



FUELING WISCONSIN'S ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Workforce Innovation Grants foster success for startups in rural areas



November 2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

RURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP DRIVES GROWTH AND INNOVATION



November 2025

Like many other states, Wisconsin in recent years has faced a workforce shortage driven primarily by an aging population and slowing birthrates. Given our already high labor participation rate—one of the top among U.S. states—in Wisconsin we've chosen to focus our efforts on helping communities and workers overcome the remaining barriers to full employment.

In 2021, Governor Evers created the Workforce Innovation Grant (WIG) Program to encourage communities to identify local workforce needs and develop and implement solutions that could be replicated elsewhere. Jointly administered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the program used funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to award \$128 million to 27 projects across the state.

Building an Economy for All requires that everyone has a shot at earning a living, improving their quality of life, and contributing to Wisconsin's economic vibrance. Entrepreneurship broadens Wisconsin's economic base, fuels innovation, and paves the way to financial success for those bold enough to start a new business to address unmet marketplace needs.

The programs detailed here have helped foster an entrepreneurial ethic in rural and urban areas across the state, enabling our communities to leverage the benefits and groundbreaking ideas that new businesses bring to Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Rikkers".

Sam Rikkers
Chief Operating Officer
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

HARNESSING CREATIVITY TO SPARK ECONOMIC GROWTH



November 2025

We are proud to support the WIG-funded projects in this report, which are leveraging entrepreneurship skills to creatively bolster the workforce pipeline for many in-demand occupational sectors faced with pervasive worker shortages in Wisconsin.

Governor Evers invested a groundbreaking \$158 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to not only support innovative pandemic recovery efforts, but to address the state's ongoing workforce needs.

The Workforce Solutions Initiative is composed of three programs, including WIG, that have delivered workforce training and supportive services to 18,000 Wisconsin residents since they began and continue to yield results today.

Projects in this report are examples of some of the creative, local solutions to regional workforce challenges. Through WIG funding and a host of partners—from the business community to the Universities of Wisconsin, a business accelerator, local government, schools, nonprofits, and others—Wisconsin entrepreneurs were equipped with the tools to take their enterprises to the next level, and young people learned about the potential of running a small business.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Pechacek".

Amy Pechacek
Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development



THE CHALLENGE

LACK OF ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND GUIDANCE CAN HOLD NEW BUSINESSES BACK

Entrepreneurship is an engine powering community development, jobs, and consumer choice in the marketplace. Building on a strong history of innovation and discovery, Wisconsin is prioritizing support for startups and founders so the state can provide fertile ground for new businesses to seed and scale.

Providing a vibrant and nurturing entrepreneurial ecosystem encourages would-be and existing entrepreneurs, giving them the technical tools to be successful and the confidence to compete. It helps stabilize communities and encourages people to build wealth and satisfying personal lives.

Challenges remain. For example, rural entrepreneurs sometimes face limitations in access to capital. New entrepreneurs in both rural and urban areas need the infrastructure to point the way to success. But entrepreneurial education and skill development can help overcome those challenges.

The vitality of these enterprises builds Wisconsin's workforce and grows our tax base, ensuring high-quality schools, robust municipal services, and a better quality of life for all residents.



THE VISION

BUILDING ENTREPRENEURIAL INFRASTRUCTURE BOOSTS INNOVATION, SUCCESS

As part of its work to develop an Economy for All, Wisconsin had the vision to tackle targeted workforce needs in a variety of areas, including transportation, education, health care, and housing, among others.

The WIG Program harnessed the power of creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime local workforce needs. The grants encouraged development of leading-edge, long-term solutions enabling businesses and institutions to find ways to connect people to resources that fill a need for the community, support the hiring needs of businesses, and help people find family-supporting careers more easily. WEDC, in collaboration with DWD, oversaw the program, which developed powerful, effective, and transformative solutions.

The programs outlined in this report used innovative approaches to educate young people about business skills and practices and provide entrepreneurs with the knowledge and technical capabilities they need to succeed and help Wisconsin's rural and urban businesses thrive.





INNOVATION ONE:

STUDENT CONSULTING EXPANDS SMALL BUSINESS OUTREACH THROUGH UW-EAU CLAIRE CENTER

The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) used about \$800,000 in WIG funding to provide student consultants for local small businesses. This helped local entrepreneurs improve, start, or expand their operations and boost capital formation.

