than in higher-value industries that drive long-term economic transformation.

Nebraska's innovation foundation remains weak. State R&D investment is among the lowest in the nation, and the share of science and engineering graduates ranks near the bottom. These gaps limit the state's ability to generate and commercialize new ideas, leaving many high-growth opportunities untapped.

At the same time, entrepreneurs describe an ecosystem that is easier to navigate than it was three years ago. Access to capital has improved, and new support programs provide clearer pathways to mentorship, training, and early-stage resources. Yet these benefits are unevenly distributed. Rural founders and those outside of established networks continue to face barriers, and partnerships with higher education institutions remain underdeveloped.

Nebraska has taken meaningful steps forward, but the ecosystem is not yet positioned to deliver the scale of entrepreneurial activity needed to transform the state's economy. Expanding access to capital across all stages, investing in research capacity, strengthening the science and engineering workforce pipeline, and ensuring statewide inclusion are critical priorities. Without these deliberate investments, entrepreneurship will remain concentrated in lower-value activity; with them, Nebraska has the potential to convert incremental gains into a durable, innovation-driven engine for growth.

References

Acs, Z. (2006). How is entrepreneurship good for economic growth. *innovations, 1*(1), 97-107.

Duke, B. (2024, March 18). *Entrepreneurship, startups, and business formation are booming across the U.S.* Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/entrepreneurship-startups-and-business-formation-are-booming-across-the-u-s/

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). (2020–2024). *Survey of State Government Research and Development: FY 2019–2023* (NSF 21-301, NSF 22-307, NSF 23-302, NSF 24-305, NSF 25-309). Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation. Available at https://ncses.nsf.gov/surveys/state-government-research-development

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). (2024). *Survey of State Government Research and Development: FY 2023* (NSF 25-309). Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation. Available at https://ncses.nsf.gov/surveys/state-government-research-development/2023

Naudé, W. (2014). Entrepreneurship and economic development. In B. Currie-Alder, R. Kanbur, D. M. Malone, & R. Medhora (Eds.), *International development: Ideas, experience, and prospects* (pp. 427–446). Oxford University Press.

S&P Global Market Intelligence. (2025, April 23). *US business growth hits lowest since late-2023, confidence slumps and prices move higher*. S&P Global. https://www.spglobal.com/market-intelligence/en/news-insights/research/2025/04/us-business-growth-hits-lowest-since-late2023-confidence-slumps-and-prices-move-higher-apr25

U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). Business Dynamics Statistics: Firm Age: 1978-2023. Economic Surveys, ECNSVY Business Dynamics Statistics, Table BDSFAGE. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from https://data.census.gov/table/BDSTIMESERIES.BDSFAGE?q=BDSTIMESERIES.BDSFAGE&g=010XX00US$0400000&nkd=time~2023.

U.S. Census Bureau (2025). Business Dynamics Statistics: Industry: 1978-2023. Economic Surveys, ECNSVY Business Dynamics Statistics, Table BDSFAGE. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from https://data.census.gov/table/BDSTIMESERIES.BDSGEO?t=Business+Dynamics&g=040XX00US31.

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). Sex by Class of Worker for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over. American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B24080. Retrieved September 29, 2025, from https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B24080?q=B24080:+Sex+by+Class+of+Worker+for+the+Civilian+Employed+Population+16+Years+and+Over&g=040XX00US31,31$0500000&moe=false.

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). Class of Worker by Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2024 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over. American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B24081. Retrieved September 29, 2025, from https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B24081?q=B24081&g=040XX00US31,31$0500000.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2019–2023). Total Population. *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year estimates, Detailed Tables, Table DP05: Demographic and housing estimates*. Retrieved September 29, 2025, from, https://data.census.gov/

U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2023, November 15). *Small business and entrepreneurship in the post-COVID expansion*. https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/small-business-and-entrepreneurship-in-the-post-covid-expansion

Van Praag, C. M., & Versloot, P. H. (2007). What is the value of entrepreneurship? A review of recent research. *Small business economics, 29*(4), 351-382.

Listening to Entrepreneurs

A Qualitative Study of Access and Opportunity in Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

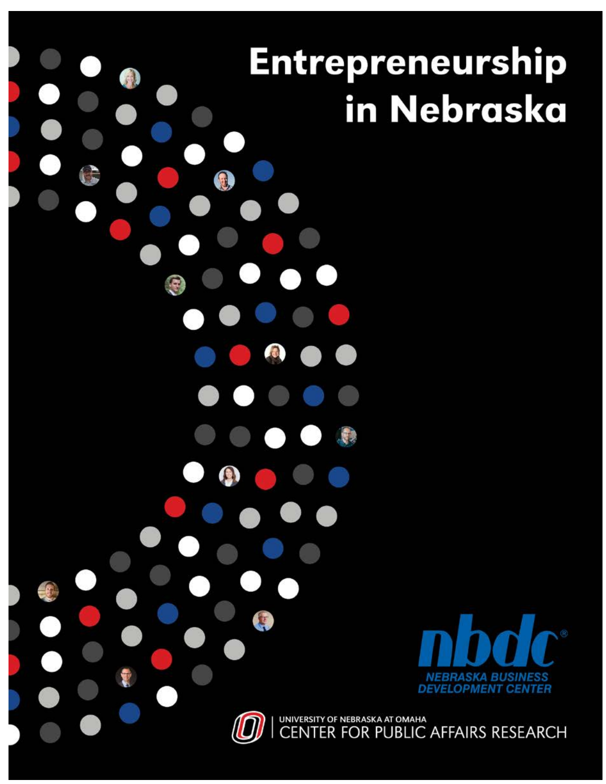
Overview

This qualitative study examines how entrepreneurs experience access and opportunity within Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Through 35 semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs across the state, the research explores how geography, education, demographics, and social networks shape opportunities for engagement with the ecosystem and successful entrepreneurial endeavors. While some entrepreneurs described supportive communities, peer cohorts, and system shifts that expand participation, many reported uneven access to funding, mentorship, and networks. Entrepreneurs from rural areas, those without Nebraska roots, women, and people of color often encountered barriers tied to legacy networks and informal gatekeeping. At the same time, younger founders, formal programs, and institutional supports demonstrate potential to broaden access and reconfigure pathways. Together, these findings highlight both persistent structural barriers and opportunities for the intentional design of a more connected and opportunity-rich entrepreneurial ecosystem in Nebraska.

Navigating Opportunity in Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Strong entrepreneurial ecosystems reduce structural barriers and channel underutilized capital, talent, and ideas into productive use, creating the foundation for sustained regional economic growth. In practice, this means expanding access to entrepreneurial pathways and mobilizing resources that have been underleveraged within existing networks. It is particularly important that a wide range of people and industries can participate (Acs et al., 2017). Yet significant constraints remain. Entrepreneurs continue to face limited access to networks, capital, and mentorship, alongside systemic obstacles related to demographics that restrict access and productivity (Brush et al., 2019; Foss et al., 2019; Motoyama et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem reflects these challenges, with uneven demographic participation, geographic concentration, and siloed structures that reinforce closed systems of decision-making (CPAR, 2021).

In 2021, the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research (UNO CPAR), in partnership with the Nebraska Business Development Center (NBDC), released *Entrepreneurship in Nebraska*. The study documented Nebraska's historically low rates of new business formation — just 0.27% in 2020, the lowest among neighboring states, down from a 0.37% peak in 1998 (UNO CPAR, 2021).



The research found that ecosystem stakeholders — including incubators, funders, educators, and entrepreneurs — rated Nebraska's entrepreneurship support as weak; the median response on efforts to grow new businesses was just 21 on a 1–100 scale (Davis, 2022). The research revealed key systemic barriers: a fragile and inconsistent pipeline of early-stage entrepreneurs, limited connectivity between aspiring founders and existing support networks, and a support ecosystem perceived as "disconnected" from emerging entrepreneurs, particularly those outside dominant groups (Duggan, 2022).

The sentiment of "Nebraska Nice" — culturally valued for friendliness and support — was also seen as having both benefits and drawbacks. While it fosters a welcoming environment, it can also stifle rigorous feedback and critical dialogue needed for healthy entrepreneurial growth (Duggan, 2022). The dominant ecosystem was described as predominantly white and male, suggesting that many potential entrepreneurs do not see themselves reflected in the current ecosystem (Duggan, 2022). More critically, access points to the ecosystem were limited. In the 2021 report, one interviewee likened the situation to an "underground entrepreneur ecosystem" where newcomers must navigate informal networks to discover opportunities (UNO CPAR, 2021; Davis, 2022).

Building on this earlier research, UNO CPAR applied for and was awarded a $310,000 Inclusive Ecosystems Grant by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in October 2022 (University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2022). The purpose of the Kauffman Inclusive Ecosystems grant was to build on the original *Entrepreneurship in Nebraska (2021)* research by better understanding how representation and decision-making dynamics shape access to Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Rather than focusing just on individual behaviors or programs, the inclusive ecosystems approach probes how structural factors — who is invited into the process, whose voices are heard, and how networks operate — affect access to opportunity (Kauffman Foundation, n.d.).

This additional research phase enabled UNO CPAR to unpack and illuminate how access (or lack thereof) to networks, capital, mentorship, and institutional support contributes to uneven patterns of support in Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. As such, this research centers the experiences of entrepreneurs who have often been overlooked — not to document deficit, but to identify where systemic change can unlock hidden opportunity and grow statewide innovation.

Research Design

To understand the nuanced experiences of entrepreneurs in Nebraska and how they engage with the state's entrepreneurial ecosystem, a qualitative research design was developed. This approach enabled the research team to explore how various factors shape perceptions of access and support received across diverse entrepreneurial backgrounds. The study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs who had direct experience navigating the state's ecosystem. This format is particularly well-suited for open-ended inquiry and in-depth exploration (Adams, 2015). Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, the open-ended questions allowed interviewees to share detailed reflections on their interactions within Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Data Collection

In total, the research team conducted 35 interviews using Zoom video conferencing. Recruitment of interviewees followed a three-pronged approach: (1) outreach to prior interviewees (see UNO CPAR, 2021) and their contacts, (2) outreach to organizations that support entrepreneurs across Nebraska, and (3) outreach to entrepreneurs recommended by other interviewees (i.e., snowball sampling). These efforts aimed to ensure a diverse sample in demographics, geography, and business type. Organizations and individuals received standardized outreach materials to circulate or respond to directly. A tracking sheet was used by the research team to monitor outreach efforts, and follow-up emails were sent 1-2 weeks after initial contact to encourage participation. Interviewee identities and referral sources were kept confidential and known only to the research team (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers continued interviewing entrepreneurs until a point of saturation was reached, in which no new information was obtained during interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Demographic and geographic information of interviewees is presented in Table 1. The average interviewee age was 45 years old. Interviewees were highly educated, with most holding a bachelor's or master's degree in their field. Interviewees were recruited statewide, with the majority currently residing in the Omaha and Lincoln metropolitan areas. Although recruitment focused on Nebraska-based entrepreneurs, several interviewees were living outside the state at the time of their interview. These individuals had strong ties to Nebraska — such as growing up, attending school, or starting their businesses in the state — and later relocated to places like Silicon Valley or Chicago to access broader networks and capital. Of those entrepreneurs interviewed, the majority identified as men, and six identified as people of color.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographic Information

Gender	Women: 16 Men: 19
Race and Ethnicity	Identified as a Person of Color: 3 Identified as Hispanic/ Native American/ Alaska Native: 3 White: 29
Educational Attainment	High School Diploma: 1 Associate degree: 1 Bachelor's degree: 12 Master's degree: 17 J.D.: 1 Ph.D.: 3
Current Residence	Lincoln: 10 Omaha: 16 Other NE: 5 Other State: 4

Entrepreneurs' Experiences of Access and Opportunity in Nebraska: Themes and Insights

Based on interviews with entrepreneurs, researchers listened firsthand to stories of how individuals experience access and opportunity within Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. These narratives were deeply personal and varied, offering rich, thick descriptions of the barriers, opportunities, and cultural dynamics that shape entrepreneurial journeys. While each story was unique, **five key themes emerged across the interviews** relating to access and opportunity for entrepreneurs.

