

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



Refresh. Revive. Replenish Your Entrepreneurial Toolkit!

Excelsior Springs, Missouri September 30 - October 2



Breakout Session 1 - 1:45 - 2:30 p.m. - Wednesday, Oct. 1

1. Innovative Financing Strategies for Downtown Revitalization

Presented by Laura Mize, Mark Spohn, and Lyndsey Baxter

This session will explore how communities can leverage the 353-tax abatement program, low-interest loans, and facade grants to drive investment, encourage redevelopment, and support small business growth. With a real-world case study and practical takeaways, this session will equip you with financing tools that stimulate economic growth, encourage downtown living, and create a vibrant, sustainable district.



Laura Mize



Mark Spohn



Lyndsey Baxter

2. Increasing Your Town's Entrepreneurial Opportunities through Tourism - Presented by Richard Proffer

The presentation will cover the "I Rural Tourism Toolkit" and its implementation process, from committee formation to community meeting to the implementation of the plan to follow up to ensure success. To illustrate the methodology, examples of rural towns who have been using the toolkit since its inception in 2021 to towns just getting started will be used. We will discuss success stories of increased new businesses based on the project, highlighting the positive impact of the program and instilling hope for the future.



Richard Proffer

3. Using Strategic Doing to Transform the Early Child Care Landscape

Presented by Sarah Kennedy, Je T'aime Taylor, Toni Sturdevant, Paula Neth

Starting Early unites providers, educators, and families to influence policy and drive positive changes in early childhood education. Their goal is to increase the number of individuals entering the field by removing barriers to obtaining credentials and degrees. They emphasize the importance of a vibrant early childhood education system and aim to provide quality options for all families with a dedicated, high-quality workforce. The coalition partnered with MU Extension to use the Strategic Doing process to create momentum in their goals toward building an effective early childhood education workforce. Strategic Doing is a collaborative practice that helps organizations develop and implement strategies in open networks, leverage existing assets and foster innovation through structured conversations. Discover the impactful work happening in western Missouri and explore opportunities for expansion into other communities.



Sarah Kennedy



Je T'aime Taylor



Paula Neth



Dr. Toni Sturdivant

4. Power Up Your Marketing: Strategies for Digital & Traditional Success

Presented by Courtney Cole

In this session, Courtney will help entrepreneurs discover essential marketing tools and gain ready-to-use insights to effectively boost their business. Whether you're looking to enhance your online presence, refine your branding, or maximize traditional marketing strategies, this session will provide practical, actionable takeaways to help you grow and succeed.



Courtney Cole

5. Ecosystem Building: Strengthening Community Coalitions for Entrepreneurial Growth

Presented by Tiffany Henry

This workshop is designed for chambers of commerce, economic developers, and community leaders seeking to cultivate a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem. Participants will explore strategies for cross-sector collaboration, identifying and leveraging existing resources, and creating an infrastructure that supports innovation and business growth. By the end of the workshop, participants will leave with a clear roadmap for strengthening their local ecosystem, practical tools for coalition-building, and a network of peers committed to advancing entrepreneurship as a key driver of economic growth.



Tiffany Henry

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



Breakout Session 2 - 3:00 - 3:45 p.m. - Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2025

1. Marketing + Downtown = Another Success Story! - Presented by Gus Wagner

Gus will share his personal and professional dedication to Downtown Jefferson City, which has created a win-win scenario for local businesses, community organizations, and economic development efforts. Attendees will gain insight into how strategic marketing, civic engagement, and business leadership can intersect to drive meaningful, sustainable success. With real-world examples and actionable takeaways, Gus will empower audiences to leverage their own expertise for community impact.



Gus Wagner

2. The Power of Entrepreneurship - Presented by Becca Castro

There is a real power behind entrepreneur-led economic development. In this session, participants will come to understand that entrepreneur-led economic development creates a diversified economy not reliant on one business or industry. That means communities are better prepared to ride the wave of uncertainty that comes with economic downturns. Entrepreneurship builds the fabric of community because small business owners are more likely to give back through mentorship or supporting local initiatives. Entrepreneurship is one of the few wealth-building activities that is open to all people: it is a strong tool for building economic inclusion and opportunity and a key part of community development around the businesses that emerging neighborhoods. Not only will participants consider the power of entrepreneurship they might even remember their "why" for doing what they do!