HOW IT WORKS:

- SBDC employed 21 paid student consultants to intern in the fields of business administration, accounting, and marketing at local businesses.
- It offered several small business clinics and seminars, covering topics such as e-commerce and business law.
- Small business clients were recruited at the clinics and through referrals from financial institutions working with businesses on commercial loans.

THE SITUATION:

Nationally, small businesses account for nearly

60% OF EMPLOYMENT

in non-metropolitan areas

Source: 2025 Small Business Profile, U.S. Small Business Administration

Startup rates in rural Wisconsin

DECLINED BY 50%

between 1978 and 2018

Source: 2021 Rural Innovation Report, Wisconsin Startup Coalition, UW-Madison, Alliant Energy

THE EXPERIENCE:

By combining the business acumen of the SBDC at UWEC with the power of student engagement, businesses across Wisconsin have been able to thrive as the center broadened its influence and impact.

The SBDC drew on student expertise to work with 1,501 clients to help launch, strengthen, or grow their enterprises and boost capital formation. The SBDC's team of 21 paid student consultants interned at client businesses in the fields of business administration, accounting, and marketing.

"The program is super vital because it makes sure that all of these small businesses that are the foundation of our economy are doing well."

- Cooper Feltz, Student, UW-Eau Claire

The program vastly increased the productivity of the SBDC along with the quality of financial projections and client consultations. During the grant period, more than 5,000 hours of student work—overseen by faculty members who served as lead consultants—was spent on client consultations and report preparation.

"We were able to increase the quality of our services and increase the number of clients we served," says SBDC Director Harlie Juedes. "We were also able to help businesses understand their financials so they can seek funding. During the pandemic and afterward, the biggest need they had was to stay afloat when cash flow was up and down."

In addition to providing consulting services, the program allowed the SBDC to offer eight Small Business Clinics throughout northwest and southwest Wisconsin, along with seminars on targeted topics such as e-commerce, business law, social media marketing, and taxes.

"The faculty and students would attend these clinics, and the students would take copious notes and do all of the follow-up work," says Juedes. "They'd then meet with the lead consultants to review the materials and then work with the clients to share the completed projects."

THE EXPERIENCE:

Other clients were referred to the program by bankers, as they often assisted entrepreneurs in obtaining commercial loans. Still others received counseling after contacting the SBDC directly for assistance. The consulting work covered a wide variety of enterprises and business problems, giving students experience in tackling a range of challenges and deepening their knowledge.

"I think the most rewarding work for our students was when they worked on the financial side," Juedes says. "For example, we've got students working with bakeries, restaurants, health care facilities, and much more."

Juedes says the students worked at a pace dictated by the scope of individual projects. For example, the program helped the Chippewa Falls-based Wisconsin Farmer's Union with an analysis that led to the purchase of a new headquarters facility after nearly four months of work.

"It was through our students that they were able to see that it was feasible," Juedes says.

Kim Chapman, who has owned Dairy Queen stores in Northwest Wisconsin for 35 years, used the program to help her prepare for the acquisition of two more stores. Chapman, who now owns eight Dairy Queens, says the students provided new insights into the viability and financials of the new stores.

"If you didn't know these were college kids, you would have thought that I paid a consulting firm for this," she says of their work, which resulted in a 16-page presentation that detailed how the deal would be workable.

"My banker had me go work with them," Chapman says. "They laid out a very different way to look at the numbers. Does it work? Does it make financial sense to take these loans? Are you going to make money? How is it all going to play out?" Chapman says. "I had a blast. Working with the students gave me a different view of my business, because if you're always looking at things the same way, sometimes you don't catch little idiosyncrasies."

In the end, Chapman acquired both stores and today owns eight stores—four in Eau Claire, plus stores in Bloomer, Barron, Turtle Lake, and Menomonie.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Rebekah Stamps, a former professional in the retail industry, took up baking during the pandemic while living in St. Louis. Selling at local farmers markets, her cottage bakery quickly turned into a successful venture.

Because of family circumstances, she moved to Chetek, continued to run her home-based bakery, and eventually decided to open a brick-and-mortar bakery. But she needed help creating a business plan to make it work. Referred by a friend, she contacted the SBDC for help.

THE SBDC
MORE THAN
DOUBLED
its impact after
receiving a WIG

MORE THAN
1,500
client businesses were
served in the program's
first 2 ½ years

CLIENT BUSINESSES
REALIZED NEARLY
\$66M
in capital formation
in 2024 alone

"They were a great resource for helping nail down that plan and getting financial forecasts together," says Stamps, who transitioned from a plan to lease a building to house her Edgewood Bakeshop in downtown Chetek to buying the building in May 2024. "It was so helpful to have a knowledgeable outside perspective. When you've not owned that type of business before, you wouldn't know what questions to ask. But they did."

