
IMPACT REPORT

Spring 2026



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SPRING

2026





STARTUP STUDIO

SPRING TOURS



This spring, Startup Studio students gained firsthand insight from entrepreneurs across retail, manufacturing, events, hospitality, food service, and creative industries. In January, Jacque Cranson of Small Town Famous, Maggie Esch of Vaughan's Printing Company, and Sidy Sissoko of LD Coffee Roasters shared lessons on scaling teams, protecting brand identity, and launching a business while in college.

In February, students toured Blue Print Engines, Saylor Screenprinting, and The Knot Shop. Founder Norris Marshall reflected on growing Blue Print Engines from a one-person operation to more than 300 employees, emphasizing the importance of staying grounded in core values and seeking mentorship from experienced industry peers. Kyle Saylor, founder of Saylor Screenprinting, The Knot Shop, and The Kyle Saylor Band, encouraged students to build businesses around strong relationships and a seamless customer experience.

Students also helped shape the semester's learning by selecting industries and business owners they wanted to engage with, including the owners of Barista's Daily Grind and Celebration on Central. One student also attended the MarkeTech Conference, expanding Startup Studio's exposure to regional innovation and entrepreneurial best practices.

Legal and accounting matters are top of mind for students as they near graduation. Startup Studio met with representatives from Jacobsen Orr (law firm) and Contryman Associates (accounting firm) to discuss best practices in the first year of business ownership.



Fallon Wells (pictured right) took over ownership of her hometown floral shop (rebranded as [Flourish Floral Company](#)) on May 1st and graduated from UNK one week later. Stay tuned for updates from her journey.



Table of Perspectives

Inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s tradition of intimate, idea-driven gatherings, Table of Perspectives creates a relaxed, welcoming space for meaningful conversation. Over a shared meal, students and business leaders exchange experiences, challenge assumptions, and consider how business and education can better serve individuals and communities. Each guest is given three minutes to share a “pit” and a “peach”—a challenge (“pit”) and a moment of pride or joy (“peach”) related to business or education.

New this semester, smaller group sizes were introduced to facilitate more individualized networking opportunities between students and business professionals following the roundtable discussion and exchange of perspectives. This luncheon series invites students to reflect on the moments that have shaped their lives, and to recognize that the path to success often includes a few bumps along the way.

“The meaningful conversations encouraged us to question preconceived ideas and think more critically. I also saw a theme of overcoming; almost everyone had a happy ending to their pit. I learned that persevering through challenges and staying committed to your dreams and passions can help lead you to where you are meant to be.
Katherine, student participant



If you are interested in **participating** in an upcoming Table of Perspectives luncheon, please contact Kelcey Wetzel at wetzelk@unk.edu.





LIGHT.IT.UP

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AWARDS

22

Nominees



The Light It Up Awards ceremony celebrates the vision, innovation, and hard work of entrepreneurs and advocates who are making a difference at UNK and throughout greater Nebraska.

Student Entrepreneur Award

Fallon Wells, *Flourish Floral Company*
Central City

Emerging Entrepreneur Award

Connor Streit, *PolyPath Med*
Grand Island

Excellence in Entrepreneurship Award

Cody Lawson, *1to1 Technologies, LLC*
Central City

Entrepreneurship Advocate Award

Caleb Pollard, *Valley Economic Development & Ord Area Chamber of Commerce*
Ord

Alumni Entrepreneur Award

Noah Young, *The Shiloh Farm*
Kenesaw



40

People in Attendance



5

Winners





LIGHT IT UP ENTREPRENUERSHIP AWARDS NOMINEES



EXCELLENCE IN
ENTREPRENEURSHIP



STUDENT ENTREPRENEUR



EMERGING ENTREPRENEUR



ENTREPRENEURSHIP
ADVOCATE



ALUMNI ENTREPRENEUR

Youth & Community Presentations

CERD offers hands-on workshops and educational programming throughout the year to support students, small businesses, and rural communities.

Presentations are designed for two tracks: youth (high school students) and community. Snippets about two popular presentations, Create Your Brand and Entrepreneurial Mindset, are included on this page.

What is a brand? Why does a personal brand matter?

Everyone has a story to tell, they just need to know how to tell their story in an engaging and succinct way. “Create Your Brand” is a quick interactive presentation designed to get students thinking about what their strengths are and how they find fulfillment.

Youth Topics

Marketing Insights – Why People Buy
Mock Business Plan Exercise
Entrepreneurial Mindset
Create Your Brand

Community Topics

Business Plan Development
General Business Startup Tips
Networking (Business Connections)
Marketing Insights – Why People Buy



Think like an entrepreneur.

The entrepreneurial mindset can be used as a framework for creativity, problem-solving, and opportunity recognition.

Through engaging examples and discussion, students explore how initiative, adaptability, and innovative thinking can support success in school, careers, and future ventures.



