



CENTER for INNOVATION
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP



The Coastal Leader in Inspiring & Educating Entrepreneurs

Annual Report

July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026

We welcome



**Bold builders.
Future-focused mindsets.
Boundless potential.**

These are the outcomes we are intentionally working towards at the UNCW Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE). This year, we deepened our role as a catalyst for connection, creativity and growth across our university and region.

From launching the Wilmington Innovation Forum to bridge UNCW research with community opportunity to strengthening Ecolnnovate as a platform for real-world problem solving to introducing Thrive — a new initiative designed to unlock the potential within existing small businesses, made possible through support from the Wells Fargo Foundation — our work reflects a simple belief: **innovation happens when people, ideas, and resources come together with purpose.**

That momentum is only possible because of you: entrepreneurs, mentors, volunteers, sponsors, donors, community partners and UNCW faculty, staff and students. All of you are part of a shared ecosystem that believes in the transformative power of entrepreneurship. I'm continually inspired by what happens when we invest in people's potential and create space for new ideas to take shape.

Thank you for being part of this community and for helping us prepare people and ideas to thrive in the future.

Yours in innovation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather McWhorter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Heather McWhorter | MS, PE, ECM
Director, Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Impact Matters

STUDENT & COMMUNITY IMPACT

12,400

PROGRAM ATTENDEES

1,200

UNCW STUDENTS ENGAGED

1,600

K-12 STUDENTS ENGAGED

44,000

VISITS TO CIE

240

VOLUNTEERS

ENTREPRENEUR & ECONOMIC IMPACT

300

ENTREPRENEURS SUPPORTED

100

JOBS CREATED

30%

ENTREPRENEURS SUPPORTED
ARE UNCW-AFFILIATED

\$15M

CAPITAL OBTAINED

INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

10,000sq ft

INNOVATION SPACE

43

TENANT COMPANIES

30%

Entrepreneurs supported by CIE are connected to the UNCW community, demonstrating the Center's role in helping students, faculty, alumni, and staff turn ideas into reality.

When I first got involved with CIE, **I had an idea, but I wasn't sure where to start.** I needed to connect with the local business community and learn how to build a company. Programs like Ecolnnovate, Idea Test Lab, and 1 Million Cups gave me exactly that.

GARRETT MITCHELL
MARINE EXPLORATION GEOSCIENTIST
FOUNDER, NAUTIGEN

2026 Coastal Entrepreneur Award Winner,
Biotechnology



The Real Measure

One of the highlights this year was watching students participate in a hands-on group activity that challenged them to think like entrepreneurs. They worked together to develop ideas, create branding concepts, and solve problems in real time. The energy in the room was incredible. **It was exciting to watch students step outside their comfort zones, share their creativity, and realize that they are capable of turning ideas into something meaningful.**

I believe programs like this have a lasting impact because they expose students to possibilities they may not have considered before. Entrepreneurship can be a full-time career, a side business, or simply a mindset that helps people solve problems and create opportunities.

Our students look forward to Entrepreneur Day each year, and we are grateful for the partnership with CIE and the local business community. Experiences like these help inspire the next generation of innovators, leaders, and entrepreneurs.

AMANDA PARISH
MARKETING TEACHER
CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION DEPT
JOHN T. HOGGARD HIGH SCHOOL



Through programs like 1 Million Cups, mentoring opportunities, and educational workshops like Thrive, **I learned more about myself, my business, and the areas where I needed to improve.** Listening to other entrepreneurs share their challenges and successes helped me identify gaps in my own plans and discover new ways to strengthen my business model. The feedback I received pushed me to think differently and approach opportunities with a broader perspective.

KIERNAN KOVAC
UNCW STUDENT ENTREPRENEUR
FOUNDER, GRAND RENTALS



of Success

What made the experience different was that the support didn't stop after a workshop or event. **The CIE team took the time to understand my business, connect me with resources, and provide guidance based on where I was in the journey.** Heather McWhorter and the entire team have played an incredible role in our growth over the last three years.



Entrepreneurship can be lonely sometimes, but CIE gave me a network. The mentorship, accountability, and encouragement helped me grow as a founder and helped move our company forward.

AJ TRELEASE
FOUNDER, CAREHOME HEALTH SOLUTIONS

2026 Coastal Entrepreneur Award Winner, Health Care



2021 United Nations Decade
2030 of Ocean Science
for Sustainable Development

Dedicated to The Blue Economy

The future of
ocean innovation
is being built right
here **and there's
room for everyone
to be part of the
journey.**

At the CIE, we use the term Blue Economy to refer to the sustainable use of ocean and coastal resources to drive economic growth, create jobs, and support healthy marine ecosystems. Valued at an estimated \$3 trillion globally, the Blue Economy would rank as the world's seventh-largest economy if it were a country. As coastal communities face increasingly complex challenges and opportunities, the Blue Economy is emerging as a powerful driver of innovation, resilience, and long-term prosperity.



Ocean Innovation Conference

At our third annual Ocean Innovation Conference, we introduced All Blue 101, a pre-conference event designed to help participants better understand the growing Blue Economy ecosystem and the opportunities it presents. The conference also expanded to include a virtual experience which allowed participants from 13 states and four countries to join the conversation.