Stamps refers to the plan at least weekly, and because of its accuracy, she has exceeded financial forecasts and her bakery continues to thrive.

The student consultants also gained real-world experience—important as they prepared to enter the job market.

Cooper Feltz, a junior from Germantown majoring in economics, finance, and accounting, has worked with coin-operated laundries, midsize factories, a woman who makes balloon arrangements, a horse ranch, and restaurants and food trucks.

"When we finish and give them the projections and they get the loan, almost every single person is super grateful that they found us," Feltz says. "We made their lives really easy. We've helped them solve problems that they didn't even know about going into the project."

THE EXPERIENCE:

Feltz says clients often come back later if they encounter problems with cash flow or buying capital equipment. And Feltz says the experience added to his classroom experience and allowed him to have more interaction with faculty.

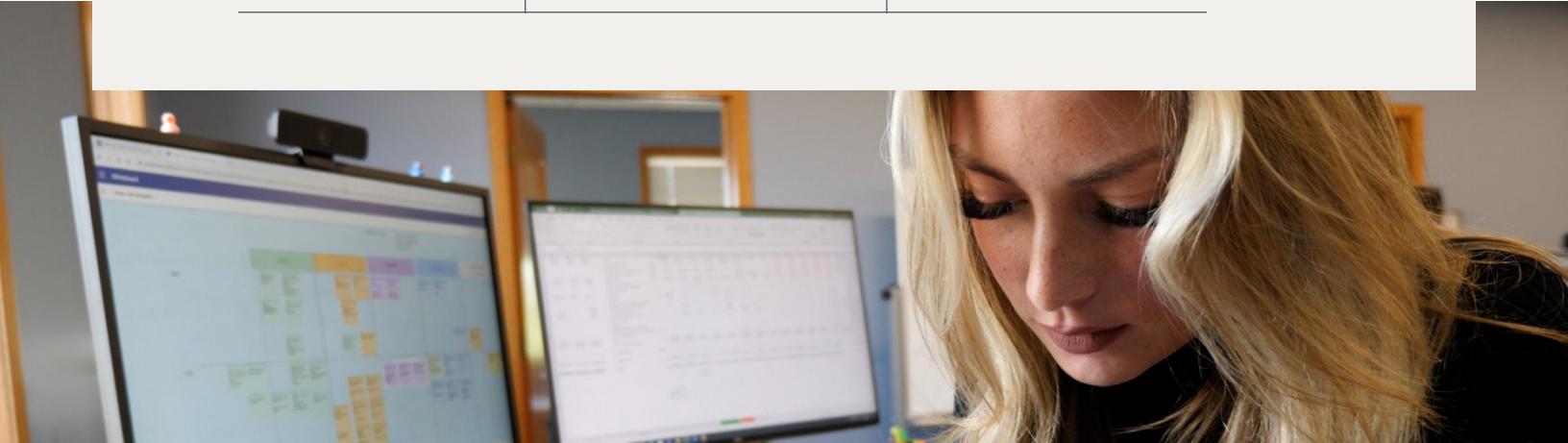
"The program is super vital because it makes sure that all of these small businesses that are the foundation of our economy are doing well," he says.

The consultations have extended well beyond northwest Wisconsin. In 2024, the center served enterprises in 44 counties and spurred significant capital formation. During the course of the grant, it helped a total of 59 counties.

UWEC's WIG award funded the first two and a half years of the program. During this time, a total of 1,501 business clients were served.

Through the consulting made possible by the WIG funding, clients have realized \$65,975,911 in capital formation—funds leveraged through owner investment, loans, lines of credit, and grants. The center's increased impact has been pronounced, demonstrated in a comparison of pre-pandemic 2019 statistics and the final full year of WIG funding in 2024:

	2019 (without WIG funding)	2024 (with WIG funding)
Clients Served	278	614
Capital Formation	\$9,032,425	\$23,176,599
Counties Served	20	44



THE EXPERIENCE:

UW-Eau Claire's Carmen Manning, dean of the College of Health and Human Sciences and joint principal investigator on the grant, says that the grant helped the university develop stronger relationships with the business community.

"Our collaboration through the WIG Program accelerated the SBDC's great work, building new pathways for business, student opportunities, and a sustainable model that will continue," Manning says. "It's creating a learning experience for our students that makes them better analysts when they get jobs or better small business owners. The virtuous cycle of this part of the grant is really strong."

