



Shaping the Future through Youth Entrepreneurship

Youth entrepreneurship education is one of the pillars of the work we do at the NIACC Pappajohn Center & SBDC. This year, one of our key priorities has been to expand our education opportunities to more students in our region at a wider range of ages. Entrepreneurship education provides more than just an introduction to business; it equips students with essential real-world skills that support their personal growth and long-term success. When students engage in entrepreneurial thinking, they gain tools that help them navigate uncertainty, solve complex problems, and lead with confidence in any field they pursue. Youth entrepreneurship education develops six foundational skills that shape capable, adaptable, and self-directed individuals.

Innovation. Through entrepreneurship, students are encouraged to generate original ideas and explore new possibilities. They learn how to solve open-ended problems that require creative thinking and flexible approaches, helping students build confidence in their ability to turn ideas into action.

Resilience. Failure is part of the learning process. Students discover how to persist in the face of uncertainty and bounce back from setbacks. They learn to take responsibility for their actions, adapt when things don't go as planned, and keep moving forward.

Teamwork. Entrepreneurial projects require teamwork. By working toward shared goals, communicating effectively, and practicing empathy and active listening students practice a collaborative mindset that is essential in both academic and professional environments.

Leadership. Entrepreneurship naturally cultivates leadership by giving students the opportunity to take initiative and guide projects forward. As they navigate real challenges, they build confidence, improve their communication skills, and learn how to motivate and support others.

Critical Thinking. Students apply classroom knowledge to real-world situations through entrepreneurial learning. They assess opportunities, weigh decisions, and prioritize tasks—all while working within constraints and evaluating risks. This strengthens their ability to think critically and make informed decisions in varied settings.

Personal Growth. Entrepreneurship also supports students in discovering who they are and what they value. They build self-discipline, practice goal-setting, and learn the value of curiosity and independent thinking. Students begin to understand that unconventional strengths can be just as valuable as traditional academic success, helping them grow into well-rounded individuals.

At the NIACC Pappajohn Center & SBDC, youth entrepreneurship is a core part of our mission. Our programs are designed to equip K–14 students with the mindset, skills, and confidence they need to lead in a rapidly changing world.

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From Spark to Startup: North Iowa's Entrepreneurial Energy

Entrepreneurship is thriving across North Iowa, and the last six months have shown just how powerful collaboration and community support can be in fueling new ideas and ventures.

This spring, we introduced hundreds of young minds to entrepreneurship, reaching 331 Fifth Grade students from six different communities through our Entrepreneur for a Day program (E4D). We also proudly hosted our first-ever IDEA Camp at NIACC for middle school students in March, sparking early interest in creativity, innovation, and business building. The energy was contagious, and we were excited to bring IDEA Camp back to NIACC this summer, along with expanding the program to the Charles City Career Academy, where the first camp was also a success.

In April, we welcomed college students to NIACC from across the state for the second annual Iowa Student Entrepreneur Summit. The energy and passion these students brought with them inspired all of us and served as a reminder of how critical it is to nurture entrepreneurial thinking at every stage.

In June, we welcomed another inspiring group of high school students to our Youth Entrepreneurial Academy (YEA), where they developed business ideas and gained confidence as future founders. This year's YEA cohort was bright and creative—and very courageous as they pitched their business ideas on-stage to a panel of judges.

Our own NIACC students continue to make waves. We celebrated another top prize winner at the Pappajohn Student Venture Competition with Caleb Renner and his life- and limb-saving invention the AgriNet. Meanwhile, our 13th cohort of the University of Iowa Venture School wrapped up with more entrepreneurs ready to move from idea to action.

Our local business community keeps reaching new heights. One of our North Iowa entrepreneurs completed the prestigious Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program this spring. And as proud business counselors, we watched Venture School alum Billie Asmus, founder of Repaint Studios, take the stage as a panelist at the annual luncheon of the Des Moines Business Record's *InnovationIowa*, sharing her story with audiences across the state. By the end of June, our small business counselors had counseled 259 clients with 974 hours of counseling.

