



CENTER for INNOVATION
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Annual Report

July 1, 2024 — June 30, 2025





To our Community of Innovators and Changemakers,

Welcome to the FY25 UNCW Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's Annual Report — **a celebration of momentum, mission and the remarkable people powering innovation in our region.** From transformative events like the Ocean Innovation Conference and EcoInnovate Weekend to milestone collaborations through the Wilmington Founders' Roundtable, CIE has deepened its role as a catalyst for change. With the launch of Innovate & Elevate and continued advances in bluetech, healthtech, and founder-focused programming, we are not only growing companies — we're growing community impact.

At the heart of UNCW's vision to **transform lives**, CIE stands as a superhub for entrepreneurship — fostering scalable, sustainable ventures in partnership with our campus, region and global networks. Our team remains committed to equipping innovators with the tools to succeed: access to capital, mentorship, collision spaces, and research-driven resources that reflect UNCW's values of excellence, collaboration, and applied learning. We've supported hundreds of entrepreneurs this year alone, generating investment, creating jobs, and anchoring Wilmington's reputation as a globally ranked entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As we look ahead, we are focused on accelerating bold ideas and inspiring the next generation of changemakers — while advancing our vision for a world-class blue economy hub right here in southeast North Carolina. I am honored to lead this dedicated team and grateful for our partners, donors, and champions — **each of you makes this work possible.** Thank you for being part of our CIE family.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather McWhorter".

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

Community Snapshot

The UNCW CIE plays a key role in driving economic growth, sparking new ideas and building meaningful partnerships across southeastern North Carolina and beyond. In 2025, Wilmington's visibility on national startup ecosystem rankings rose sharply, climbing 32 spots to #61 in the world and earning recognition as the **#1 small city for startups globally**. That momentum reflects our commitment to support entrepreneurs and innovators by growing our programs, strengthening community ties and creating real opportunities for business development in the region.

At its core, the CIE is about helping people turn ideas into impact. This year, our progress continued through events like the Ocean Innovation Conference and Innovate and Elevate, alongside **long-standing programs like the CIE Mentors and 1 Million Cups (1MC) Wilmington**. Through our support for founders across industries and stages — and more than 10,000 square feet of incubator, coworking and flexible collision space — the CIE remains a trusted partner to both the university and the broader community.

The results can be seen not just in headlines and awards, but in the ripple effects across the economy. From helping startups grow to hosting pitch competitions, the CIE remains a trusted hub for entrepreneurs and ecosystem partners alike. Collaborations with groups like NC IDEA, U.S. Patent and Trade Office (USPTO), and investors helped bring even more energy into the space this year — and there's no sign of slowing down.

Taken together, this report offers a look back at a year shaped by collaboration and creativity, as well as a shared belief that entrepreneurship drives progress. Every event, program and partnership highlighted here is part of a bigger picture — one that reflects the CIE's ongoing mission to support innovation, build strong connections and help new ideas take root. Let's explore some key programs and metrics over the past year to understand our impact.

Entrepreneurs
Supported
350

Capital
Raised
\$19.2M

Jobs
Created
54

UNCW Students
Engaged
1,100

K-12 Students
Engaged
600

Mentors &
Volunteers
200+

Event
Attendees
10,600

CIE Programs

Powered by UNCW, the CIE offers a wide variety of programs and initiatives designed to help entrepreneurs succeed. From tech ventures to the Blue Economy, from applied learning to youth entrepreneurship, the reach of the CIE has been extensive. Take a closer look at some of our favorite and growing programs from 2024-25.



Five Year Anniversary of 1 Million Cups Wilmington

In February, we celebrated a major milestone: the five-year anniversary of 1 Million Cups (1MC) Wilmington. What began as a weekly gathering of entrepreneurs and community members has turned into a must-attend event, with **more than 250 entrepreneurs** having presented since its inception. Hosted by the CIE, supported by the Wilmington Coalition and powered by a dedicated team of volunteers, 1MC provides a platform for founders to share their ideas, receive feedback and network. The anniversary event brought an electric crowd to the CIE, featuring a packed Expo, engaging speakers and a strong sense of community pride.



CIE Mentor Program

Our Mentor Program continues to be one of the CIE's most valuable offerings. This past year, that value only grew. With **130 active mentors** from a wide range of industries and more than **2,500 years of combined senior-level experience**, our mentor network brings a depth of knowledge that's hard to match. CIE mentor teams work closely with founders to **challenge assumptions and offer guidance rooted in real-world experience**. Whether it was prepping for a pitch, solving a thorny operations issue, or just figuring out next steps, our mentors showed up again and again to help entrepreneurs keep moving forward.