The university hopes to continue the program with help from area financial institutions and other entities. "We have banks that have stepped up and said, 'This has made a huge impact on our community and the businesses our banks serve,'" Juedes adds.

THE RESULTS: 2022 – 2025



Client businesses have realized

\$65.9M IN CAPITAL FORMATION

through the SBDC Program, post-WIG

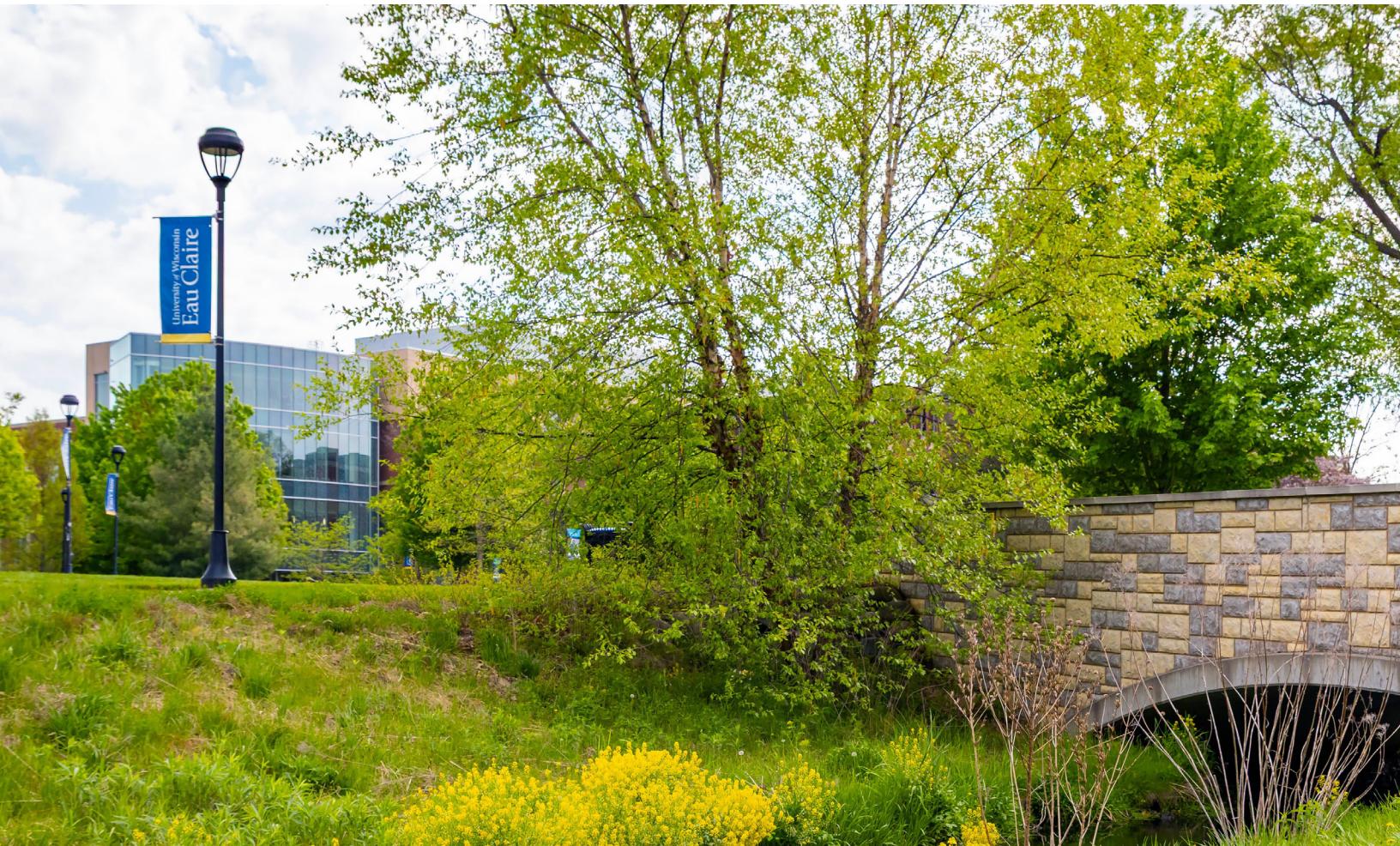
LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Students surpass expectations.