Becca Castro

3. Grant Writing as a Team: Collaborative Strategies for Winning Funding

Presented by Melinda Mehaffy, Sonya Morgan, and Molly McGovern

In this session, learn how Excelsior Springs has leveraged partnerships between local government, economic development organizations, businesses, and nonprofits to secure funding for impactful projects. We'll explore best practices for assembling a grant team, leveraging diverse expertise, and aligning proposals with funder priorities. Attendees will leave with actionable strategies to build stronger grant applications by engaging the right stakeholders, maximizing available resources, and presenting a unified community vision. Whether you're a nonprofit leader, small business owner, or municipal official, this session will equip you with tools to turn great ideas into funded projects.



Melinda Mehaffy

4. Refreshing Our Focus on Local: Supporting Microbusinesses for Thriving Community

Presented by Marci Goodwin and Leigh Ann Brown

We know that a vibrant town square or business corridor is one that is full of diverse, local businesses, like boutiques, cafes, yoga studios, hair salons-not corporate chains. But the reality is that it can be difficult to find those ideal micro-businesses that are ready to open a storefront. Emerging research showing that the appetite for business ownership is strong in rural communities, but they are falling through the cracks of traditional economic development strategies. Join us to learn what these aspiring business owners want and how to implement micro-economic development strategies that engage and support them at the earliest stages, thereby creating a pipeline of viable businesses to grow into your town square and beyond.



Marci Goodwin

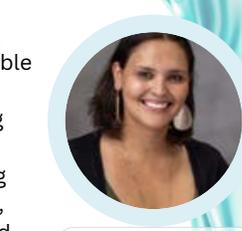


Leigh Ann Brown

5. Building Entrepreneurs from the Beginning

Presented by Janine Castillo, Evie-Lyn Lewis, and Sadie Davis

This workshop will provide attendees with effective strategies for nurturing young entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of building connections across generations, communities, and available resources. Participants will gain insights into creating win-win solutions that foster the growth of emerging entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on rural areas. A college and career advisor, along with two of her students, will share firsthand experiences and lessons learned while fostering entrepreneurial success in rural Missouri. The workshop will highlight various experiential learning projects that have made a significant impact, including Reality Day, Hornet Tank, Mock Interviews, and Step into Your Future. These projects are designed to equip students with real-world skills and opportunities, helping them bridge the gap between education and entrepreneurship. Join us to learn how to create supportive environments that inspire and empower the next generation of entrepreneurs.



Janine Castillo



Evie-Lyn Lewis



Sadie Davis

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



Breakout Session 3 - 4:15 - 5:00 p.m. - Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2025

1. Entrepreneurial Success Starts Here: Removing Roadblocks to Growth - Presented by Deana Imhoff

This presentation examines the common obstacles that entrepreneurs face, including self-doubt, limiting beliefs, and fears of failure. It will also address external challenges such as securing funding, building the right team, and adapting to shifts in the industry. Additionally, the session will touch on strategies for maintaining a healthy work-life balance while growing a successful business. By identifying and overcoming these roadblocks, you can unlock your full potential and create a thriving, resilient venture. Whether you are just starting out or looking to scale your business, this session will provide valuable insights and tools needed to break through barriers and achieve lasting success.



Deana Imhoff

2. Rethinking Customer Connections – Finding, Engaging and Keeping the Right Customers

Presented by TaylorAnn Washburn, MS

In today's fast-paced marketplace, understanding your target customer is more critical than ever. This workshop will challenge participants to rethink how they identify, attract and retain the customers that drive their business' success. By evaluating shifts in consumer behavior and new marketing technologies, participants will uncover opportunities to connect with their ideal target customer. The workshop will share practical, actionable tips for defining target customers and developing tailored approaches to turn these individuals into repeat customers. Through interactive exercises and examples, participants will gain tools to explore new approaches to customer relationship-building.