Geography and Regional Access

Education and Credentials as Gateways to Access

Demographics and Uneven Access to Opportunity

Informal Networks and Pathways

Generational Change and System Shifts Underway

Each of these themes is explored in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Geography and Regional Access

For the entrepreneurs who were interviewed as part of this study, geography played a major role in shaping access to Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. A clear divide emerged between entrepreneurs located in Omaha and Lincoln, where resources are concentrated, and those based in rural areas of the state. Additionally, entrepreneurs without local roots — whether new to Nebraska or without family connections — described feeling disadvantaged compared to peers who had long-standing ties to the region.

Many entrepreneurs described the experience of trying to compete for resources from outside Omaha and Lincoln as isolating. Without connections in these metropolitan hubs, some entrepreneurs interviewed felt excluded from critical funding and networking pipelines. Even within the urban core, some noted tensions between Omaha and Lincoln themselves.

> *"Outside of Lincoln and Omaha, I don't know how people get access. It's unfortunate, because there are great ideas elsewhere in the state, but I imagine they struggle even more than we do." (Interviewee 5)*

> *"I just feel like everything is so focused on the eastern part of the state or the far western part of the state...Being in the middle, we just get lost and shuffled aside, and I feel like a lot of times when there are different grant opportunities or even different educational opportunities or workshops...a lot of times we're not involved in that. (Interviewee 22)"*

Others worried that this concentration of entrepreneurship resources in eastern Nebraska overlooked industries and expertise based elsewhere in the state.

> *"I think that most of the resources around entrepreneurship startups are centered in Eastern Nebraska, and that's not where potential ag startup founders are. You need to get out of Eastern Nebraska to really drive that. I mean, you have the university there, but having founders that have career experience and industry experience is really important, especially for [agriculture]..." (Interviewee 10)*

A few entrepreneurs found ways to bridge these geographic divides by positioning themselves between the two cities.

> *"I think there's a pretty big divide, though, between, like the Omaha and Lincoln community. So, I live halfway in between...I think that's really good for me and the company, because we're kind of in both places. But I think if I wasn't closer to Omaha, I don't think we'd have any connections in Omaha." (Interviewee 23)*

At the same time, recognition outside of the metro often felt symbolic rather than substantive.

> *"If I go to a small town like Loup City... they absolutely adore me. They love that I'm from a small town. But as an ecosystem as a whole, I don't feel recognized. I just can't get anywhere." (Interviewee 19)*

Geography was not just about location within Nebraska — it was also about whether an entrepreneur was from Nebraska at all. Founders who relocated from out of state, or who lacked deep family roots in the area, often described their entry into the ecosystem as uphill compared to native Nebraskans. They pointed to an informal system that rewarded legacy networks and family names.

> *"The entrepreneurship ecosystem is inclusive... only if you're part of the 'good old boys' system. It would have been different if I had been born here or had the right family name. But me coming from out of town — the deck was stacked against me." (Interviewee 8)*

"Whereas somebody who's from Nebraska or even from the Midwest has a generational network and a family network to be like, 'my uncle's best friend is a lawyer and he just helped me,' you know, or 'my mom's best friend from her sorority is a business lawyer.' So, I think maybe for me it's less about not being from here and more that I don't have a generational family network." (Interviewee 21)

For some entrepreneurs, this lack of connection meant years of extra work to build trust and credibility.

"I wish I [had attended] college here or been from the hyper local area to have some rapport with some people who can be like, 'Hey, can you ask your uncle if I can have a meeting with him?' Something to that effect. It took me 3 years to build a significant enough network to generate enough sales to make it a legitimate business." (Interviewee 24)

For those with Nebraska roots, emphasizing local identity became a part of their strategy. Entrepreneurs reported that highlighting their Nebraska ownership and connections appealed to investors who wanted to keep dollars circulating locally.

"We've played up the Nebraska card... Like, 'Hey, we want investment dollars from Nebraskans because we're a Nebraska company.' And that strategy works because people want to invest in local things." (Interviewee 17)

Despite this perceived homegrown advantage, even some native Nebraskans who lacked entrepreneurial backgrounds said they felt lost in trying to navigate resources without the right connections.

"We're White, and we live here, and we've lived here our whole lives, and we don't know where to go. I think that's hard. I mean, you can have this great idea and just not know where anything is or who's going to listen to you because you're not from here, but even if you are from here, you may have this idea but you've never done it, you don't have the background in it." (Interviewee 19)

Altogether, geography and existing roots in the state shaped how entrepreneurs initially gained access to the ecosystem. Rural founders, newcomers, and those without Nebraska ties often felt excluded, while entrepreneurs able to claim deep Nebraska roots saw doors open more readily.

Education and Credentials as Gateways to Access

Beyond the barriers associated with geography, entrepreneurs also highlighted how educational background shaped their experiences in Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Education, credentials, and networks created as a result of educational experiences were often described as gateways — sometimes opening doors, other times reinforcing barriers that kept people out.

One of the clearest advantages for entrepreneurs came from attending Nebraska institutions. Alumni of these programs described having early access to pitch competitions, mentors, and cofounders — resources that smoothed their entry into the ecosystem.

"I think going to school here is an advantage. The University of Lincoln gave me access... That's where I met my cofounders, where I had pitch competitions. So, if you want to start a business here, it really helps." (Interviewee 14)

In contrast, those who did not share these educational ties found it harder to break into tightly knit networks.

"I could definitely see not being a native Nebraskan [as a disadvantage]. I already see it in my own community. The folks who are like 'yeah, we all went to high school together. We all went to college together. We're all friends.' It's very hard to break into those groups in a place like Nebraska." (Interviewee 16)

Education alone was not always the distinguishing success factor, but also the network gained during the educational experiences. Participants noted that having a Nebraska-based education — and the ongoing connections that came with it — provided a distinct advantage in the ecosystem. By contrast, those without these networks often struggled to break into tight-knit circles. One female entrepreneur reflected:

> *"I can compare myself to another entrepreneur… he went to Creighton Prep and is a Creighton grad… he was like, 'Oh, well, I just took these 8 guys out golfing, and I raised $2 million.' I don't golf. I don't have a Rolodex of White, rich guy friends… You walk into pitch at the Nebraska Angels, and 90% of them are white men… that's a hard room to walk into as a female." (Interviewee 15)*

Others also noted the privilege of some of these networks, particularly of those with shared socioeconomic backgrounds. Entrepreneurs who shared similar backgrounds with investors explained that their identity and social status made it easier to gain access to meetings and raise capital.

> *"I am 40-something, White male… I identify with the folks investing in this business. They see me as a peer. So, my ability to get meetings, raise capital, is much easier than it would be for other folks." (Interviewee 16)*

Yet even those who recognized their privilege admitted that access did not guarantee success. One participant reflected on how challenging the system was, even for those who seemingly fit the mold of the typical Nebraska entrepreneur.

> *"What's most alarming for me is… if somebody with as much access and privilege as me had a super difficult uphill battle, how is anybody who doesn't have that network supposed to make it? That's what worries me." (Interviewee 7)*

Taken together, these reflections suggest that while education and credentials can smooth entry into the entrepreneurial community, they can also reinforce existing hierarchies. Access was often mediated through informal networks built on shared ties, gateways that not all entrepreneurs could easily cross.

Demographics and Uneven Access to Opportunity

Several entrepreneurs interviewed in this study spoke about their experiences with access shaped by demographic characteristics, particularly race, ethnicity, and gender. Some described being the only one from their demographic group in entrepreneurship ecosystem settings. While this could feel isolating, standing out in a largely homogenous ecosystem also created visibility that, in some cases, opened opportunities.

> *"If I lived somewhere where like women of color were constantly getting opportunities, maybe it'd be great, maybe I'd be a smaller fish in a bigger pond… I wouldn't have the ability to leave a lifetime of a legacy. And so that has given me some opportunities here, and I hope to really stick around so that I can create the ecosystem that I would've killed to have as I was coming out of college here." (Interviewee 21)*

Others, however, emphasized that being "the only one" came with barriers to resources and support. Entrepreneurs described how language, lack of peers, and limited visibility created additional challenges for minority groups.

> *"As a Latina being bilingual, I am pretty much the only consultant for a lot of the Latino businesses… I was able to break out of that very poor upbringing. To not have had or applied for any kind of funding, just doing everything on my own… If I feel that I don't have access to it as an educated Latina, then what do people do that don't have access to that or the knowledge?" (Interviewee 6)*

I wasn't familiar with cohort groups or community building within the minority groups as entrepreneurs... Sometimes I think to create some level of safety to the conversation, having those circles available can be beneficial... It's not dissimilar to somebody saying, 'I didn't know that I could be that until I saw somebody else that looked like me doing that thing.' (Interviewee 18)

Some participants pointed to the challenge of raising capital for entrepreneurs who did not align with the prevailing investor networks, while also recognizing that funding was broadly difficult for everyone in Nebraska.

> *"...it's undoubtedly hard for non-White males to raise venture capital. But it's really hard for everybody. I don't know that necessarily, positively or negatively, that race or ethnicity or gender had anything positive or negative to do with my ability to get stuff done. I think of raising money as probably the only thing that mattered. Really. I think that raising money in Nebraska period, is like, really, really hard." (Interviewee 5)*

Still, many saw the concentration of participation within a narrow demographic profile as a defining feature of the ecosystem.

> *"There aren't really a lot of people of color. I don't know that there are even a lot of people that aren't from Nebraska, that have stayed in the ecosystem. I mean...I do feel that most of the people that have the biggest say in the ecosystem have been largely Caucasian... Like I would be willing to wager 85% male, and even of the women who have been a part of leading the ecosystem, they are White women that are from here. Literally the bias goes both ways by the men and women that run the ecosystem." (Interviewee 21)*

> *"They're so quick to judge. Nebraska is a hard place to really fit in. If you're not White, you know, and so you have to kind of be and go through a lot of different stuff. And at the end of the day, it's not really worth it, because you end up selling yourself short." (Interviewee 25)*

To put it more bluntly, there's a lot of middle-class White people. And there wasn't a lot of racial diversity, there wasn't a lot of ethnic diversity or, yeah, all the other ways to consider diversity...a little bit of a homogeneous group. (Interviewee 3)

Alongside race, ethnicity, and age, gender emerged as another key dimension shaping access within the ecosystem. Several interviewees noted that women were underrepresented among entrepreneurs and that male-dominated networking spaces, such as golf outings, limited participation. Additionally, some entrepreneurs pointed out that the gender imbalance extended beyond founders to investors, with few women investors present in the ecosystem.

> *"I have not one female investor. Not one. And it's not that I haven't tried. I've pitched to female investors, but out of probably 150 investor pitches, I've spoken to 3 females... So if there's not that many female investors, then there's not going to be that many female board members." (Interviewee 20)*

The limited number of women in leadership roles also fed perceptions of double standards, where women entrepreneurs had to prove themselves in ways that men did not.

> *"The due diligence for me to get an investment — I have to go through spreadsheets, show QuickBooks reports, meet with accountants… whereas a male in [the] Pipeline [Program] gets an angel check just based on who he knows." (Interviewee 15)*

> *"I felt like the two strikes against me in the navigation of the ecosystem were my gender, and probably my background. I would say, as a female, there wasn't as much connectivity or support. It was largely males finding other guys that were doing the work and kind of building their own networks." (Interviewee 18)*

> *"So, I just always felt like I was seated at the table with people twice my age, twice the number of credentials, more school, more education, and I really had to prove myself [as a woman]." (Interviewee 14)*

Societal expectations around caregiving added yet another barrier. Some entrepreneurs noted that talented women were leaving or pausing their entrepreneurial roles to take on childcare responsibilities, often without systemic supports to help them remain in business.

