

Wisconsin Inventor & Entrepreneur Clubs: Paving the way for innovation



“America is undergoing a time of rapid change. Old ways and businesses that don’t keep up with the times are passing away. But at the same time, new opportunities are springing up like never before. We must foster a culture that embraces and supports the innovators and entrepreneurs within our communities; they will be the ones to lead our economy to higher ground.”

—Terry Whipple, President,
7 Rivers Region, and Executive Director,
Juneau County Economic Development
Corporation

Situation

The image of an entrepreneur as a rugged individualist who identifies an economic opportunity and pursues it successfully plays well in the popular imagination. But in reality, entrepreneurs need substantial technical, educational, social and community support to be successful.

Inventors and entrepreneurs—especially in rural areas—face significant challenges. Low population density, a relative lack of resources and a shortage of peers with whom to share ideas and experiences are major obstacles to promoting entrepreneurship in rural areas.

While research shows that rural areas support a disproportionately high number of entrepreneurs, they lag far behind their non-rural counterparts in the income and revenue they earn. In Wisconsin, the challenge lies in finding viable ways to help rural entrepreneurs achieve economic success.

Response

The Wisconsin Entrepreneurs’ Network (WEN) was created by the Wisconsin Legislature as part of the “Grow Wisconsin” initiative. WEN’s mission is to create easy access to resources and expertise from across Wisconsin to help spawn new ventures and expand existing businesses.

One of WEN’s early activities was providing \$1000 grants to counties to support Inventor & Entrepreneur (I & E) clubs.

I & E clubs offer a place for individuals to share new ideas, develop networks and obtain support for their efforts. They can offer a venue for entrepreneurs to explore and move their ideas to reality, as well as provide education on issues related to market feasibility, intellectual property, marketing, financing and business planning. I & E clubs also seem to play a significant role in bolstering the confidence of individual entrepreneurs by offering them a sense of legitimacy.

Most I & E clubs rely on volunteer staff, often drawn from local economic development organizations, chambers of commerce and the University of Wisconsin-Extension. The majority of clubs meet monthly, with a typical meeting including a guest speaker followed by an opportunity for networking. Popular speakers have included successful inventors and entrepre-



neurs and intellectual property experts. Tax advisors, patent attorneys, advertising agency staff and motivational speakers are among the other professionals who participate in I & E meetings.

The clubs have established an e-mail network (listserv) for the facilitators, with WEN providing other resources and support.

Community resource development educators from UW-Extension's Center for Community Economic Development (CCED) are among the resource providers that have taken part in meetings and provided support to many I & E clubs. CCED educators also surveyed I & E clubs to learn what aspects of the clubs were most useful to members. This information has been helpful in supporting existing clubs and planning future groups.

Outcomes

Wisconsin's Inventor and Entrepreneur Clubs have aided the state's entrepreneurs by providing:

- Support and a social network that research shows is essential for innovators and entrepreneurs to flourish.
- Connections to educational opportunities and larger support services outside the community.
- Resources for members to develop their ideas and apply for patents on new products and inventions.
- Help in creating and getting new jobs.
- A local venue for entrepreneurs to network among themselves.
- Information and assistance in getting grants for research and business development.

- Help in overcoming the challenges entrepreneurs face in rural areas, such as smaller populations, greater distances to travel, lack of a peer group and fewer financial resources.

Based on a UW-Extension survey of 30 I & E club facilitators, an impressive number of club participants have created new jobs, obtained patents, and received grants for their ideas and enterprises.

Most of the clubs included in the survey were established in 2006, with the oldest founded in 2002.

Many club facilitators reported that their groups were inspired to form after listening to the executive director of the Juneau County Economic Development Corporation and facilitator for the the Juneau County I & E club. Seven of the facilitators specifically credited Terry Whipple, the Juneau County's club facilitator and a strong proponent of I & E clubs across Wisconsin and nationally, for motivating them to organize their groups.

Other outcomes of the survey included the following:

- When asked about the major benefits of their club for members, more than two out of every three facilitators identified networking as the major benefit, followed by education and access to information.
- Most respondents mentioned three elements that they considered to be the club's mission: 1) business formation; 2) networking; and 3) education. Two-thirds said their club's major focus was on networking.
- More than eight in ten of the club facilitators surveyed (83%) reported jobs had been created in their region as a result of participation in the club.

- Sixty-three percent of respondents indicated that a new patent had been filed by a member as a result of their club participation.

- Twenty-three percent of respondents indicated that members had received research grants to develop their business or idea. Most of these grants came in the form of angel financing. In one case, a company received a grant for the design of a hydroponic greenhouse, while another club member received funding from a private furniture company for a project.

In summary, although the concept of I & E clubs is still evolving, these groups are becoming an important place for potential entrepreneurs to share ideas, obtain information and make connections with other entrepreneurs.

As Wisconsin grapples with the impacts of a changing economy, I & E clubs provide an important tool for helping the state's entrepreneurial spirit continue to flourish.

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