TaylorAnn Washburn

3. Shift Happens: How to Turn Life's Detours into Entrepreneurial Triumphs - Presented by Natasha Harris

Life's unexpected challenges can feel like roadblocks, but they can also be opportunities for transformation. In this session, I'll take attendees on a journey through my personal and professional trials, sharing how I shifted my mindset, rebuilt my systems and created a thriving entrepreneurial path. By the end of the session, participants will be equipped with the tools and inspiration to turn their own obstacles into steppingstones for success.



Natasha Harris

4. Detecting New Businesses: Is Your Community Thriving with Startups?

Presented by Alan Spell and Luke Dietterle

Are new businesses starting in your community, and how would you know? Learn how to find data on young businesses in your community to better understand your entrepreneurial landscape, recent trends, and how you compare to other communities. Use this information to educate your stakeholders and help guide local business support efforts. Data sources will shed light on new business in your area, and we'll walk you through how to get this information and quick ways to use it in your communications.



Alan Spell



Luke Dietterle

5. Beyond Entrepreneurship: Leadership that brings the whole community together

Presented by Mel Lambert and Elias Corpas

Discover how leadership can drive community impact and unlock new possibilities beyond traditional entrepreneurship opportunities. We'll discuss our 10-month leadership course put together by the library and a community connection that empowers 25 participants to collaborate in teams, solving real-world challenges faced by local nonprofits. Through this unique approach, entrepreneurs can expand their vision, develop innovative problem-solving skills, and build meaningful connections that go beyond their usual networks. Drawing on insights from diverse community leaders—including entrepreneurs, corporate executives, nonprofit directors, and community developers—this course rethinks leadership beyond business. Explore how engaging with your community and learning from leaders across all sectors can reshape your leadership journey to reveal unexpected avenues for growth.



Mel Lambert



Elias Corpas

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



Breakout Session 4 - 9:45 - 10:30 a.m. - Thursday, Oct. 2, 2025

1. Inclusive Entrepreneurship: Breaking the Barriers

Presented by Taylor Clark, M.Ed., and Dwayne T. James, P.E., Ed.D.

This program provides evidenced-based practices like those of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship to common barriers for entrepreneurs seeking to unlock their talents and potential. The strategies discussed will allow entrepreneurs to foster a community initiative centered around inclusive entrepreneurship, motivate those with an entrepreneurial mindset that need help getting started, and encourage entrepreneurs who have had businesses fail in the past. This presentation also aims to empower the youth to have an entrepreneurial mindset to create more opportunity for the community's future economic growth.



Taylor Clark



Dr. Dwayne T. James

2. Creating Effective Capabilities Statements for Government Contracting - Presented by Jason Cole, PhD

This program is designed to help small businesses and entrepreneurs understand the critical role of a Capability Statement in securing government contracts. Participants will learn the key elements needed to create a compelling and professional Capability Statement that effectively communicates their business's core competencies, differentiators, and past performance to government agencies. Through real-world examples, the course will walk attendees through best practices for formatting, saving, and tailoring their statements to different agencies and contracting opportunities. Additionally, participants will gain insights into the registration process, certifications, and contact information that enhance credibility and responsiveness.



Jason Cole

3. Overcoming Self-Doubt & Imposter Syndrome for Entrepreneurial Success - Presented by Dr. Kasi Lacey

In this interactive session, discover how to break free from imposter syndrome and self-doubt to unlock your full entrepreneurial potential. Learn practical strategies to reframe negative thinking, challenge limiting beliefs, and cultivate unshakable confidence. Through engaging activities and real-world examples, participants will identify common triggers of self-doubt, develop actionable tools to overcome them, and learn how to leverage confidence as catalyst for innovation and growth. Perfect for entrepreneurs feeling "stuck" or hesitant to pursue new opportunities, this session empowers attendees to rethink their approach to success and lead with authenticity.