> *"…there's just a heightened awareness that we're losing talented women. I've got two hires right now on maternity leave. They're brilliant. But society still puts the caregiving burden on women, and we're losing out as a result." (Interviewee 12)*

At the same time, some acknowledged that the demographics of Nebraska itself placed limits on diversity in the ecosystem.

> *"I would say from my experience, it is inclusive but not very diverse. And that's not the community's fault; that's just the demographics of Nebraska. You know, you can only be as diverse as we are, right? So, in my personal experience I have not had an issue with anything like that. I would say that I am oftentimes outnumbered by White males. But that's what's here. (Interviewee 10)"*

> *"I haven't seen it in Nebraska, but overall, I do think females are given those larger investment stages less. But when you look at the statistics, female-run companies do better on less capital. So, I think to highlight that as these studies go on, people need to have some clear quantifiable data. 'We invested $800 million dollars in entrepreneurs, and 4% of it went to women,' that started drawing attention to it so that you can see the inherent bias. Well, was it because there were only, you know, 8 women founders in your area? Because then there's nothing you can do about it, right? I mean, sometimes it just really is that." (Interviewee 20)*

Beyond race and gender, participants also pointed to other aspects of demographics – such as religion, disability status, and sexual orientation – as factors that influenced connection to core networks. These connections, they noted, could give certain groups an advantage in gaining resources, while those without similar ties faced greater challenges accessing support.

Informal Networks and Pathways

Access to Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem is often shaped by informal networks and insider circles. Entrepreneurs described how previous business connections and social ties could open doors for some, while others struggled to break in. For those who were already part of long-standing networks, inclusion came more naturally; for newcomers, the experience was often marked by barriers and exclusion.

> *"There's a core cohort…that has worked together for 10 to 15 years. I didn't work with them. I know some, but not well. It makes a difference." (Interviewee 16)*

These insider networks were sometimes tied to social settings rather than professional ones, creating challenges for entrepreneurs who did not — or could not — participate in activities where deals were made.

> *"I don't golf. I didn't do drinks after work. But I should have. That's where the deals happen. I thought being professional was enough, but it wasn't." (Interviewee 21)*

Several participants described this dynamic as a form of informal gatekeeping: opportunities appeared open on the surface but were, in practice, limited to those who already aligned with the expectations of the core group.

> *"Behind closed doors, it's not honest. People will meet with anyone on the surface, but when they're making deals, it's about who they already know or trust." (Interviewee 21)*

As an example, this selectivity was felt particularly by entrepreneurs outside of the dominant tech sector, who often perceived their ventures as less valued. Without a degree or a start-up explicitly in tech, it was hard to break into the ecosystem and find investors open to deal-making.

> *"I didn't come from tech. My background was nonprofit. Regardless of my MBA and for-profit experience, I didn't connect — people saw my past as less valuable." (Interviewee 18)*

> *"I think Nebraska as a whole kind of put some of those [tech] companies on a pedestal willingly so, because they want to draw the attention in, and I think they've done a really good job of that…I think they're doing a bad job promoting the whole state and the tech we have here… Those are really put up on a pedestal compared to any other service centric business." (Interviewee 24)*

At the same time, entrepreneurs emphasized that formal programs and peer cohorts have helped to counterbalance these insider dynamics by offering more open pathways to support. Programs like The Startup Collaborative and other incubators and accelerators were frequently cited as pivotal for creating inclusive spaces and peer-to-peer learning.

> *"The fact that The Startup Collaborative was free, and it was kind of on your own timeframe, and I could do it while working full time. Basically, I had no reason not to try." (Interviewee 15)*

> *"You know, there are minority-owned accelerators. And the incubators are very active in making sure that they have a high percentage of minority and woman-owned businesses." (Interviewee 6)*

> *"Startup Collaborative helped me meet founders at a similar stage. It felt like a graduating class — like we were building our companies together." (Interviewee 1)*

"I was having a really hard time as a first-time female founder surviving a CEO transition at getting anyone to give me money. And so, with the ability to get Invest Nebraska and Nebraska Angels to give me that $500,000 capital to prove that I can run this company and increase the revenue and do it well, and we can survive that the CEO left, and that the brains are still behind this organization… To get people to believe that this team wasn't going to fall apart without the original CEO, that was really that pivotal piece. And I think that goes to say that they must have had those types of VCs investing in females, and investing in maybe not the typical founder that's come out of a prestigious school with a certain track record." (Interviewee 20)

Beyond formal programs, many entrepreneurs described Nebraska's entrepreneurial community as one that is, at its best, generous with time and willing to support new ideas. Coffee meetings, informal mentorship, and shared advice were frequently mentioned as bright spots.

"I threw out an idea at a networking event – not knowing anything about tech – and people jumped in to help. It started from there." (Interviewee 11)

> *"What I loved was that I could call anyone, and they'd grab coffee with me, even without a connection. That made me feel like Nebraska is a great place to start a business. (Interviewee 9)"*

"I do feel like the true testament that your ecosystem is really strong is that I'm not from their community. I didn't have those networks. I'm not somebody's child who had some type of political connection. I'm not any of those things, and I've still had access to the ecosystem." (Interviewee 20)

"The programs that the Angels put on are, you know, absolutely great content for founders. They're more on site, though. They're absolutely about building those networks and meeting other entrepreneurs and talking, and then meeting the investors and being all in the same room… They always put on great content. Really engaging questions, really engaging investors who care about making those introductions." (Interviewee 20)

Altogether, entrepreneurs described an ecosystem shaped by both insider circles and open doors. While informal networks and social gatekeeping remain powerful forces in Nebraska's entrepreneurial landscape, the growth of formal programs and the community's willingness to support new ideas suggest a path toward greater inclusion. The balance between these forces – established networks and expanding access – will be critical in determining how connected and opportunity-rich the ecosystem becomes for future entrepreneurs.

Generational Change and System Shifts Underway

While entrepreneurs described mixed experiences with access in Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem, many also expressed hope for future progress. They emphasized that the ecosystem itself is still in an early stage of development and therefore capable of meaningful evolution.

Generational change was often cited as a key driver of this evolution. Younger entrepreneurs in their 20s and 30s were seen as building more inclusive spaces and pushing the culture forward, even as some older members of the ecosystem held on to exclusionary views.

"There are a few holdouts, generally older, who resist non-White, non-male founders. But younger people in their 20s and 30s are very supportive. We're saying, 'Hey, come on in, the water's fine.'" (Interviewee 11)

This system shift was also reflected in new efforts to expand the range of founders engaged in the ecosystem. While participants agreed that broad access is not yet the norm, they pointed to signs of progress, particularly over the past few years.

> *"There's definitely an effort to bring in founders from different backgrounds. I wouldn't say it's overly positive or overly negative. But it's not the norm. It's still a work in progress." (Interviewee 1)*

> *"Proven Ventures and a few others are trying to bring women into their portfolios. The last two years feel better than ever. Before, it didn't feel inclusive at all." (Interviewee 15)*

Some even compared Omaha favorably to larger, coastal ecosystems, noting a surprising sense of inclusivity at local events.

> *"I think it's very inclusive. When I would attend events... there were a lot of diverse founders in the room. There were a lot of female founders in the room. When I attend other events... maybe in Boston, maybe 2 of 200 of us are women. And so it feels like it's really diversified in Omaha, where you wouldn't think it would be." (Interviewee 20)*

Positive experiences, particularly among newer entrepreneurs and those entering emerging sectors, suggest that progress is underway and momentum is building. While barriers remain, the consensus among entrepreneurs is positive and signals progress and momentum. These perspectives suggest that Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem, still in an early stage of development, has the potential to broaden participation and strengthen its foundations for long-term growth.

Findings and Future Directions for Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Altogether, interviewees described an ecosystem where access is uneven, shaped by geography, demographics, and reliance on established networks, yet also evolving through new programs, generational shifts, and growing openness to fresh ideas. Interviews with Nebraska entrepreneurs revealed the following **key takeaways**.

- **Geography and Nebraska roots determine initial access.** Not surprisingly, entrepreneurs based in Omaha and Lincoln had more consistent access to funding and support. Entrepreneurs from rural areas or those new to the state felt excluded due to lack of legacy networks and connections. Those with deep Nebraska roots were often seen as more "investable."
- **Education and credentials remain gateways.** Entrepreneurs with higher education, particularly from Nebraska institutions like UNL, reported smoother entry into the ecosystem. These institutions provided networks that were key pathways to funding.
- **Access shaped by demographics continues to be limiting, though it is evolving.** Many women and people of color noted that they rarely saw themselves or their ideas reflected in core networks and investment circles. At the same time, some found that standing out in a largely homogenous ecosystem created visibility they could leverage to their advantage. While systematic access is still uneven, participants pointed to signs of progress, particularly among newer founders and emerging networks.
- **Informal networks outweigh institutional access.** Mentorships, referrals, and "who you know" relationships dominate deal-making. Entrepreneurs lacking pre-existing ties struggled with navigation. Formal programs like The Startup Collaborative were praised, but even still many described a culture where deals happen after hours in social rather than professional settings.
- **System shifts are underway but uneven.** Generational change is occurring, with founders in their 20s and 30s creating more open and connected spaces. Some programs and venture capital groups are intentionally broadening the range of founders they engage, but this remains the exception rather than the rule. The ecosystem itself is still in an early stage of development, striving to expand authentic access and opportunity.

Access as the Foundation of the Ecosystem

Access is the starting point for any effective entrepreneurial ecosystem. Without it, the six essential components identified by Isenberg (2010) – finance, culture, policy, human capital, support, and markets – cannot function as intended. Furthermore, the ecosystem must reflect the full pipeline of entrepreneurs. When networks are too homogenous, knowledge becomes siloed, reducing adaptability and weakening long-term viability (Roundy, 2017; Korsgaard et al., 2021).

Tapping into the wide range of knowledge and experience already present in the workforce is essential to building stronger ecosystems (Backman, 2012; Becker, 1993; Crook et al., 2011; Florida, 2002; Langelett, 2002; Stewart et al., 2020). Ultimately, supporting the growth of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem requires more than reinforcing existing pathways. It calls for building new pipelines that diversify who engages in entrepreneurship as well as broadening access. To increase ecosystem diversity, firms, universities, and other actors in the system need to reach out to underrepresented communities and expand points of entry.

Next Steps for Nebraska

- Continue to promote and celebrate entrepreneurship across the state.
- Develop targeted outreach campaigns to engage underrepresented entrepreneurs.
- Create an accessible, statewide guide on how to become an entrepreneur in Nebraska.
- Uplift and expand current resources that introduce potential entrepreneurs to the ecosystem.
- Encourage ecosystem members to make clear what services they offer, to whom, and why in order to help entrepreneurs understand the value of connecting with each node in the system.
- Partner with community-based organizations to deliver mentorship and entrepreneurship education that is locally and culturally relevant.

Expanding Access to Capital

For entrepreneurs, capital is both a prerequisite for starting up and a mechanism for scaling, yet it often remains concentrated within familiar circles. Expanding capital flows requires not only collaborative relationships across public and private sectors (Inada, 2024), but also intentional efforts to widen the range of participants who can access investment. Without those new connections, capital remains locked in narrow networks, limiting the number of ventures that can grow.

Next Steps for Nebraska

- Bring diverse sponsors together to develop new funds and capital vehicles for entrepreneurs.
- Create funding pools that pair public investment with private capital to broaden access for entrepreneurs outside existing networks.
- Expand access to seed funding so more potential entrepreneurs are able to test and pursue new ventures.
- Encourage local financial institutions and investors to adopt more transparent criteria for funding decisions, helping entrepreneurs better understand pathways to capital.