“Students can bring a lot more value to the table than people give them credit for,” says Juedes. “Our clients love their energy. Sometimes they boot me and the lead consultants out of the room because they want to work with the students. They’re eager and smart and have helped make a big impact in the business community.”

2. Academic partnership pays off.

Organizers say that while the SBDC is university-affiliated, its headquarters was downtown and off-campus, remote from the academic mission of the university. During the course of the grant, the center moved onto campus, and Manning says the center’s connection with the university is stronger today.





INNOVATION TWO: KENOSHA PROGRAM MENTORS ENTREPRENEURS, LEVERAGES VENTURE CAPITAL

gBETA Kenosha is a free pre-accelerator program designed for early-stage companies that are interested in venture capital but not yet ready for investment. This program used \$1 million in WIG funding to help set up local entrepreneurs for success.

HOW IT WORKS:

- This entrepreneurial bootcamp prepares early-stage companies to pitch for venture capital.
- Over seven weeks, the program exposes entrepreneurs to mentors, potential customers, and finally investors.
- It also helps to increase inclusion of underrepresented entrepreneurs in local economic momentum.

THE SITUATION:

Between 2024 and 2025 just

**2.3% OF
VENTURE CAPITAL**

was awarded to female-only
founding teams, globally

Source: 2025 Women in VC & Startup Funding:
Statistics & Trends, Founders Forum Group

Across all industries

**29% OF
STARTUPS FAIL**

due to lack of funding

Source: 2025 The Ultimate Startup Guide
With Statistics, Founders Forum Group

For Rust Belt cities,

**THE PROMISE OF
NEW IDEAS**

can be easily overlooked.

THE EXPERIENCE:

gBETA Kenosha is a free seven-week pre-accelerator program with cohorts of up to five companies. Representing a range of industries, the companies are selected from a competitive applicant pool to participate.

The entrepreneurial bootcamp—a program run by gener8tor, an international business accelerator that fosters innovation ecosystems—offers selected companies coaching, mentorship, and development of investor documents, culminating in a week of pitching participants' ideas to 25 or more real-world potential investors during 15-minute presentations.

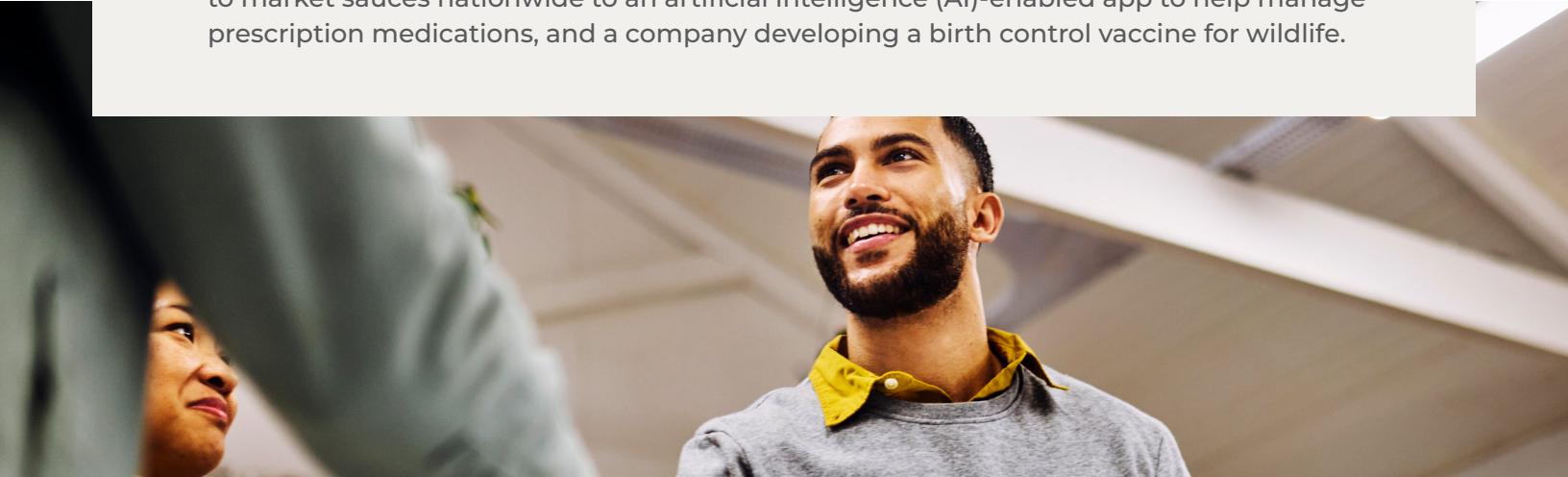
During the program, entrepreneurs take advantage of individualized coaching, weekly lunch-and-learn sessions, and “Mentor Swarm” sessions—a sort of mentorship speed dating event in which they interact with between four and six mentors in the span of 90 minutes. Mentors come from the ranks of local businesses and the Service Corps of Retired Executives. Occasionally, alumni of the program come back and serve as mentors.

