LISTENING TO ENTREPRENEURS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

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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.

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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.