Leveraging Institutions for Knowledge and Networks

Beyond capital, access also depends on institutions that connect entrepreneurs to knowledge, talent, and networks. Nebraska's higher education institutions already provide credentials and valuable connections, but ecosystem leaders can further leverage anchor institutions to close additional gaps (Rinkinen et al., 2024). Universities help drive innovation, produce research and technology, and prepare future entrepreneurs and skilled workers (Huang-Saad et al., 2018; Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015). When universities partner with local and regional businesses, they also strengthen access to social and knowledge networks (Prokop & Thompson, 2023). Connecting research more directly to entrepreneurs who can apply it remains an opportunity not reflected in this current round of interviews. Still, universities are only one part of the picture. Broader collaboration across SMEs, suppliers, and customers is equally critical for sustaining growth (Wright et al., 2006; Inada, 2024).

Next Steps for Nebraska

- Expand scholarship and fellowship programs, such as student pitch competitions, to support entrepreneurial training.
- Incorporate entrepreneurial training across a wide range of academic programs and degrees.
- Further promote and formalize university–business partnerships (e.g., internships, research commercialization, technical assistance) to extend knowledge and networks to new founders.
- Invest in university-based research and development that can be translated into entrepreneurial opportunities and shared with founders.
- Incentivize collaborations that connect SMEs, suppliers, and customers with universities to create applied opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Expanding Access Through Entrepreneurial Spaces and Programs

Formal institutions are not the only levers for improving access. Entrepreneurship events, coworking spaces, and incubator and accelerator programs are essential for building entrepreneurial ecosystems that are more accessible and connected (Spinuzzi, 2012; Cohen, 2013; Welter et al., 2017). Coworking spaces, for example, foster collaboration and community among freelance and small business workers. While primarily located in urban areas, these spaces have expanded in rural and suburban areas, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift has created new opportunities for entrepreneurs in less densely populated places (Mariotti & Tagliaro, 2024; Frenkel & Buchnik, 2025). However, accessibility – including proximity to public transit and affordability – remains an important factor in determining who benefits.

Startup programs like incubators and accelerators also provide vital support structures for new ventures. They offer resources that help businesses refine their models, strengthen operations, and connect with mentors, investors, and peers (Neumeyer, 2019). Incubators typically serve early-stage startups over a longer period (one to five years), while accelerators focus on ventures ready to scale through short, intensive programs (three to six months). Yet access to these programs is uneven. Barriers such as program cost, limited recruitment pipelines, and norms that privilege certain types of entrepreneurs continue to restrict who participates (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Maxheimer et al., 2021; Neumeyer, 2019). Expanding participation will require investments in human capital and the design of more flexible and inclusive program structures.

Next Steps for Nebraska

- Expand coworking hubs into underserved rural areas with state or philanthropic support.
- Offer tiered membership pricing or subsidized access for early-stage entrepreneurs.
- Co-locate co-working spaces with community resources (e.g., libraries, workforce centers) to improve accessibility.
- Strengthen training for program managers on equitable and transparent selection and support processes.
- Pilot mentorship models designed to expand access for entrepreneurs with limited prior exposure to startup networks.
- Embed flexible scheduling and family-supportive policies (e.g., childcare stipends) into accelerator programs.

Ultimately, supporting the growth of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem requires more than reinforcing existing pathways. It calls for new pipelines that diversify who engages in entrepreneurship and broaden access to capital, talent, and markets. Investing in communities and businesses with limited ties to current networks – through seed funding, education, or relationship building – is an important step (Wang, 2023). Yet long-term growth depends on shaking the system loose so that resources flow through multiple channels rather than remaining concentrated in established circles. The future of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem will be defined by its ability to expand access, diversify participation, and strengthen connections that unlock sustained innovation and growth.

Why It Matters

Inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems are not just more equitable – they are more resilient. **By valuing and supporting a broader range of entrepreneurs, regions can build ecosystems that are better able to adapt and thrive over time.** Moreover, by designing policies and programs that identify and address the distribution of resources (i.e., who gets what, where, and how), leaders in the ecosystem can begin dissolving the barriers that limit participation in the regional economy. As demographic, technological, and economic shifts continue to reshape regions, inclusive ecosystem design is a strategic necessity for long-term innovation and growth.

Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem is at a crossroads. **Entrepreneurs' stories reveal that while opportunities exist, they are unevenly distributed along lines of geography, education, demographics, and social networks.** These disparities weaken the ecosystem's resilience by leaving talent and ideas untapped. When entrepreneurs in rural areas or from historically underrepresented groups face closed doors, the state risks losing not only businesses but also innovation, investment, and future community leaders.

At the same time, the research highlights many new bright spots. Formal programs, inclusive peer cohorts, and the energy of younger founders are building new pathways for access. Entrepreneurs themselves emphasized that when they did gain entry, Nebraska's communities were often generous with support and eager to help. Ecosystems that engage with a broader range of people are more adaptive, innovative, and economically sustainable – and, importantly, supporting entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship can help to grow all of Nebraska.

By centering access and opportunity in Nebraska's entrepreneurship ecosystem in both design and practice, the state can move beyond surface-level friendliness, or "Nebraska Nice," to create a truly connected ecosystem that strengthens local economies, attracts and retains talent, and ensures that entrepreneurship is open to anyone with the drive to pursue it.

Conclusion

This qualitative study illustrates that Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem is still in its formative stages — marked by strong community spirit and promising initiatives, but also by entrenched gatekeeping and uneven access. Entrepreneurs' lived experiences make clear that access remains inconsistent: geography and social ties still dictate opportunity, education and pre-existing networks act as filters, identity-based barriers persist, and insider networks carry more weight than institutional programs.

Yet cultural change is underway. Founders in their 20s and 30s are reshaping the ecosystem with more inclusive practices, and new programs are beginning to broaden the reach of resources and networks. This momentum provides a foundation for building a more adaptable, innovative, and sustainable ecosystem.

The path forward requires intentional effort: investing in people, broadening access and opportunity, leveraging universities and anchor institutions, and breaking down silos between insider networks and formal supports. If Nebraska embraces these strategies, it can transform its ecosystem from one that is promising but uneven into one that is resilient, connected, and authentically accessible. By acting now, leaders, investors, and entrepreneurs can ensure that Nebraska not only keeps pace with national trends in entrepreneurial ecosystems but also sets a standard for how smaller states can foster innovation for all.

References

Ahl, H., & Marlow, S. (2012). Exploring the dynamics of gender, feminism and entrepreneurship: Advancing debate to escape a dead end? *Organization, 19*(5), 543–562. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412448695

Acs, Z. J., Stam, E., Audretsch, D. B., & O'Connor, A. (2017). The lineages of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. *Small Business Economics, 49*(1), 1–10.

Backman, M. (2014). Human capital in firms and regions: Impact on firm productivity. *Papers in Regional Science, 93*(3), 557–576. https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12005

Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (3rd ed.). The University of Chicago Press.

Brush, C., Edelman, L. F., Manolova, T., & Welter, F. (2019). A gendered look at entrepreneurship ecosystems. *Small Business Economics, 53*(2), 393–408. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-018-9992-9

Davis, D. (2022, October 18). Concern about entrepreneurial opportunities in Nebraska sparks national grant. *The Daily Record*. Retrieved from https://omahadailyrecord.com/content/concern-about-entrepreneurial-opportunities-nebraska-sparks-national-grant

Duggan, M. (2022, November 4). Challenges for Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. *Nebraska Public Media*. Retrieved from https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/en/news/news-articles/challenges-for-nebraskas-entrepreneurial-ecosystem

Cohen, S. L. (2013). What do accelerators do? *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization, 8*(3–4), 19–25. doi:10.1162/inov_a_00184

Crook, T. R., Todd, S. Y., Combs, J. G., Woehr, D. J., & Ketchen, D. J. (2011). Does human capital matter? A meta-analysis of the relationship between human capital and firm performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96*(3), 443–456. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022147

Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. (n.d.). *Researchers + community: Inclusive ecosystems*. Retrieved from https://www.kauffman.org/currents/researchers-community-inclusive-ecosystems/

Feldman, M., Steinzor, N., & Lowe, N. (2019). Economic development grounded in place: Entrepreneurship in American cities. *Economic Development Quarterly, 33*(3), 195–204.

Florida, R. (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. Basic Books.

Frenkel, A., & Buchnik, T. (2025). Choosing coworking spaces: Exploring the preferences of coworking space members. *Cities, 162*, 105991. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105991

Foss, L., Henry, C., Ahl, H., & Mikalsen, G. H. (2019). Women's entrepreneurship policy research: A 30-year review of the evidence. *Small Business Economics, 53*(2), 409–429. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-018-9993-8

Huang, S., Pickernell, D., Battisti, M., Dann, Z., & Ekinsmyth, C. (2022). Disadvantaged Entrepreneurship and the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: A Critical Literature Review and Introduction. In D. G. Pickernell, M. Battisti, Z. Dann, & C. Ekinsmyth (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Entrepreneurship Research* (pp. 1–8). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2040-724620220000014001

Inada, Y. (2024). Unlocking Value Co-Creation in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: The Vital Role of Institutions. *Administrative Sciences, 14*(5), 82. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14050082

Isenberg, D. J. (2010). How to Start an Entrepreneurial Revolution. *Harvard Business Review*, 1–11. https://hbr.org/2010/06/the-big-idea-how-to-start-an-entrepreneurial-revolution

Korsgaard, S., Müller, S., & Tanvig, H. W. (2015). Rural entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in the rural—between place and space. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 21*(1), 5–26. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-11-2013-0205

Langelett, G. (2002). Human Capital: A Summary of the 20th Century Research. *Journal of Education Finance, 28*(1), 1–23.

Mariotti, I., & Tagliaro, C. (2024). Flexible working arrangements and new proximity dynamics. In P. Pucci & G. Vecchio (Eds.), *Questioning proximity: Opportunities and challenges for urban planning and mobility policies* (pp. 103–108). SpringerBriefs in Applied Sciences and Technology. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66071-9_9

Marlow, S., & McAdam, M. (2015). Incubation or Induction? Gendered Identity Work in the Context of Technology Business Incubation. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 39*(4), 791–816. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12062

Maxheimer, M. M., & Nicholls-Nixon, C. L. (2022). What women want (and need) from coaching relationships during business incubation. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship, 34*(5), 548–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/08276331.2021.1981728

Motoyama, Y., Muntean, S. C., Knowlton, K., & Ozkazanc-Pan, B. (2021). Causes of the gender divide within entrepreneurship ecosystems. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit, 36*(3), 187–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094221995783

Neumeyer, X. (2022). Inclusive High-Growth Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Fostering Female Entrepreneurs' Participation in Incubator and Accelerator Programs. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, 69*(4), 1728–1737. https://doi.org/10.1109/TEM.2020.2979879

Prokop, D., & Thompson, P. (2023). Defining networks in entrepreneurial ecosystems: The openness of ecosystems. *Small Business Economics, 61*(2), 517–538. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-022-00710-w

Rinkinen, S., Konsti-Laakso, S., & Lahikainen, K. (2024). University as an opportunity space enabler in a regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. *European Planning Studies, 32*(5), 1010–1028. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2023.2246522

Roundy, P. T., Bradshaw, M., & Brockman, B. K. (2018). The emergence of entrepreneurial ecosystems: A complex adaptive systems approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 86, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.01.032

Spigel, B. (2017). The Relational Organization of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 41*(1), 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12167

Spinuzzi, C. (2012). *Working alone together: Coworking as emergent collaborative activity. Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 26*(4), 399–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651912444070 scholarship.libraries.rutgers.edu+4sfb1472.uni-siegen.de+4research.cbs.dk+4repositories.lib.utexas.edu+6journals.sagepub.com+6researchgate.net+6

Stam, E., & Spigel, B. (2018). Entrepreneurial ecosystems. In R. Blackburn et al. (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Small Business and Entrepreneurship* (pp. 407–422). SAGE.