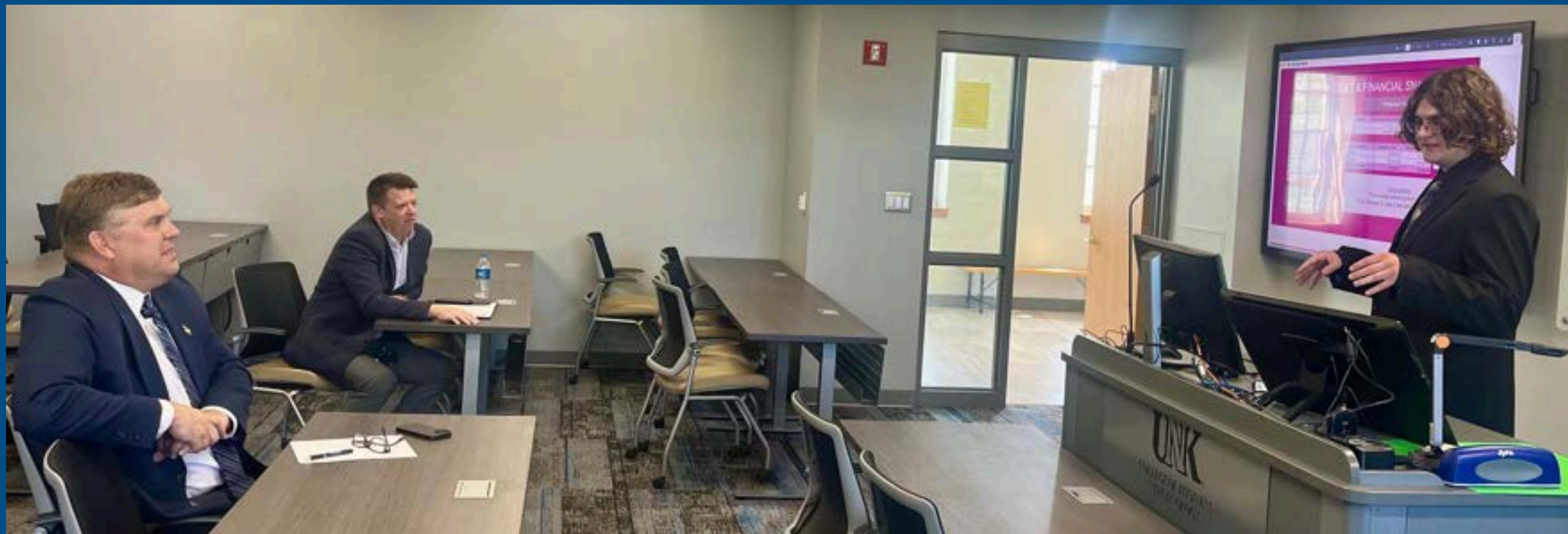
Contact Sara Bennett to schedule a presentation at bennetsa2@unk.edu.

Business Startup Independent Study

Students seeking hands-on entrepreneurial experience can enroll in BSAD 476: Business Startup, an independent study course designed to guide them through launching their own ventures. In this course, students develop and test their business ideas, learning through experimentation, reflection, and continuous feedback. They gain practical experience connecting with potential customers, partners, and investors while building a strong foundation for a viable enterprise.

A key component of the course is guided reflection. Students integrate knowledge from prior coursework to evaluate their progress, refine their strategies, and determine next steps for advancing their ventures.

The course culminates in a final presentation in which students share insights gained from their research and activities throughout the semester. Presentations are delivered to a panel that includes the instructor, a CBT administrator, and an industry mentor or banking professional. Students highlight industry insights, lessons learned, and their plans for moving their businesses forward.



Skills Learned



Customer problem identification



Financial analysis



Communication with industry experts



Strategic thinking

Customer Discovery Pre-Work Assignment



Task

You will conduct 20 interviews with potential customers to validate their problem-solution fit and gain insights into their needs, preferences, and behaviors.

For this assignment, you will prepare a list of **open-ended questions** that address the **problem** you are trying to solve, the **solution** you plan to offer, and the **value proposition** your product or service can deliver. You will explore **potential target customer segments** and determine which segments are best to target.

Graduate of Leadership UNK

CERD's Event Coordinator

Kelcey Wetzel



Leadership UNK exposes participants to leadership opportunities at UNK and in the Kearney area, enhances their leadership skills, and encourages them to accept leadership roles in the future.

The program also increases their knowledge of the university system and gives them an opportunity to network with classmates, speakers, and others while discussing issues pertinent to campus and leadership development.



Congratulations

LOOKING AHEAD

What's to come in Fall 2026

Save The Dates

October 19-20 **Two-Day Trek**

November 4 **Big Idea UNK**



Support CERD

Creating entrepreneurial experiences outside the classroom is the focus of the Center for Entrepreneurship & Rural Development.

We aim to connect students to the people, places, and opportunities that will help them succeed as future entrepreneurs. If you have a passion for entrepreneurship and want to support students through your time, talent, or treasure, please connect with our office.

308-865-8199

unk.edu/cerd

[Support future entrepreneurs](#)

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