UNCW & BUSINESS
PROGRAMS



ENTREPRENEUR
DAY



MENTOR
MADNESS



EDUCATION

IDEATION

STARTUP

GROWTH

HIGH IMPACT &
BLUE ECONOMY
PROGRAMS

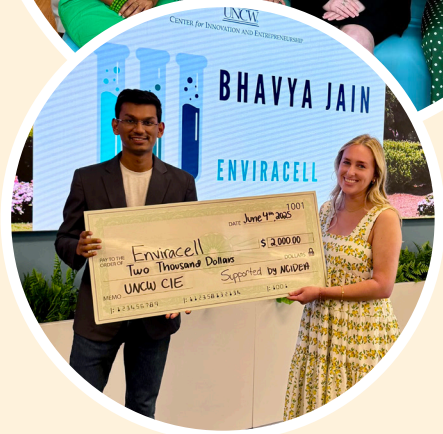


PARTNERED
PROGRAMS



Idea Test Lab

This spring, Idea Test Lab once again provided early-stage founders with an opportunity to answer a critical question: is this idea worth pursuing? Over the course of four weeks, two specialized cohorts — Women-in-Tech/Female Founders and Bluetech/ClimateTech — participated in guided sessions designed to help participants test their assumptions, articulate value and prepare for next steps. The cohorts concluded with Demo Days — 15 founders presented their ventures to a panel of judges and community supporters. Participants were awarded a total of **\$20,000 in funding** with support from Wells Fargo and an NC IDEA ECOSYSTEM grant.



Dedicated to the Blue Economy

Our Commitment to the Blue Economy

At UNCW, the Blue Economy is more than a buzzword — it's a priority that connects innovation, economic growth, and sustainability. In 2025, we continued to lead the charge in positioning southeastern North Carolina as a national hub for ocean-focused entrepreneurship. We received the national University Economic Development Association **(UEDA) Award of Excellence**, affirming UNCW's growing role as a national leader in solving problems for our communities.



**2021
2030** United Nations Decade
of Ocean Science
for Sustainable Development



Ocean Innovation Conference

Our commitment is perhaps most visible at the Ocean Innovation Conference, a daylong event to explore pressing issues in coastal innovation. The 2024 Ocean Innovation Conference brought together 360+ entrepreneurs, researchers, policymakers, investors and students for a discussion on advancing ocean sustainability and the regional Blue Economy. Held at the UNCW Burney Center and online, the event featured keynote speakers like SeaAhead founder Mark Huang, and *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Casey, as well as panels on funding innovation, community engagement, and founders focused / on building a resilient Blue Economy. Attendees explored the latest in bluetech through lightning talks and pitches and an on-site Innovation Fair showcasing marine science initiatives and emerging ventures. Building on its momentum, the 2024 event featured robust climate and ocean solutions, a deeper discussion on coastal resiliency and enhanced networking — earning UNCW's **Gold Talon** designation for sustainable events.

UNC Wilmington Blue Economy Index

At the center of this effort is the UNC Wilmington Blue Economy Index, launched in early 2024 in partnership with the UNCW Cameron School of Business, the UNCW Office of Innovation and Commercialization and data analytics firm FactSet. As the first benchmark of its kind, the index tracks companies working in sustainable ocean industries and weighs them based on ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) factors. It's an economic development tool, but also a signal to investors and policymakers that this region is ready to lead. In UNCW Chancellor Aswani K. Volety's words, the index was built "to attract innovators, students and financiers to the Wilmington region."

Blue Economy Assets Map

On the ground, this momentum is supported by tools like the Blue Economy Assets Map — a collaborative project led by the CIE and All Blue. The interactive map highlights the diverse businesses and organizations already working across ocean-related sectors in North Carolina, from aquaculture and marine tech to coastal restoration and ocean education. Designed as a public resource, the map helps entrepreneurs, researchers and economic developers understand where opportunities exist and where strategic partnerships can be built. As CIE All Blue lead intern Carolyn Greenway shared, the map "acknowledges the interdependence" of this ecosystem — and helps keep everyone on the same page.





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CIE 2026–2031 Strategic Plan

Mission: The CIE, the coastal leader in inspiring and educating entrepreneurs, nurtures high-impact startups with education, connections, and incubation and collision space and accelerates the entrepreneurial ecosystem in southeastern North Carolina as a vibrant hub of innovation.

Vision: The CIE transforms lives.

Goals

1. Unparalleled opportunities
2. Nationally prominent programs
3. Community commitment
4. World-class operations and infrastructure



“The CIE provided an incredible ecosystem of support, mentorship, and creativity. The diversity of ideas in my cohort and the quality of the conversations pushed my thinking in powerful ways. No matter where we were in our journeys, we helped each other grow.”

—SANA ROCKWELL

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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.