Stewart, F., Yeom, M., & Stewart, A. (2020). STEM and Soft Occupational Competencies: Analyzing the Value of Strategic Regional Human Capital. *Economic Development Quarterly, 34*(4), 356–371. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891242420948604

UNO Center for Public Affairs Research. (2021). *Entrepreneurship in Nebraska: Exploring the current climate for Nebraska's entrepreneurs* [Report]. University of Nebraska at Omaha. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1520&context=cparpublications

University of Nebraska at Omaha. (2022, December 12). CPAR receives Kauffman Foundation Inclusive Ecosystems Grant. *College of Public Affairs and Community Service*. Retrieved from https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-public-affairs-and-community-service/news/2022/12/cpar-receives-inclusive-ecosystem-grant.php

Wang, Q. (2019). Gender, race/ethnicity, and entrepreneurship: Women entrepreneurs in a US south city. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 25*(8), 1766–1785. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-05-2017-0156

Wang, Q. (2023). Planning for an Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: COVID-19 and Business Resilience in Underserved Communities. *Journal of the American Planning Association, 89*(3), 295–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2022.2105740

Wang, Q., Li, Y., Yang, Y., Little, M. G., Basnight, E. B., & Fryberger, C. B. (2024). University-Led Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Building in Underserved Communities: From a Network Perspective. *Geographical Review, 114*(3), 353–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2023.2256000

Welter, F., Baker, T., Audretsch, D. B., & Gartner, W. B. (2017). Everyday entrepreneurship: A call for entrepreneurship research to embrace entrepreneurial diversity. *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice, 41*(3), 311–321. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12258

Wright, M., Lockett, A., Clarysse, B., & Binks, M. (2006). University spin-out companies and venture capital. *Research Policy, 35*(4), 481–501. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2006.01.005

APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

Kauffman Foundation Inclusive Ecosystems Grant

– INTERVIEW QUESTIONS –

Project Description:

The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha received a grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation to study entrepreneurial ecosystems in Nebraska. For reference, the entrepreneurship ecosystem encompasses the myriad of organizations that exist to support, drive, and grow entrepreneurship. The ecosystem includes entrepreneurs themselves, along with government agencies, academic institutions, nonprofits, and private sector organizations. For this case study, we are particularly interested in how different entrepreneurs interact with and experience Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The sample of interviewees was designed to be inclusive in order to explore variation in the support and access entrepreneurs received from the state's ecosystem, especially when starting their venture.

We sincerely appreciate your willingness to talk with us today. We provided you with an electronic copy of the interviewee information sheet which guarantees that all interview results will be confidential and kept anonymous.

We want to record our conversation. Only the researchers will have access to the recording, and we will destroy the recording as soon as the interview is transcribed. Your name and organization will not appear in any manuscripts from this research. Your name will never be shared or associated with any of your comments today.

Do you agree to participate? Yes/No

Do you consent to being recorded? Yes/No

START RECORDING

Interview Questions

1. To start, can you give us your name, organization, and professional title?
2. Thinking back to the beginning of your entrepreneurship journey in Nebraska, what was the first step you took after you had the initial idea? How did you get started?
3. On your entrepreneurship journey, who are some of the people in the ecosystem that you interacted with? To the extent possible please share names, positions, and/or organizations you interacted with. Specifics of those you identify will not be reported.
4. We are interested in your perspective on interactions with ecosystem members, including the tangible

support and/or resources they provided as well as how they made you feel.

- How helpful or not helpful were they? In what ways?
- Did they provide you with any tangible resources?
- Did they help you make any new connections?
- Do you think they understood what it was like to be an entrepreneur?
- Did they show consideration and care for you throughout the process?
- Did you feel valued and respected as a contributor to the ecosystem?

5. Do you think your gender, race, ethnicity, and/or geography played a role in the type of support and access you received? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel Nebraska's entrepreneurship ecosystem is inclusive? Why or why not?
7. Reflecting on your experience now, what do you wish you would have known about Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem when you were just starting out?
8. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

We would like to gather additional demographic information. If you do not want to answer any of these questions, please tell me to skip.

- With what gender do you identify?
- Are you a person of color?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What is your age?
- Where in Nebraska do you maintain residence?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We will share the results from this study when it is completed.

Centering Students in Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

A Case Study of Student Experiences with the 2023/24 Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition

Overview

This case study follows the development and implementation of the inaugural Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition (2023-2024), a state-level initiative aimed at fostering student entrepreneurship and strengthening Nebraska's entrepreneurial pipeline. Through interviews with competition organizers and student participants, the study follows the competition from its initial design and goals through student engagement and reflection. **Findings reveal that students were primarily motivated to participate because of access to funding and networking opportunities.** However, students also expressed a strong desire for mentorship, actionable feedback, and opportunities for long-term ecosystem integration. While students valued the exposure and experience the competition provided, many noted gaps in event organization and limited access to sustained connections. **These insights point to the importance of structured mentorship, inclusive programming, and intentional networking design in supporting student entrepreneurs and enhancing the impact of statewide entrepreneurship initiatives.** Addressing these needs is critical not only for supporting student ventures, but for retaining emerging talent in Nebraska and reducing brain drain by embedding young entrepreneurs more deeply into the state's economic landscape.

Student Entrepreneurs

A great deal of research in the past decade has focused on student entrepreneurship (Schimperna et al., 2021; Sieger et al., 2016; Jansen et al., 2015). The term "student entrepreneur" refers to all students who take an active role in some form of entrepreneurial activity (Ayob, 2021; Fini et al., 2016; Holienka et al., 2017). While such programming exists across all levels of education, this discussion centers on post-secondary students, who represent a particularly important demographic to Nebraska.

Universities can help grow the economy and benefit their communities by encouraging student participation in entrepreneurial activities and business development (Astebro & Bazzazian, 2011; Taylor, 2008). As a result, the overall number of new business ventures developed by students, as well as the demand for university programs supporting student entrepreneurship, has been steadily growing (Bae et al., 2014; Liu et al. 2021; Sedita & Blasi, 2021). For example, Liu and colleagues (2021) note the importance of the university ecosystem for entrepreneurship education and development, with unique ties to resources from government, industry, and community sources. As the desire to promote student entrepreneurship has grown, it is necessary to understand how best to provide students with support and resources on this path (Fini et al., 2016).

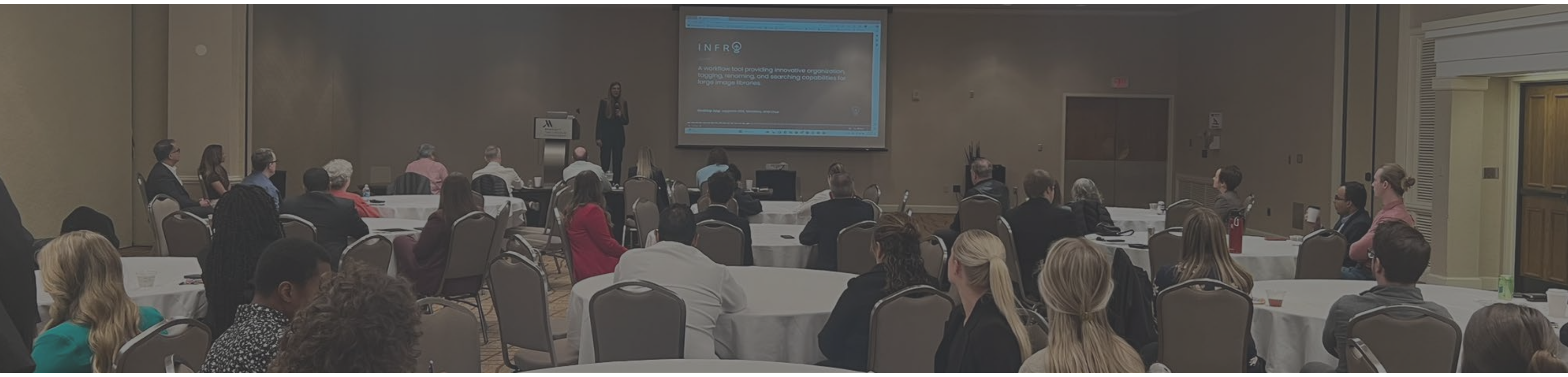
NEBRASKA GOVERNOR'S NEW VENTURE COMPETITION

Student entrepreneurship efforts by universities have been quite successful at boosting student startup activity post-graduation. For example, 90% of students of a graduate enterprise program reported that they would have chosen to delay the pursuit of their entrepreneurial goals by at least five years if they had not been supported by the program (Brown, 1990). Similar efforts have linked increased entrepreneurship education to positive outcomes for both individual students and local communities. Communities benefit from enhanced economic development and an increase in new businesses, while individual students may experience stronger entrepreneurial intentions, improved entrepreneurship skills and knowledge, and increased motivation toward networking and business development (Duval-Couetil, 2013; Falkang & Alberti, 2000; Fayolle et al., 2006; Pittaway et al., 2009).

Capitalizing on student entrepreneurs is also an important way for a state like Nebraska—one that has long struggled to grow both its population and its entrepreneurship ecosystem—to foster inclusive economic development. According to analysis from the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research (UNO CPAR), Nebraska's entrepreneurship ecosystem remains relatively small compared to other states, with fewer new businesses and limited access to startup capital and support infrastructure (Schafer and Vogel, 2021). At the same time, research from UNO CPAR also shows that Nebraska has faced persistent brain drain, or the net outmigration of individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher, since at least 2010. **While recent estimates from the 2023 U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey indicate the trend may be improving, retaining educated young people remains a critical concern for state leaders.**

In response, the Governor's Office, the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, and the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry have all prioritized efforts to address brain drain and stimulate innovation. Fostering student entrepreneurship directly addresses these challenges by tapping into a pipeline of emerging talent that is already embedded in the state's educational institutions. Students represent a demographically diverse and often under-resourced group—more likely to include first-generation college students, individuals from rural areas, and people from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. **By investing in entrepreneurship at the student level, Nebraska can expand access to opportunity, support a broader range of ideas and founders, and strengthen pathways for more inclusive economic participation.**

This research seeks to better understand the motivations behind student decisions to participate in the Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition for student entrepreneurs. Although additional research is necessary to fully understand the motivations and factors driving student entrepreneurs more broadly, this effort lays important groundwork by capturing insights from a key group of students actively engaged in entrepreneurship. We take a case approach to explore student entrepreneurship comprehensively, including the many antecedents of students' entrepreneurial intentions. We seek to offer clear guidance on the types of programming that best support students, while also exploring how the experiences of Nebraska student entrepreneurs align with broader trends.



Drivers of Student Participation in Entrepreneurship

One key area of interest regarding student entrepreneurship includes understanding the motivations and drivers that lead students to participate in student entrepreneurship at the individual, organizational, and cultural levels. Entrepreneurial culture may be one major factor affecting students' motivation to participate in entrepreneurship (Ayob, 2021). Entrepreneurial culture can encompass general social and societal support, an emphasis on autonomy and personal initiative, an environment in which taking risks and creativity are encouraged, and an overall focus on personal responsibility (Ayob, 2021). Universities, social networks, and even local community programs can play a key role in promoting a positive entrepreneurial culture.

Another potential factor driving student entrepreneurship, and continued student entrepreneurial success, is the presence of a high-quality interpersonal network (Ahsan et al., 2018; Pugalia et al., 2020). A student entrepreneur's network may be comprised of mentors, educators, team members, and other social influences, all contributing to the overall success of a business venture. A strong network can shape student founders' overall entrepreneurial identity and lead to successful business launches (Ahsan et al., 2018). Strong networks not only boost students' motivation but also help them navigate key startup challenges, especially securing funding and building a founding team (Pugalia et al., 2020). The business and social connections student entrepreneurs build are often critical to their success, whereas a lack of strong networks can hinder their ventures (Jansen et al., 2015). Communities and educational institutions can support student entrepreneurship by actively helping students build these connections.