From elementary schoolers to seasoned business owners, the entrepreneurial journey is alive and well here. These successes are made possible through statewide collaborations, our integrated Small Business Development Center office, and the generous support of local stakeholders who serve as advisors and mentors. Their guidance gives aspiring entrepreneurs the tools and confidence they need to build and grow businesses right here in rural North Iowa.

We can't wait to see what the next six months bring!

Candi Karsjens, DBA
Director, NIACC Pappajohn Center



2025 Youth Entrepreneurial Academy

For one week in June, four North Iowa high school students stepped into the world of entrepreneurship and walked away with real-world business skills, mentorship, and prize money to support their dreams. The NIACC John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center hosted its annual **Youth Entrepreneurial Academy (YEA)** from June 16–20, bringing together a select group of students ready to explore the possibilities of building a business from the ground up. Now in its long-running tradition, YEA offers high school students the opportunity to learn what it takes to think like an entrepreneur and lead with confidence.

Each student received a \$500 scholarship to North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC), generously sponsored by John Pappajohn. The program itself is free to attend, thanks to the support of the John K. and Luise V. Hanson Foundation.

Throughout the week, students engaged in hands-on learning guided by Raegan Hanson, Youth Entrepreneurship Coordinator at the Pappajohn Center, and facilitated by Ashley Page, Director of Entrepreneurship Programs & Client Success. The students explored essential business topics including customer discovery, startup costs, branding, and sales projections, while developing their own business model canvas and refining their ideas into actionable plans.

Guest speakers, including local entrepreneurs, helped the students connect theory to real-world experience. Leadership activities and group discussions encouraged collaboration and helped build the confidence and communication skills necessary for entrepreneurship.

The Academy concluded with a pitch competition on June 23. Each student submitted an executive summary outlining their company's mission, operations, and financial outlook. They then pitched their ideas to a panel of business leaders: **Brook Boehmler** (NIACC SBDC), **Stacy Doughan** (Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce), and **Caleb Renner** (Renner Ag Solutions).

The students competed for a total of **\$1,600 in cash prizes**, and each business idea reflected the creativity and drive of the next generation of innovators.

1st Place – Reagan Lindquist, Dale's Drive-In Theater – \$750

2nd Place – Isabella Abben, Bubbly Sweet Paws – \$500

3rd Place – Nickolas Bass, Smokey Rubber Photography – \$250

4th Place – Shelby Smith, Jolene's Food Truck – \$100

YEA is one of the cornerstones of the Pappajohn Center's mission to foster entrepreneurial thinking in North Iowa's youth. By providing access, mentorship, and meaningful experiences, the Youth Entrepreneurial Academy empowers students to explore their ideas with purpose and confidence.



From left: Reagan Lindquist, Bella Abben, Nickolas Bass, and Shelby Smith

IDEA CAMP Inspires Middle School Students

The NIACC Pappajohn Center & SBDC introduced a new entrepreneurial education program for middle school students this year. **IDEA Camp** helps students practice some of life's key components: innovation, discovery, entrepreneurship, and achievement. This hands-on program guides young innovators who are eager to explore entrepreneurship, develop creative problem-solving skills, and build confidence in their ability to create and innovate. At IDEA Camp, students had a full day of activities where they learned the key principles of entrepreneurship, created a business plan, and presented their business in a Pitch Competition. The inaugural IDEA Camp was held on the NIACC campus on February 17, 2025 to coincide with the observance of President's Day. 28 students from 12 schools across North Iowa attended. Three student teams were awarded the top prizes:

1st Place - Preston Gniadecki

2nd Place - Aaliyah Dodge

3rd Place - Ellie Borcharding

Two additional IDEA Camps were held over the summer break, at NIACC in Mason City and at the NIACC Charles City Career Center. A total of 14 students attended the summer sessions.