Dr. Kasi Lacey

4. Building Community: Reimagine Coworking - Presented by Heather Heckroot and Bob Martin

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a tapestry of influences and resources that say your hometown is committed to supporting start-ups and small business growth. In this presentation, you will learn how to weave an entrepreneurial ecosystem that leverages shared workspaces as cornerstones to those efforts, why they are important and what role they play. Every community has the capacity to launch a co-working space. Building these spaces – beacons of creativity and innovation – is more about attitude than aptitude.



Heather Heckroot



Bob Martin

5. Beyond the Block Party: Where Events Meet Economic Impact - Presented by Lyndsey Baxter

Events are more than just fun gatherings—they are strategic tools for economic development, tourism, and community engagement. This session will explore how Downtown Excelsior Partnership (DEP) has successfully transformed its downtown district through events that celebrate history, culture, and local businesses. Attendees will learn how to: Develop events that align with a community's unique identity, engage local businesses and stakeholders to maximize participation, revenue, and leverage partnerships and sponsorships to make events financially sustainable. Utilize creative marketing, social media, and storytelling to boost attendance. Measure impact and track economic benefits to ensure long-term success. From large-scale festivals like BBQ & Fly-In on the River to niche experiences like the Chocolate Tour, this session will showcase real-world examples, challenges overcome, and best practices for communities looking to level up their downtown event strategies.



Lyndsey Baxter

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



Breakout Session 5 - 11:00 - 11:45 a.m. - Thursday, Oct. 2, 2025

1. Slow Productivity: Redefining Success for Entrepreneurs

Presented by Sunitha Bosecker, M.Ed., LPC

In this session, we will challenge traditional productivity norms and explore how intentional slowness and reframing your expectations can lead to greater focus, creativity, and sustainable success. Rather than seeking a rigid work-life balance, attendees will learn how to define productivity on their own terms, align their work with their values, and create rhythms that enhance both personal and professional well-being.



Sunitha Bosecker

2. Second String Income Strategies for Small Business Success

Presented by Savannah Nave, Susan Blaser, Rynne Wilkins, Phil Scherer

This session will explore how small business owners can maximize their spaces, talents, and customer base to generate additional income. Attendees will leave with practical ideas for diversifying their income, strengthening financial stability, and maximizing their business potential—helping them create a more resilient and adaptable operation.



Savanna Nave



Susan Blaser



Rynne Wilkins



Phil Scherer

3. Special Topic: Hosting a CEC Conference - Presented by Deana Dothage

Are you interested in hosting the CEC Conference in your community? This session will cover the purpose of the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities, the Conference, along with the mechanics and reciprocal responsibilities of the host community and MU Extension.



Deana Dothage

4. Building Social Capital to Strengthen Rural Communities - Presented by Mallory Rahe, Ph.D.

Social capital—the relationships between individuals—can create access to other forms of capital and support local economic development. Strong bonding ties, or the clustering of similar individuals, can create trust and foster teams to lead local initiatives. Strong bridging ties, which connect diverse individuals, can increase access to resources to complete projects. In this session, participants will hear how other rural communities have used social capital in their economic development efforts. We will explore how measures of social capital vary in rural Missouri and how the data does or doesn't reflect participant's experiences. The session will include a brainstorming activity to discuss opportunities to build more social capital based on a community's strengths and leader's economic development goals.



Dr. Mallory Rahe

5. That WAS a genius idea....now pivot. A rebrand story. - Presented by Heather Mincer

Ever had a business idea that felt like pure genius... until it wasn't? Same. The truth is, what works today might not work tomorrow. Customers change, markets shift, and let's be honest—sometimes, we just outgrow our own ideas. I'll share how I took my business from Naked Chicks Pasture (yes, really) to Yes Honey, and why rethinking, reframing, and (gulp) pivoting could be the golden ticket to long-term success. Whether it's a small tweak, tracking customer trends, getting up to date on technology, or a full-blown rebrand, embracing change isn't admitting failure—it's how you win. So, if you need encouragement to shake things up, stand out, and take your business to the next level, Yes Honey- our story will inspire you! Let's turn those "genius" ideas into something even sweeter.



Heather Mincer