“The program exposes them to a huge variety of mentors, potential customers, and finally, investors,” says Bethany Larsen, gBETA’s former director.

Participants and investors have been enthusiastic about the program, says Larsen. Some of those in gBETA’s investor network have attended pitch presentations from all six of gBETA’s cohorts.

“A lot of the investors are interested in mentoring them and watching them progress over a period of time,” she says. “For most of the companies, they’re still too early to take on investment, but they’ve received a lot of follow-up conversations from investors.”

The program has involved a variety of businesses, from a chicken wing restaurant hoping to market sauces nationwide to an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled app to help manage prescription medications, and a company developing a birth control vaccine for wildlife.



THE EXPERIENCE:

The program adds a resource that has not been widely available in Kenosha.

gBETA Kenosha has also helped underrepresented entrepreneurs participate in a spate of economic development activity that the area has experienced in recent years. Larsen says, for instance, that the national venture capital landscape for women is “abysmal,” with only about 2.3% of funding going to women-run businesses. In contrast, of the participants in gBETA Kenosha, 40% of the founders are women, 25% are African American, 21% are Hispanic American, and 12% are Indian American. gBETA Kenosha’s supportive program has also brought about impressive results, including generating \$1.4 million in venture capital overall, with two firms actively raising capital and the prospect of another \$500,000 to \$1 million in possible infusion.

<p>FEMALE FOUNDERS IN gBETA ARE 20X MORE LIKELY to receive funding than the national average</p>	<p>MORE THAN 90 JOBS have been created by gBETA Kenosha startups</p>	<p>TO DATE 33 Kenosha-based startups have been served by the program</p>
---	---	---

Aicha Choudhuri, co-founder of the Kenosha-based startup InnerJoy, participated in the program to hone the company’s product-market fit, refine its business plan, and learn more about attracting venture capital.

InnerJoy offers a human-centered emotional intelligence learning platform for kids in schools, after-school programs, summer camps, school-based health clinics, and mental health clinics. The platform uses an evidence-based interactive curriculum and project-based learning to equip kids with the emotional resilience, confidence, and skills to thrive in school, relationships, and life.

“gBETA provides a support system that allowed me to reach the next milestone for InnerJoy. It opened our eyes to the business model, and to our pricing model,” says Choudhuri, whose enthusiasm for gBETA led her to become a program mentor after completing her bootcamp.

Raising venture capital is important for InnerJoy and gBETA provided a window into what’s required for a successful raise.

THE EXPERIENCE:

"It helped me to understand the commitment required of a founder and why investors are looking for that special unicorn," Choudhuri says. "And it helped me understand the investors' experience versus just my own as a founder."

Aaron Colcord is founder of Voyager AI, an AI-powered solution that helps financial institutions track, analyze, and interpret regulatory changes in real time, enabling those institutions to stay in compliance and maintain accuracy and efficiency.