Barriers to Student Entrepreneurship Participation

Along with these common factors driving student participation in student entrepreneurship programs, students also encounter common barriers that hinder both initial participation and long-term entrepreneurial intentions. At the individual level, demographics often play a significant role (Gupta & York, 2008; Holienka et al., 2017; Sieger et al., 2016). Gender, in particular, can influence decisions to pursue entrepreneurship. For example, a 2008 study found that in rural Nebraska, women reported higher motivation to become entrepreneurs but were significantly less likely than men to start a business (Gupta & York, 2008). In addition to gender, students also face internal barriers such as low motivation, limited self-efficacy, fear of failure, and lack of confidence (Sitaridis & Kitsios, 2016). Externally, they may struggle with limited finances, weak support systems (e.g., family commitment, role models, social support), and inadequate formal support (e.g., institutional backing, mentorship). Additional environmental obstacles—such as lack of market knowledge, social capital, or access to networks—further reduce entrepreneurial intentions, especially when positive drivers are absent (Jakubczak, 2015; Sitaridis & Kitsios, 2016).

Student entrepreneurship exists at a pivotal timepoint, when students are at a higher risk of losing momentum and may struggle to transition ventures from early start-ups to fully operational businesses. This transition out of start-up territory can be difficult for entrepreneurs, regardless of experience level or age. Previous research by the Kauffman Foundation reports that nearly 20% of new businesses fail within their first year of operation (Fairlie, 2022). Similarly, research from the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research (2021) also finds this theme to be true among entrepreneurs in Nebraska. For students, this phase proves even more difficult due to time constraints from academic commitments, limited professional experience, and fewer opportunities to build networks. Supporting students during this critical startup period becomes essential. Programs like the Governor's New Venture Competition can help student entrepreneurs advance their ventures beyond the start-up phase and improve first-year business survival rates.

Nebraska's Governor's New Venture Competition

Beginning in academic year 2023/2024, the Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition gave students across the state an opportunity to explore entrepreneurship in a real-world setting. The competition welcomed participants from Nebraska post-secondary institutions and required them to submit business proposals in one of eight industry tracks: Agtech, Fintech/Insurtech, Cleantech, Advanced Manufacturing, Biotech/Healthtech, Emerging Media Arts, Sportstech, or General Tech.

This new initiative aims to foster student entrepreneurship across Nebraska. Beyond the competition itself, the program extends its impact by providing mentorship from experienced startup founders, funders, and service providers currently active in the state's entrepreneurial ecosystem. As a local news outlet reported, "The state's ecosystem of startup founders, funders, and service providers will support the young teams through judging at the competition, as well as provide general technical assistance" (Porter, 2023). This emphasis on mentorship reflects a broader goal: to equip student entrepreneurs with the knowledge, connections, and technical support necessary for long-term success.

This emphasis on mentorship reflects a broader goal: to equip student entrepreneurs with the knowledge, connections, and technical support necessary for long-term success.

Aimed at supporting pre-seed businesses, the competition set a $1,000,000 cap on seed capital raised and a $500,000 revenue limit for participating companies. The multi-stage process included an initial submission phase, virtual semi-finals, and a live final round at the Nebraska State Chamber's Annual Meeting. Students competed for funding and gained valuable experience presenting their business ideas. They also had opportunities to network with local entrepreneurs, Nebraska government officials, and fellow students pursuing their own entrepreneurial goals. For more information on competition requirements and background, see appendix A.

Insights from Competition Organizers

In order to gather more insight into the initial goals of the competition, interviews were conducted with two of the primary competition organizers. For the full organizer interview protocol, see Appendix B.

Organizers shared that the competition aimed to strengthen Nebraska's student entrepreneurship community by giving students opportunities to grow and build connections with local business owners and other key stakeholders. Through these connections, competition organizers hoped to ease students' transition from campus-based ventures to the post-college entrepreneurial ecosystem. The quotes below from competition organizers share this sentiment.

> *"I think it took on a higher elevated conversation about student entrepreneurship not at their institution level, but more at the statewide level and then in partnership with the state Chamber of Commerce, which is the state's largest organization for businesses. Letting those business owners and founders know what's going on with students and their business ideas was beneficial."*
>
> *"[It does] a good job of bridging that university to private sector to the startup piece of it and seeing how it really works. If these students do want to get fundraising or raise venture capital down the road and do these things, [the competition] gives them good practice and early exposure to people that are working in that day-to-day."*

Conversations with organizers made it clear that their goals went beyond simply supporting students; they aimed to bring student entrepreneurial efforts into the public spotlight and connect them to Nebraska's broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, as suggested by the quote below.

> *"For all the finalists, we paired them up with a mentor or an expert that was in the community. So, if it was someone that was developing an enterprise software app, we connected them with a local CTO, Chief Technology Officer... we reached out within our network of founders and local experts [asking], 'Are you willing to offer an hour to meet with a team of these students to essentially hear their pitch, give them feedback and guidance?'"*

Consistent with this goal, competition organizers provided student participants with access to community mentors and a broad audience through the public competitions to promote their efforts.

Student-Focused Research Design

Given the program's goals, this research focused on learning about Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem by highlighting student entrepreneurs and their experiences in the local pitch competition. To evaluate the competition's effectiveness and capture individual student experiences, the research team took a qualitative approach. The research design for this study included detailed, semi-structured interviews with student participants in the Nebraska Governor's New Venture pitch competition. Semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended questions and additional probing when necessary (Adams, 2015). Open-ended interview questions allowed individual students to provide detailed information about their own experiences. We supplemented student interviews with open-ended, informational interviews with competition organizers to understand the goals of the competition and how well it achieved them.

Data Collection

The research team conducted nine interviews via Zoom, representing approximately 30% of student entrepreneurs who participated in the 2023/2024 competition. The team contacted participants using email addresses obtained from the competition organizers. Demographic information for all nine student interviewees is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Gender	Women: 4 Men: 5
Race and Ethnicity ***self-identified**	White: 4 Black: 4 Mexican: 1
Year in School at Time of Competition	Junior: 2 Senior: 5 Graduate Student: 2
Post-Secondary Institution Attended	UNO: 2 UNL: 7

This study received approval from the University of Nebraska at Omaha Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to each interview, the research team emailed interviewees an information sheet outlining confidentiality and anonymity protections. Interviewers reviewed these protections at the start of each session and obtained verbal consent before proceeding. All interviews took place on Zoom, and each participant agreed to be recorded. See Appendix C for the full student interview protocol.

Data Analysis

The research team used Zoom to transcribe all interviews, then reviewed the transcripts for clarity and accuracy. Interviewers also wrote summative memos immediately after each session to document key points and highlight major takeaways (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The research team reviewed transcripts to understand common topics and identify common themes across all interviews. Researchers then tracked the frequency of specific topics across all nine interviews and calculated the percentage of discussion each topic represented. To achieve clarity and nuance in analyzing interview data, the team created individual codes, grouped codes into categories, and then organized categories into several key themes. Appendix D includes the complete list of identified themes and categories.

Findings from the Student Perspective

Researchers noted 23 individual categories, mentioned by participants a total of 157 times across 9 interviews, organized into 4 key interview themes:

Motivating Factors and Benefits

Entrepreneurship Resources

Positive Aspects of Competition

Competition Concerns

Motivating Factors and Benefits

For student entrepreneurs, motivating factors and benefits refers to explicit reasons that interviewees chose to participate in the NE Governor's New Venture Competition. **The main motivating factor across the majority of participants was the opportunity to win funding to continue their business ventures.** Since a key goal of the Governor's New Venture Competition is facilitating the transition between student business and a full-time startup/company, it is not surprising students valued the prize money, with hopes of scaling their businesses to the next level, as the quotes below indicate.

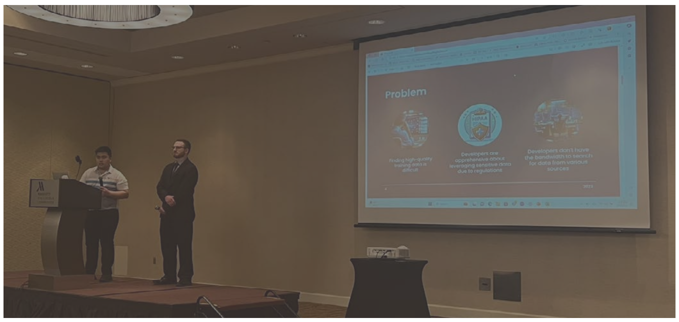
> *"The first motivation was having the money which can help us build the prototype, but besides that, there is also a lot of experience we can get through the competition" (Interviewee 6)*

> *"And one of the things that we knew early on was, okay, this is going to be more than just a capstone project. This is going to be a full-on company, and so, we were looking for opportunities to make money by looking at the various pitching competitions in the area." (Interviewee 9)*

Interviewees also highlighted several intangible benefits of participating in the competition. For example, **key motivators included the opportunity to build meaningful connections and expand their business ventures through broader social and community networks.** One student entrepreneur shares this motivation in the following quote.

> *"I would say there's two different types of motivators for me. One is to just continue to expand my network. One of the quotes that I live by is 'it's not what you know, it's who you know.' So, I just wanted to continue to grow my social network because that's what really gets you far in the entrepreneurship world. And second, videography equipment is very expensive, so the financial investment that was being offered through the competition was also a big motivator." (Interviewee 5)*

Given that the final round of the competition was to be presented before a large gathering of government officials, local entrepreneurs, and potential investors, students noted that networking was of high importance after the prize money. Building connections and building capital were the overwhelming benefits of participating in the competition according to the student entrepreneurs, with a handful also acknowledging the opportunity to build presentation skills as another benefit.



Entrepreneurship Resources

Entrepreneurship resources refer to the support and tools beyond those provided by the competition that have helped students in their entrepreneurial efforts and contributed to the growth of their businesses. Specifically, descriptions of how students began their journey in entrepreneurship, the key resources that supported them in pursuit of creating their businesses, and their decision to apply for the competition were mentioned frequently.

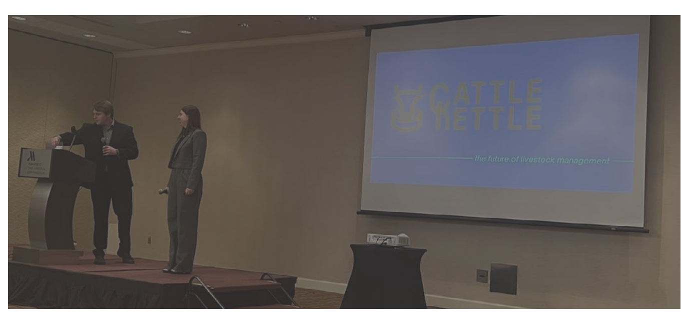
Many students cited school-sponsored programs as a primary resource aiding them in developing their businesses. For example, entrepreneurship-focused courses and class projects that encouraged the exploration of entrepreneurship were discussed, as well as formal programs like the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Center for Entrepreneurship. The quotes below share some specific examples of school-sponsored programs that support students on their entrepreneurship journey.

> *"I've had some classes that were entrepreneurial in nature. Just kind of understanding… the startup landscape at…the early stages. My freshman year, I took a class that was called Innovation Processes, where you basically had to take an idea and try…doing customer discovery and actually seeing if it's viable as a company, and I think that was my first glimpse at… a startup landscape." (Interviewee 9)*

> *"My freshman year I did research at UNL in a lab and I had a really high level of autonomy. And I really enjoyed that and the research funding … challenging projects started to fade out as I went through college and entrepreneurship was a good substitute. It's a really high-autonomy activity, and there's a lot of support for it in Lincoln. And so, it was a way to work on similar projects that I really enjoyed with other people that were really passionate about it." (Interviewee 9)*

Through these school-sponsored programs and courses, students connected with formal entrepreneurship mentors who helped them develop and grow their businesses over time. These formal mentorships – detailed in the quotes below – involved faculty members, local entrepreneurs, and connections from previous work experiences who helped guide students as they built their own companies and prepared for the Governor's New Venture Competition.