Mason City IDEA Camp Winning Teams:

1st Place - Corbin Uhde, Elliott Summerfield and Parker Pals

2nd Place - Anya Hardee

3rd Place - Gabe Elmore and Devin Dettmer

Runners Up: Will Phillips and Elliott Summerfield

Charles City IDEA Camp Winning Teams:

1st Place - Bennett Jung, Vivienne Rafkin, and Grady Rottinghaus

2nd Place - Merron Murray

Runners Up: Cameron Lessin, Laker Kubik, Blair Walker, Max Schmidt, and Hazel Hansen

IDEA Camp is one of many youth entrepreneurship initiatives undertaken by the NIACC Pappajohn Center. Raegan Hanson, NIACC Pappajohn Center Youth Entrepreneurship Coordinator, said "Teaching entrepreneurship is an investment in our students – the entrepreneurial mindset drives innovation, fuels economic growth, and empowers the next generation to turn bold ideas into lasting impact. When young minds learn to think like entrepreneurs, they build the skills and confidence to redefine what's possible and shape the future."



Caleb Renner Wins Top Prize at 2025 Pappajohn Student Venture Competition

North Iowa Area Community College student Caleb Renner was named one of the top three winners at the John Pappajohn Student Entrepreneurial Venture Competition. The 2025 John Pappajohn Student Entrepreneurial Venture Competition was held on Friday, April 25, at the University of Iowa Pappajohn Education and Events Center in Des Moines. The final presentation round consisted of 18 students presenting 15 business ideas to a panel of judges.

"John Pappajohn launched this student competition 25 years ago, and entrepreneurial students continue to innovate and present the most amazing businesses year after year. The competition brings student entrepreneurs together from across the state. They enjoy the opportunity to connect and support each other. To make it to the finals of this competition is a great achievement for these young entrepreneurs" commented Judi Eyles, director of the Iowa State University John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center.

Student entrepreneurs entering the competition came from Drake University, Iowa State University, North Iowa Area Community College, the University of Iowa, and the University of Northern Iowa. The following three businesses emerged as winners of this year's competition, each winning venture receiving \$5,000.

Renner Ag Solutions — Caleb Renner, North Iowa Area Community College

Caleb Renner is a 5th generation farmer from Klemme, IA and the innovator behind the AgriNet, a revolutionary technology that cleans out grain bins with the press of a button. The AgriNet provides a safe alternative to grain bin sweeps, eliminating the need for farmers to enter the grain bin during the clean-out process and saving both lives and limbs.

Archaneon Supplements — Tyler Graham, University of Iowa

Archaneon Supplements is a supplement brand created by lifters and backed by science.

Casmium — Henry Shires, Iowa State University

Casmium is an intuitive software platform for youth sports that provides statistics collection and analytics tools.

Other finalists, each receiving \$500, included Davis Stelzer (University of Northern Iowa), North Lindell (University of Northern Iowa), Noah Bronk (University of Northern Iowa), Josh Hanson (NIACC), the team of Christopher Madsen, David Roman, and Ethan Kudej (NIACC), Gabe Howard (Drake University), Dorian Boyland (Drake University), Diego Munoz (Drake University), the team of Alana Corwin and Jamal Beavers (Iowa State University), Spenser Leise (Iowa State University), Michal Brzus (University of Iowa), and Emmanuel Akor (University of Iowa).

The competition is a collaborative effort among the Iowa John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Centers located at Drake University, Iowa State University, North Iowa Area Community College, the University of Iowa, and the University of Northern Iowa.

Caleb Renner
and Candi Karsjens





NIACC Pappajohn Center Hosts Iowa Student Entrepreneurship Summit

The NIACC John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center hosted the second annual Iowa Student Entrepreneurship Summit on April 11-12, 2025 at locations in Mason City and Clear Lake, IA. This dynamic event brings together business majors and student entrepreneurs from Iowa's community colleges, private colleges and the University of Northern Iowa. The Student Entrepreneurship Summit included a student pitch competition followed by a day of interactive workshops designed to support personal growth, leadership development, and entrepreneurial thinking—whether they are starting a business or planning to bring innovation and creativity into the workplace. The event featured keynote addresses from Brad Barber of Cabin Coffee Co. and Dan Gleason of TitanPro.