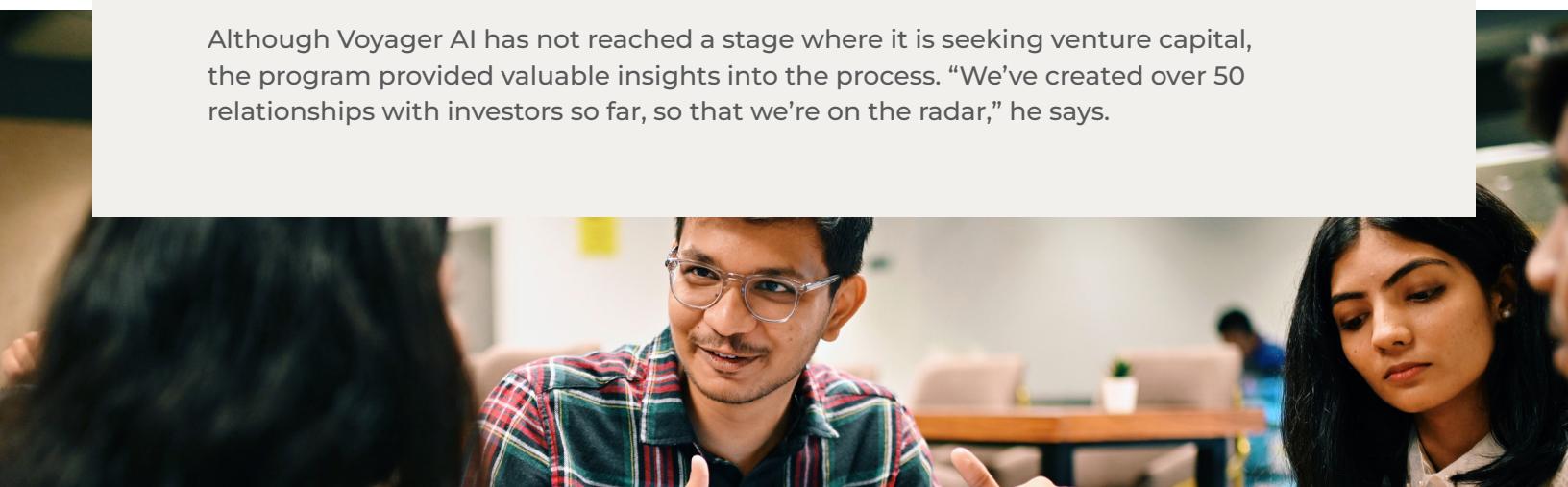
Colcord came to gBETA with the concept of Voyager AI and the skills and background of a chief technical officer, but no experience as a CEO. Finishing the gBETA bootcamp in mid-February 2025, he was able to incorporate in March and launch the venture.

"We have a huge entrepreneurial spirit. These entrepreneurs just need an outlet and a way to develop those ideas."

- Bethany Larsen, former Director, gBETA

"I conceived the idea, built the idea, researched it, and built prototypes. I had zero understanding of whether I was going to turn the idea into an actual business," Colcord says. "gBETA was a huge value. It's set up to drive you to make sure that you're always being accountable to your goals. Now we've been able to actually execute against the market."

Although Voyager AI has not reached a stage where it is seeking venture capital, the program provided valuable insights into the process. "We've created over 50 relationships with investors so far, so that we're on the radar," he says.



THE EXPERIENCE:

The timing of these company launches coincides with other encouraging developments in the area. The Kenosha Innovation Neighborhood is revitalizing 107 acres of vacant land in a collaborative, mixed-use project that includes sustainable, innovation-focused office, medical, education, recreation, commercial, and residential space. Within that neighborhood, the \$23.5 million Kenosha Innovation Center will include leasable tenant space as well as event and meeting space available for community use.

While the projects are not directly linked, Larsen says gener8tor's programs fit well into the fabric of building innovation and driving Kenosha's economy forward: "I think that gener8tor can be an important piece of the innovation puzzle here," she says. "It fits in very well with the redevelopment that is happening in Kenosha."

To help continue the program after WIG funding lapses, Larsen says gener8tor is exploring a partnership with an area college to provide both the gALPHA and gBETA programs.



THE RESULTS: 2022 – 2025



As of June 2025,

\$1.4M IN VENTURE CAPITAL

had been generated by gBETA Kenosha startups

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Innovation is everywhere.

Larsen says that because Kenosha is often seen as a Rust Belt city, the promise of new ideas can be easily overlooked. "We have a huge entrepreneurial spirit," says Larsen. "These entrepreneurs just need an outlet and a way to develop those ideas."

2. Interactions feed economic development.

"You've got to get out in the community and talk to people," she adds. "You have to get out and recruit businesses and mentors and talk to as many people as possible. You can't sit back and hope startups will come to you. You've got to start cold calling and messaging. I'm talking about hundreds of people."





INNOVATION THREE:

CAREERFORCE BUILD UP! PLANTS THE SEEDS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Encouraging young people to learn the value and skills of entrepreneurship is one of the keys to Wisconsin's economic future. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County (BGCDC) is using a \$3.5 million WIG to give teens a pathway to entrepreneurship through the WIG-funded Careerforce Build UP! program.

HOW IT WORKS:

- It offers middle-school students entrepreneur training, preparing students to launch their own businesses—especially in the construction trades—and build generational wealth.
- It prepares students for transition into the workforce, teaching soft skills such as interpersonal communication and leadership.
- It provides underrepresented high-school students with 16 weeks of paid training in the construction trades.