> *"I found my advisor… always encourages me, 'You need to commercialize these products, the research outcomes, rather than publishing and finding an academic career.' So that's another motivation. I need to highlight him as a good mentor for me to go through this path." (Interviewee 8)*



"We have specific staff here, [that is] kind of dedicated to watching over the startups. So whether that be the person in charge of managing a startup specifically, or the schools director, the staff here has really done a great job with that. There's a couple of folks from the general Omaha and Lincoln startup communities that have really made an impact on me. They take the time to meet with me outside of you know, being forced to. I'll grab coffee with people or things like that... that's the thing I really appreciate about the Midwest is that, you know, people that you may have interacted with once or twice, they're willing to really stick with you on that journey and get a coffee whenever you want, and you know, give you their advice and their feedback. So, I've had a lot of mentors coming from a lot of places." (Interviewee 7)

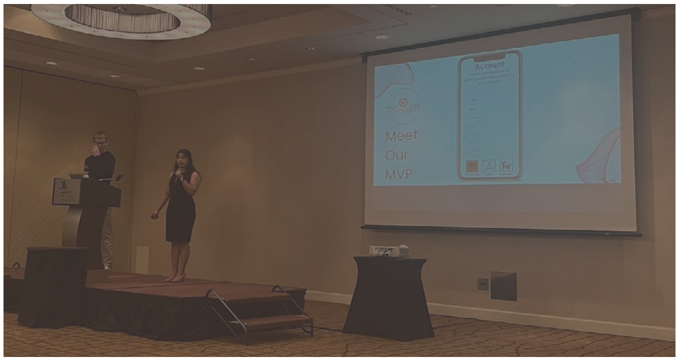
In addition to school-sponsored programs, **students identified prior exposure to entrepreneurship within their families as a valuable built-in resource.** For example, one interviewee shared, "...my grandpa actually owns his own... crop insurance company, and he started that himself. So, entrepreneurship kind of runs in my family" (Interviewee 5).

Those with entrepreneurial family ties felt more connected to the idea of starting a business and believed they had an advantage over peers who lacked access to similar advice and guidance. Among the nine students interviewed, four acknowledged that family experience in business, including access to family resources and general knowledge, played a crucial role in shaping their entrepreneurial journeys.

Along with school and family resources for learning about pathways into Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem, six out of the nine students mentioned competing in other local pitch competitions at the university level. These pitch competitions provided students with learning opportunities for both current and previous business endeavors. Students mentioned that previous participation in school-sponsored pitch competitions allowed them to feel confident going into the Governor's New Venture Competition and helped them better understand what to expect from the process. According to one interviewee,

"It was really fun, because it was a lot of getting to compile a lot of the information that we already had floating around but updating at this point. So, we had previously competed at the new venture competition won by UNL, so we had that information kind of as a starting point." (Interviewee 9)

Based on the conversations with these student entrepreneurs, many have found support and inspiration from university-sponsored programs such as college entrepreneurship centers and college-sponsored pitch competitions. Additionally, mentorship and family influences were key resources that ultimately led students to participate in the Governor's New Venture Competition.



Positive Aspects of Competition

One theme that emerged from the interview data was positive perceptions of the Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition and specific aspects of the competition that participants appreciated.

Students most frequently highlighted the involvement of organizers and mentors as a strength of the competition. Organizers matched participants with local business owners or startup founders who shared relevant experience, allowing students to receive ongoing feedback and support throughout the competition. As one student shared,

> *"And also there was somebody... from the New Venture team who looked at our slides, helped us... make it better for the semifinal. We did the pitch...so when we get to the final, we are kind of mentored...They are assigned to us, so she followed us. She was really available. She followed us through the steps of making our slides better, the speech better, more fluent, what to tell more about, how to keep the audience's attention..." (Interviewee 6)*

In addition to providing mentors for student feedback and guidance, students also noted that judges were highly qualified and that the time limits for each stage of the competition were fair. For example, one interviewee shared the following reflection:

> *"I loved how semifinals were over winter break because it gave me more time to prepare for the Zoom presentation and then with finals being in February, it...like the spacing out let me regroup, adjust based off of my critiques, and then best prepare my pitch for the next presentation. So, I feel like those are all very high points." (Interviewee 5)*

Beyond the expected competition benefits, student entrepreneurs also offered praise for the inclusion of a knowledgeable mentor paired with student groups based on area of expertise. Mentors gave student entrepreneurs guidance throughout the competition and the opportunity to build connections within the Nebraska entrepreneurial community. Additionally, students felt that the judges were high-quality and that the evaluations were fair throughout the competition. While some students offered feedback on how the event's organization could be improved, they did not question the fairness of the final outcomes.

Competition Concerns

Given that this was the inaugural Governor's New Venture Competition, it is reasonable for student participants to share feedback and suggest areas for improvement in future years. **Several students described aspects of the competition as disorganized, pointing to issues such as scheduling conflicts, limited planning, and challenges in coordinating meetings with assigned mentors.** For instance, one student explained,

> *"The only challenge with round two was just that it was over Christmas break, so it's a little difficult because I'm not from Nebraska. So, I was back home so it was just a little difficult to kind of rehearse it and practice it and do all the things." (Interviewee 3)*

In addition to concerns about the overall organization of the event, students also raised issues with the initial application stage. They felt that the structure, particularly the use of specific categories and tracks, was limiting for more "general" startups that did not clearly fit into any one category, leaving them feeling somewhat excluded. The quote below conveys this sentiment.

> *"[There were] very specific categories… It was meant to be ag tech or medical technology, or…there were 3 or 4 different categories. And initially, we didn't really fit in any of those categories. So, we reached out to see if there was a possibility of adding an AI category or having a General Technology category to see if we could still apply because we felt we fit the requirements for everything else. We just didn't necessarily have a great group to fit into." (Interviewee 9)*

Additionally, students felt that the feedback provided by judges and competition organizers was not always helpful in guiding future changes to their businesses. Although organizers mentioned that students could seek out feedback after the in-person competition rounds, many students believed that more specific and proactively shared feedback would have been more beneficial to their growth. The following quotes describe this issue in students' own words.

> *"Between round one and two, we didn't get any feedback, so we just adjusted it based upon like what we knew could be better and also kind of just trying to get an idea of what they were looking for in round three." (Interviewee 3)*

> *"There was this kind of recap session. And I think they tried to anonymize the feedback and keep things light. But I really wish it was more to the point…the more pointed and specific the feedback is, the more beneficial it is, like if it's just a light, 'All the judges thought your intro to your pitch was a little rough,' or they like this part about your company… the more specific it can be, the more useful it is." (Interviewee 2)*

> *"I feel like the last challenge was just not being able to hear direct feedback from the judges. We just heard it from the facilitators of the competition. Because I always love the critique session, even if the judges just unleash everything on me, because then it's a big learning opportunity or the potential for realizing something about my business that maybe I haven't before." (Interviewee 5)*

Additionally, students also noted a lack of available networking opportunities. As the quotes below suggest, the main networking event of the competition was not ideal for building new connections and showcasing their work, especially for those who were not finalists.

> *"At the event itself that took place in Lincoln, I definitely had the expectation of meeting more people because they kind of advertised it as a lot of people just that were kind of, I don't know, big wigs. Important people in Nebraska would be there and it would be an opportunity to just kind of network. We didn't have that opportunity. I don't know. When we got there, we were kind of sitting in the hall for the reception. It seemed like the people that already knew each other…I guess that work kind of in the political stance field…they were kind of conversing amongst themselves. So, we didn't really meet anyone, which was kind of a downside, especially me being someone that's new to Nebraska and trying to grow my network." (Interviewee 3)*

> *"I wish we would have had more opportunity to speak with the people present who were there that week. Because even during the dinner, we were placed with all of the rest of the finalists. We weren't with everyone else in the room. And I feel like that was a huge opportunity for the creation of those mentorships, but we didn't get that." (Interviewee 5)*

Students felt the competition could have done more to support participants beyond monetary prizes. Several noted that organizers should be more intentional about connecting students with resources to help grow their businesses—even for those not selected as finalists or winners.

> *"There are a lot of programs that I wasn't aware of at the beginning of the year … beyond pitch competitions, like grants that you can apply for, or anything like that. I don't know if the competition could do anything in that regard. But like providing us with, 'Okay, even if you didn't necessarily earn money from this pitch competition like these are other opportunities to bring in money'… whether it's like grants or anything like that, I think that would be super helpful." (Interviewee 9)*

While participants generally viewed the competition experience positively, they also shared constructive feedback that highlighted the specific needs of student entrepreneurs. Overall, the concerns focused on the event's organization—particularly issues with scheduling, the application process, and unclear expectations—all of which were identified as areas for improvement. Students also felt that, given the audience, the networking opportunities were limited. Additionally, student entrepreneurs viewed this competition as an opportunity for growth beyond the acquisition of funds. As a result, students felt that individualized feedback was lacking and that more tailored feedback could better prepare them for future endeavors.

Key Takeaways

By gaining a deeper understanding of the needs of student entrepreneurs in Nebraska, we are better positioned to ensure they have a voice in the conversation and a meaningful role within the state's broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. We offer the following key takeaways from our interviews with student entrepreneurs.

Students are motivated to launch and grow their businesses, and they are looking to the state to help them succeed.

Student entrepreneurs involved in the Governor's New Venture Competition desire connections to the ecosystem, constructive feedback, growth opportunities, and economic stability through funding.

By providing experiences such as the Governor's New Venture Competition and ensuring that these programs are inclusive of all experience levels and industry specializations, student entrepreneurs are encouraged to grow their businesses and contribute to Nebraska's economy.

If the right conditions for growth are not available, these talented and motivated student entrepreneurs may be forced to seek growth opportunities elsewhere and are not afraid to relocate.

While students felt mostly positive about assigned mentors in the New Venture Competition, a more structured system for encouraging regular check-ins and feedback could make those relationships more meaningful and further drive student success.

Students who are encouraged to grow their networks and build meaningful connections within the existing entrepreneurial ecosystem will feel greater support through their transition from student entrepreneurs to full-time business owners.

Based on conversations with student participants, the networking environment for the New Venture Competition was underdeveloped. Most students were existing members of their own local entrepreneurship communities and felt they were already connected with a majority of the attendees. For those who were new to the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the final event did not feel conducive to organic networking.

Since networking was a key motivator for student participation, the New Venture Competition shows that state-sponsored programs can play a valuable role in supporting student entrepreneurs, offering structured networking opportunities with members of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Student entrepreneurs acknowledged prize money was appreciated but additional access to funding opportunities should be built into future competitions.

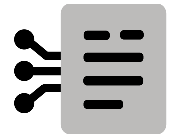
In summary, by offering support and resources to meet the demands of a growing market, state-sponsored programs like the Governor's New Venture Competition can engage emerging talent early and help retain innovative entrepreneurs within Nebraska. The current iteration of the competition successfully met many of the goals outlined by its organizers and echoed by students who participated in its inaugural year. Nonetheless, there are still opportunities to expand and improve the program to ensure effectiveness.

Conclusion

Within Nebraska's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem, competition organizers saw an opportunity to uplift student entrepreneurs and support their transition from higher education to the business world, a gap previously unaddressed in the state's economy (Schafer and Vogel, 2021). While the long-term effects and impact of the Governor's New Venture Competition are yet to be seen, **the benefits of connecting students with the greater Nebraska entrepreneurship ecosystem and providing additional resources is valued by both the students and the competition organizers.**

Students who participated in the Governor's New Venture Competition had a number of opportunities to present their ideas in front of a diverse population of Nebraska business owners and government officials. Competition organizers are hopeful that connections made, and exposure offered as a result of this competition, will allow all competitors, regardless of final placement, to reach their full potential in the Nebraska entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Winning Companies



Privy AI

1st Place — $20,000 prize

PrivyAI sources high-quality training data from data aggregators and sells the data securely on its marketplace, empowering AI developers and companies.

Cattle Kettle

2nd Place — $15,000 prize

Cattle Kettle is a stock tank management company that simplifies managing cattle tanks, allowing ranchers to remotely monitor and control their tanks.

Dyslexico

3rd Place — $10,000 prize

Dyslexico is an assistive writing platform designed to meet the needs of people with dyslexia through AI-powered accessibility tools.