The Iowa Student Entrepreneurship Summit is the official pathway to the Pappajohn Student Venture Competition, where students pitch real business ideas for funding and advancement to the finals. Eight students from NIACC, Drake University, and the University of Northern Iowa participated in the Summit Pitch Competition.

Three NIACC students won a \$500 Finalist prize and advanced to the Pappajohn Student Venture Competition: Josh Hanson (*American Rustguard*), Caleb Renner (*Renner Ag Solutions*), Christopher Madsen with partners David Roman & Ethan Kudej (*Blast Off Power Washers*).

Two Drake University students won a \$500 Finalist prize and advanced to the Pappajohn Student Venture Competition: Dorian Boyland (*IonFlow*), Gabe Howard (*Nautilus Dynamics*), Diego Munoz (*Valor Storage*).

Two additional awards were presented to pitch competitors: Heart & Hustle Award, \$250 Prize – Karleen Roberts, *Karl-Bean's Coffee*. Fueling the Future Award, \$250 Prize – Holden Mathis, *Mathis Speed Shop*

The Iowa Student Entrepreneurship Summit was free to attend thanks to the generous support of local sponsors, ensuring that cost is never a barrier to students interested in pursuing entrepreneurship and leadership development.

Student Award & Hospitality Sponsors: Ag Ventures Alliance, NIACC Business & Workforce Solutions, Sukup Manufacturing Co.

Tourism Marketing Sponsor: Visit Mason City

Expo Sponsors: Clear Lake Bank & Trust, North Iowa Corridor EDC, First Citizens Bank, Bank Iowa

In-Kind Sponsors: Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, City of Clear Lake, City of Mason City, City of Mason City Parks & Recreation, Mason City Chamber of Commerce

The Summit was hosted by the NIACC John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center in partnership with the Great Plains Entrepreneurial Consortium (GPEC). GPEC is a group of private colleges and universities working together and sharing resources to collaboratively scale and infuse an entrepreneurial mindset to foster entrepreneurship education, economic expansion, and job creation in technology-focused economic development.

Entrepreneur of the Month

The NIACC Pappajohn Center & SBDC is proud to recognize an inspiring North Iowa entrepreneur every month. Read their stories on our website and discover the stories behind some of our region's businesses.



[Repaint Studios](#)



[Gabby's Gluten Free Goods](#)



[K2 Enterprises](#)



[Home Style](#)



[Georgette Bridal](#)



[Winan Creek Barn](#)

Local Entrepreneurs Gain World-Class Business Training with the GoldmanSachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program

Kian Gibson of Hampton graduated from the prestigious GoldmanSachs 10,000 Small Businesses program as a member of the Spring 2025 cohort. Gibson is a jeweler at Christiansen Jewelry, a family-owned company that offers fine jewelry, gemstones and diamonds, giftware, watches, gold and silver bullion, design and repair services. Christiansen Jewelry was founded in 1960. Gibson enrolled in the 10,000 Small Business Program to polish the skills needed to join the family business.

The GoldmanSachs 10,000 Small Businesses program is an intensive multi-week training where small business owners connect with a network of peers, receive one-on-one business advice from experienced mentors, and learn valuable skills to help grow their business. Business owners will learn about access to financial capital and practical business skills, including negotiations, employee management, and marketing.

"I would recommend GoldmanSachs 10KSB to any business owner," Gibson said. "The GoldmanSachs program gave me foundational knowledge to ask the right questions. It gave me a better perspective of what I need to pay attention to in order to run my business successfully. I met so many peers in the group and I now have a vast network of support for the future. The GoldmanSachs program is worth the time that I dedicated to it, because I invested in my business!"

Learn more about the GoldmanSachs 10,000 Small Businesses program at www.iowa10ksb.com.