THE SITUATION:

In a national survey of high school students

NEARLY 20%

have no plans post-graduation

Source: 2024 Youth Right Now Survey,
Boys and Girls Clubs of America

Of high school students surveyed

24%

feel they can't lead a team to complete a project

Source: 2024 Youth Right Now Survey,
Boys and Girls Clubs of America

In the U.S. just

3.4% OF BUSINESSES

are Black-owned

2023 Analysis of Annual Business Survey,
Pew Research Center

THE EXPERIENCE:

BGCDC are instilling an appreciation for business through a variety of WIG-funded classes and clubs aimed at giving middle-school students and eventually high schoolers a pathway to entrepreneurship through the Careerforce Build UP! program. This program, aimed at underrepresented youth aged 16-18, is based out of the Club's new Mackenzie Regional Workforce Center in Fitchburg.

Careerforce Build UP! offers entrepreneurship clubs designed for middle-school students, with the goal of inspiring them to consider a range of business activities—especially those in the construction trades.

The sessions focus on topics such as soft skills—interpersonal communication, job interview skills, leadership, and teamwork—as well as other topics such as running family businesses and learning about the stock market, says Alan Branch, BGCDC senior vice president of workforce development. As of June 2025, the program had served 170 youths.

“Entrepreneurship has the potential to change the trajectory of a low-income family and build generational wealth.”

- Alan Branch, Senior Vice President of Workforce Development, BGCDC

Early in the program, the sessions were more classroom-focused, teaching about businesses and culminating in the students creating a business plan and selling a product or craft at the Dane County Farmers Market. Later, the sessions took on a more club-oriented format, embracing a hands-on approach.

For example, the Stock Market Club spotlights investing, companies, stocks, conducting research, diversification, and portfolio evaluation. The Family Business Club focuses on what it means to be a CEO, team dynamics, marketing, and consumer research—with an emphasis on participants' interests and strengths.

“These kids are 12, 13, 14 years old, so they’re not going to leave our class and go into entrepreneurship,” Branch says. “It’s planting that seed. Entrepreneurship has the potential to change the trajectory of a low-income family and build generational wealth.”

THE EXPERIENCE:

Because Careerforce Build UP! is primarily aimed at helping young people learn skills relevant to construction trades, much of the entrepreneurship program is about the potential of running a small business within that sector.

UPON COMPLETION OF THE CAREERFORCE BUILD UP! PROGRAM, STUDENTS:

KNOW	UNDERSTAND	CAN IDENTIFY	CAN ENVISION
what it means to be an entrepreneur	basic business concepts like marketing	at least one local business and its target audience	being a leader or starting a business

It's also a way of encouraging middle schoolers to become involved in the high school program where they can begin to learn valuable skills in the building trades. The 16-week program allows students to explore in-demand trades, learn to use tools, and receive certifications on OSHA-10, first aid/CPR/AED, fall protection, traffic flagging for construction, and driver education.

"There's a lot of potential in mastering a craft and translating that into a private business, because small business is at the core of the trades," says Branch. "The awareness we provide today can encourage some of the younger kids who are good with working with their hands to continue in the pre-apprenticeship program. By the time they get to 10th or 11th grade, it all starts to make sense to them."

THE RESULTS: 2022 – 2025



As of June 2025,
170 STUDENTS
have participated in the
Careerforce Build UP! program

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Know your audience.

Language matters when trying to engage youth in programs of this nature.

"When promoting the program, we've seen significantly better engagement when we avoid terms like entrepreneurship and instead use phrases like start your own business or be your own boss," says Branch. "These resonate more clearly with young people."

2. Be able to adapt methods.

Working with a younger audience also requires an understanding of learning styles.

"One key takeaway is that traditional, classroom-style lectures are not as effective for many of the young people we serve," says Branch. "Youth also respond more positively to hands-on activities," he adds.

3. Transportation is essential.

Branch says that getting the kids and teens to the Mackenzie Regional Workforce Center is central to the program's success. WIG-funded vans helped make that possible, he says. Going forward, the program has secured new grant funding to pay for dedicated drivers rather than relying on instructors and staff.

THE CONCLUSION:

Wisconsin's entrepreneurs, equipped with the knowledge and tools to succeed, are leading advancements in all sectors. They innovate and drive progress, contributing to our economy and quality of life.

WIG-funded programs like these are nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit in young people, helping secure access to capital markets, and unlocking business potential in urban and rural areas. These programs are helping to drive community development and expand our tax base.

Enriching Wisconsin's entrepreneurial ecosystem through these grants helps diversify our economy, infuse new ideas, and ensure a prosperous Economy for All.