Source: https://governor.nebraska.gov/press/gov-pillen-awards-prizes-student-entrepreneurs-through-inaugural-new-venture-competition

References

Ahsan, M., Zheng, C., DeNoble, A., & Musteen, M. (2018). From student to entrepreneur: How mentorships and affect influence student venture launch. *Journal of Small Business Management, 56*(1), 76-102.

Astebro, T., & Bazzazian, N. (2011). Universities, entrepreneurship and local economic development. *Handbook of Research on Entrepreneurship and Regional Development: National and Regional Perspectives*, 252-333.

Ayob, A. H. (2021). Institutions and student entrepreneurship: the effects of economic conditions, culture and education. *Educational Studies, 47*(6), 661-679.

Bae, T. J., Qian, S., Miao, C., & Fiet, J. O. (2014). The relationship between entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial intentions: A meta-analytic review. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 38*(2), 217-254.

Brown, R. (1990). Encouraging enterprise: Britain's graduate enterprise program. *Journal of Small Business Management, 28*(4), 71-77.

Duval-Couetil, N. (2013). Assessing the impact of entrepreneurship education programs: Challenges and approaches. *Journal of small business management, 51*(3), 394-409.

Fairlie, R. (2022) State Report on Early-Stage Entrepreneurship in the United States: 2021, *Kauffman Indicators of Entrepreneurship*, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation: Kansas City.

Falkäng, J., & Alberti, F. (2000). The assessment of entrepreneurship education. *Industry and Higher education, 14*(2), 101-108.

Fayolle, A., Gailly, B., & Lassas-Clerc, N. (2006). Assessing the impact of entrepreneurship education programmes: a new methodology. *Journal of European industrial training, 30*(9), 701-720.

Fini, R., Meoli, A., Sobrero, M., Ghiselli, S., & Ferrante, F. (2016). Student entrepreneurship: Demographics, competences and obstacles.

Goeser, B. (2025, March 7). Report ranks Omaha in top 10 emerging tech talent markets in North America. *Silicon Prairie News*. https://siliconprairienews.com/2025/03/report-ranks-omaha-in-top-10-emerging-tech-talent-markets-in-north-america/

Gupta, V. K., & York, A. S. (2008). The effects of geography and age on women's attitudes towards entrepreneurship: evidence from the state of Nebraska. *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, 9*(4), 251-262.

Holienka, M., Gál, P., & Kovačičová, Z. (2017). Drivers of student entrepreneurship in Visegrad four countries: Guess evidence. *Central European Business Review, 6*(2), 54.

Jakubczak, J. (2015). Youth entrepreneurship barriers and role of education in their overcoming-pilot study. *Manag. Intellect. Cap. Manag. Innov. Sustain. Knowl. Learn. Incl. Soc*, 1775-1782.

Jansen, S., Van De Zande, T., Brinkkemper, S., Stam, E., & Varma, V. (2015). How education, stimulation, and incubation encourage student entrepreneurship: Observations from MIT, IIIT, and Utrecht University. *The International Journal of Management Education, 13*(2), 170-181.

Liu, H., Kulturel-Konak, S., & Konak, A. (2021). Key elements and their roles in entrepreneurship education ecosystem: Comparative review and suggestions for sustainability. *Sustainability, 13*(19), 10648.

Pittaway, L., Hannon, P., Gibb, A., & Thompson, J. (2009). Assessment practice in enterprise education. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 15*(1), 71-93.

Porter, C. (2023, October 4). Student Entrepreneurs Will Compete for Leg Up in Nebraska Governor's 'New Venture Competition' *KLIN News Talk*. https://klin.com/2023/10/04/270694/

Pugalia, S., Prakash Sai, L., & Cetindamar, D. K. (2020). Personal networks' influence on student entrepreneurs: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Innovation and Technology Management, 17*(05), 2050037.

Schafer, J. G., & Vogel, M. (2021). Entrepreneurship in Nebraska. *UNO Center for Public Affairs Research*. https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cparpublications/523

Schimperna, F., Nappo, F., & Marsigalia, B. (2021). Student entrepreneurship in universities: *The state-of-the-art. Administrative Sciences, 12*(1), 5.

Sedita, S. R., & Blasi, S. (2021). Determinants and success factors of student entrepreneurship: evidence from the University of Padova. Piccola Impresa/Small Business, (1).

Sieger, P., Fueglistaller, U., & Zellweger, T. (2016). Student entrepreneurship 2016: Insights from 50 countries.

Sitaridis, I. K., & Kitsios, F. (2016). Students' perceptions of barriers to entrepreneurship. *Εκπαίδευση Δια Βίου Μάθηση Έρευνα και Τεχνολογική Ανάπτυξη Καινοτομία και Οικονομία, 1*, 524-535.

Taylor, D.W. (2008). The Entrepreneur in Youth: An Untapped Resource for Economic Growth, Social Entrepreneurship, and Education, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 14*(5). 367-369. https://doi.org/10.1108/13552550810897713

Appendix A

Competition Details

Team requirements:

1. Business proposals must be entered in one of the eight industry tracks listed.
2. Students may only participate on one team, regardless of track.
3. Participating teams must be comprised of more than one student.
4. All student participants must be actively enrolled at a post-secondary educational institution in Nebraska at the time of submission. This includes community colleges, state colleges, and universities.
5. Teams will submit proposals on Venture Dash.
6. The maximum limit for seed capital raised by a company at time of application is $1,000,000.
7. The maximum limit in revenue previously generated by a company is $500,000.

Competition stages:

1. Initial submission deadline – December 1, 2023
2. Semi-Finalists Chosen – December 8, 2023
3. Virtual Semi-Finalists - "Semi-finalists will pitch a group of judges virtually in 15-minute increments in one day. Semi-finalist judges (6 individuals) will ask questions of the teams. The judges will then choose the 6-8 finalists to move to the final round."
4. Virtual Semi-Finals – December 21, 2023
5. Finals - "6-8 finalists will pitch to a group of six judges live during the Nebraska State Chamber's Annual Meeting at the Cornhusker Hotel. Each team will have 25-minutes: 15-minute pitch and 10-minute Q&A."
6. Finals at Cornhusker Hotel – February 1, 2024

Appendix B

Competition Organizer Interview Protocol

START RECORDING ZOOM SESSION

1. In your own words, could you describe how the competition came about/originated, and the goals of the competition?
2. Do you feel that the first iteration of the competition was successful at accomplishing these goals?
    a. How did the design of the competition contribute to reaching its intended goals?
3. How do you see the Governor's New Venture Competition fitting within the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Nebraska overall?
    a. Do we need more of a student focus in the ecosystem?
    b. Do students currently have other outlets to achieve their entrepreneurship goals?
    c. Why was it important to focus on a competition for student entrepreneurs?
4. How do you feel that the Governor's New Venture Competition differs from existing/similar pitch competitions in Nebraska? often hosted by individual institutions?
    a. Did you draw inspiration from any existing competitions specifically? other states?
5. Does the competition target certain stages of business development? Why or why not?
    a. Is that expressed within the rules & requirements for participation?
6. How did you identify judges and the provided mentors?
    a. How were judges and mentors prepared for their roles in the competition?
    b. Was there an expected time commitment for judges and mentors?
    c. Were judges provided guidance on giving feedback and/or interacting with student participants?
7. Did the structure and overall plan for the competition change at all from initial conception to final competition start date? If so, what changes were made and why?
8. Beyond prize money, what do you believe are the most important benefits that student entrepreneurs gain from participating in the competition?
9. How would you say the overall competition went? Do you think you achieved the goals set out for the competition?
    a. Did you receive any meaningful feedback on the success of the event? Either from student participants or involved local entrepreneurs (judges or mentors).
10. Have you or your team made any changes to the structure of the competition for the upcoming 2024/2025 iteration of the competition?
11. What are your hopes for the trajectory of the students that competed?

Appendix C

Student Participant Interview Protocol

Student Entrepreneurs from the Governor's Pitch Competition

– INTERVIEW PROTOCOL –

Date:

Time of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Name:

Higher Education Institution:

Project Description (to be summarized at start of interview):

My colleagues and I are working with Kauffman to try to better understand the experiences of student entrepreneurs in Nebraska. Our intent for this research is to tell the story of how student entrepreneurs became involved with, navigated, and applied experiences from the Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition. Our hope is that this research will lead to solutions to support new entrepreneurs, and recommendations for future New Venture Competition.

We are conducting interviews with student participants in the Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition Nebraska, giving special attention to how students gained interest in entrepreneurship. We sincerely appreciate your willingness to talk with us today. We provided you with an electronic copy of the interviewee information sheet which guarantees that all interview results will be confidential and kept anonymous.

Do you mind if we record this interview so that we can ensure accurate transcriptions of our conversation? We will destroy the recording as soon as it has been transcribed. Your name will never be shared or associated with any of your comments today.

START RECORDING ZOOM SESSION

To start, can you share your name and the institution you attended?

Demographic Profile Questions

We would like to gather additional demographic information. If you're not comfortable answering any or all of these questions, please tell us to skip the question.

- With what gender do you identify?
- With what race, races and/or ethnicity(s) do you identify?
- What year in school are you?
- What is your major?

Introduction/Background-Questions

1. To start, can you tell us a little bit about how you became interested in entrepreneurship?

a. Can you discuss any influential mentors, role models, or resources that have contributed to your entrepreneurial drive and aspirations?

Competition Idea Questions

2. How did you find out about the governor venture competition?
3. Can you describe your motivation for participating in the competition?
    a. Prompts – money, experience, resume builder, institution/faculty.
4. Was there any reason that you considered not applying?
5. How long have you been working on the idea you submitted to the competition?
    a. Who have you been working with on this idea before the competition, i.e., faculty, mentors, other students, broad network?
6. Can you describe the process of the competition and your experience through those stages?
    a. Did you experience any setbacks or challenges throughout the process competition?
    b. How did your team work together through the competition process?
        i. May want to follow up on some details at the end.
7. Through the competition, did you gain any new mentors, network contacts, or even particularly useful feedback?
    a. Did any of the judges' questions or feedback surprise you?
8. During your pitches, do you think more emphasis was placed on your presentation style or the ingenuity of your idea?
9. If the competition were to be held again, what feedback would you give to the organizers?
10. What advice would you give to other student entrepreneurs considering participating in this or similar conversations?
11. Following the competition have you stayed in touch with anyone from the process, if so who and why?
12. How did the competition help you build a network to support your entrepreneurship journey?
13. We are interested to know if you think aspects of your identity, such as your cultural background, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, made a difference in how your pitch was perceived?
14. Any other benefits or challenges from this experience that you would like to share with us?
15. What are the next steps for you and your idea?

Closing: Thank you for participating in this interview. Again, all results will be kept anonymous. Would it be okay for us to contact you if we need to clarify any of your statements?

Appendix D

Key Themes and Associated Categories

Theme	Category	Total Mentions
Motivating Factors & Benefits Reasons that interviewees chose to participate in the Governor's New Venture Competition.	Presentation Experience	6
	Funding	10
	New Connections	16
	Community Visibility	7
Entrepreneurship Resources Resources that allowed participants to explore entrepreneurship and build their existing entrepreneurship networks/communities.	School-Sponsored Programs	13
	Coursework	4
	Family Influence	6
	Formal Mentorship	11
	Other Competitions	11
	Pre-existing Business Experience	7
	Fellow Students	5
Competition Concerns Issues or problems that participants noted with the competition's organization or execution.	Disorganized (scheduling, lack of planning, communication, etc.)	12
	Application Issues	8
	Feedback Issues	10
	Lack of Networking	5
	Gender Equity	1
	Need for Additional Resources	4
	Judging Concerns	5
	Unclear Expectations	5
Positive Aspects of Competition Key areas of the Governor's New Venture competition (outside of key motivating factors) that participants reacted positively to.	Good Judges	4
	Provided Mentor	6
	Good Preparation Time	1