Ecolnnovate

Adopting a new format this year, Ecolnnovate challenged participants to form teams to solve real-world sustainability problems presented by local community members. This Innovation Sprint led to the development of tangible solutions, turning concepts into actionable ideas.



Painting 1 Million Cups Blue

Every Wednesday in June, in recognition of World Oceans Day, Blue Economy entrepreneurs shared their stories and ventures with the Wilmington community during 1 Million Cups. These sessions provided both valuable exposure for the business owners and a better understanding of the breadth and potential of the Blue Economy to community members.

The Stories

One of the biggest lessons I learned was that building a successful brand isn't just about creating a product you love. It's about understanding your customers, speaking their language, and meeting their needs. The professionals and mentors involved in the program challenged me to think differently about my business and my consumers. They helped me look beyond the product itself and focus on how to communicate the value of my brand more effectively.



The mentor program was equally valuable because it gave me someone in my corner — someone who could provide guidance, ask the right questions, and help me think through challenges.

To me, CIE is about helping entrepreneurs see opportunities they may not see on their own. Every program I've participated in has provided a new insight, a new perspective, or a new tool to help me grow.

DAWN MCDOWELL

FOUNDER AND CEO, CREATIVELY COVERED CO

2026 Coastal Entrepreneur Award Winner,
Minority/Women-Owned Business

Behind the Stats

As a researcher and educator, I spend a great deal of time exploring ideas, solving problems, and helping others learn. What CIE provided was an opportunity to take what I already knew and build on it in a new way. **The experience wasn't about starting from scratch — it was about looking at the same process through a different lens and learning how to apply entrepreneurial thinking to ideas with real-world potential.**

Through programs such as Innovate + Elevate, Idea Test Lab, the Mentor Program, NSF initiatives, and NCInnovation opportunities, I gained valuable insights that helped me move ideas forward. One of the most impactful experiences was participating in Idea Test Lab, where I was able to validate concepts in a supportive environment. Having the opportunity to test assumptions, receive feedback, and refine ideas before making larger commitments was incredibly valuable.

For anyone with an idea but uncertainty about what to do next, CIE is an incredible resource. It provides access to knowledge, mentorship, connections, and programs that help individuals move from potential to action. Whether you're a student, researcher, entrepreneur, or professional, CIE offers a pathway to explore possibilities and build something meaningful.

ELLIE EBRAHIMI
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNCW



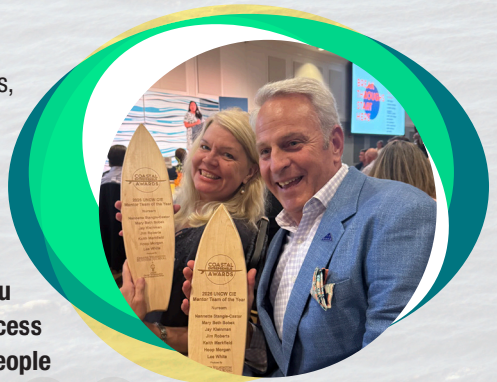
Powering the Future of Medicine



UNCW is taking a transformative step toward addressing the growing healthcare needs of southeastern North Carolina through planning the development of a new medical school — the first new public medical school in North Carolina in more than 50 years. Designed to combat the region's physician shortage, the proposed school will offer both traditional four-year and accelerated three-year medical degree pathways, helping to bring highly trained physicians into the workforce more quickly.

CIE is excited to support the school by elevating health and medical entrepreneurs as a key area within our ecosystem. To help catalyze these efforts, CIE will be launching **Innovate Health**, a conference that will bring together healthcare professionals, entrepreneurs, researchers, investors, and community leaders in 2027 to explore opportunities for collaboration and innovation. By connecting medicine, technology, and entrepreneurship, CIE is helping build a culture that complements UNCW's medical school vision and positions our region as a leader in advancing healthcare solutions for the future. Come be a part of this exciting adventure!

Having spent decades working across startups, corporate ventures, and entrepreneurial businesses, I can confidently say that CIE is one of the best organizations of its kind in the country. Too many entrepreneurs believe they have to do it alone, but they shouldn't. **CIE provides a soft landing place where you can test ideas, build relationships, gain access to resources, and receive guidance from people who have been through the journey themselves.**



ROB COOLEY
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, NUREAM

We Invite You to Explore What's Possible

Innovation doesn't happen in isolation — it happens when education, industry, and community come together to solve real-world challenges.



Whether you're looking for fresh ideas, future talent, or new ways to grow, CIE can help. We partner with businesses, students, entrepreneurs, researchers, and community leaders to solve problems, spark innovation, and create opportunities. **Looking to develop your employees as leaders?** Encourage them to serve as mentors to college students and emerging entrepreneurs. **Want fresh perspectives on a business challenge?** Partner with our students and innovation community. **Seeking stronger connections to the next generation of talent?** We can help with that, too.

Let's start a conversation about how we can help each other. Together, we can strengthen our business community, inspire the next generation of leaders, and continue building Wilmington's reputation as a place where entrepreneurship, education, and industry lead and thrive. Visit the CIE website or give us a call to explore the possibilities.

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UNC Wilmington is committed to and will provide equal educational and employment opportunities. Questions regarding equal opportunity may be directed to the EEO/AA Officer, 910.962.3160. UNCW does not discriminate on the basis of sex. Questions regarding UNCW's Title IX compliance should be directed to titleix@uncw.edu.