Venture School Helps North Iowa Entrepreneurs & Innovators Succeed

North Iowa entrepreneurs are achieving success with the assistance of the NIACC Pappajohn Center cohort of the University of Iowa Venture School. Venture School is the premiere business training program in Iowa, emphasizing real-world entrepreneurship and innovation based on a leading-edge curriculum. Participants learn to overcome the chaos and uncertainty of creating new ventures by conducting customer discovery, market research and developing their foundational business model in real-time.

Many of North Iowa's Venture School graduates have gone on to make impressive moves with the businesses they developed and refined during the program. The \$100,000 top prize at the InnoVenture Challenge, a rigorous pitch competition hosted by the InnoVenture Iowa Fund, has been won by North Iowa Venture School grads every year since the competition's inception. Jayson Ryner, founder of ReEnvision Ag, an innovative regenerative agriculture company, won in 2023. Billie Asmus, founder of Repaint Studios, won in 2024 for her eco-friendly invention the Repaint Tray.

Venture School success is not just defined by pitch competition wins, however. Venture School graduates are going on to grow their businesses to make a global impact. Mitchell Hora, CEO of Continuum Ag, graduated from the Spring 2019 Venture School cohort. Venture School helped Hora realize that Continuum Ag could do more than he'd originally envisioned. Continuum Ag has differentiated itself by working directly with farmers, helping modify the way they tend the land to increase overall soil health and facilitating a profitable transition to regenerative agriculture. Today, his company has a global footprint extending as far as South Africa and was announced as one of the winners of the prestigious 2021 Cisco Global Problem Solver Challenge.

The NIACC Pappajohn Center is now accepting applications for the Fall 2025 cohort of the University of Iowa Venture School program. The Fall 2025 program will begin with an in-person orientation session on Thursday, September 4, 2025. Classes will be held online via Zoom on Thursdays September 11 through October 16, 5:30-9:00pm. The Venture School program will culminate with the Venture School Launch Day pitch competition, held in-person at NIACC on October 23, 2025, where entrepreneurs will have the opportunity to compete for cash prizes. The cost for the program is \$299.



Venture School participants are assigned a local entrepreneur as their coach who will help advise and guide them as they learn to master the startup process. Participating teams will be eligible to compete for cash awards both locally and at the state level during the Venture School launch day at EntreFEST 2026.

To apply for the Fall cohort, visit www.venture-school.com and select the Mason City cohort in the drop-down menu. The deadline to apply is **August 27, 2025**. Contact Ashley Page at ashley.page@niacc.edu with questions or if you are a local entrepreneur interested in becoming a Venture School coach. Learn more about the North Iowa Venture School cohort at www.pappajohncenter.com/ventureschool.

“Had I not gone through Venture School, I would've wasted my time marketing to the wrong people.”
- Billie Asmus, Repaint Studios

Upcoming Events

Business Essentials: Entrepreneurship Essentials Series I

August 21, 2025 | 5:30pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

Business Essentials is the cornerstone of your entrepreneurial journey, offering practical guidance and expert advice to set you on the right path. Explore the intricacies of starting a business, uncover the common pitfalls that lead to failure, and gain invaluable insights into what not to do. [Registration is required.](#)

Marketing Essentials: Entrepreneurship Essentials Series II

November 6, 2025 | 5:30pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

Marketing Essentials delves into the dynamic world of marketing and branding, focusing on the essential task of creating a strategic approach. Elevate your brand and connect with your audience through a strategic blend of digital and traditional marketing methods and develop a well-crafted marketing strategy. [Registration is required.](#)

Financial Essentials: Entrepreneurship Essentials Series III

November 13, 2025 | 5:30pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

Financial Essentials explores the critical steps required to master your business's finances. Your business's financial health is a crucial determinant of its success. In Financial Essentials we demystify financial statements, empowering you to interpret and leverage these vital tools for decision-making. Discover how to create accurate projections that guide your business growth and unlock valuable insights into your company's fiscal well-being. [Registration is required.](#)

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