NATURE OF THE INNOVATION: A ten-week, ten-session entrepreneurial training program, held in eight Florida workforce regions, in which jobseekers, paired with a mentor who has succeeded in business and a real technology from universities and federal labs, build a simulated startup company. Over the course of the program, participants acquire the business skills and gain the confidence needed to succeed at self-employment or become a better employee.

Key Features

University of Florida and CareerSource NCFLDesigned Program: At the beginning of Startup Quest®, a mentor—a successful entrepreneur who has already taken a product to market—selects a technology that aligns with their expertise from undeveloped patents or patent pending technologies held by the public universities of Florida, NASA, and the Department of Energy. Mentors guide teams of participants to produce a market analysis and business plan to commercialize their technology and pitch the plan to a panel of judges. Through the simulated startup, participants learn skills such as “Understanding the Value Proposition of a Technology,” “Commercialization Strategies and Intellectual Property,” and “Sources of Funding.”

Cross Functional Teams: Startup Quest® recruits unemployed and underemployed participants with a Bachelor’s or higher degree and professional experience. Participants are paired with a mentor in teams of eight to ten. Teams are formed with a balance of marketing, finance, engineering or other skills, but members are often cross-trained in multiple occupations.

Supporting Self-Employment for Graduates: In addition to traditional case management through the workforce system, participants can draw on connections they have made through the program in their job search. Startup Quest® also contracts with the Gainesville Area Innovation Network to support graduates intent on starting a business, which can entail help with commercializing a product and accessing investors.
Future Outlook

Scaling a New Model: Startup Quest® launched a pilot program cycle in late July 2015 without a regional project manager that worked for the local workforce board, a departure from the model under the WIF grant. Instead, the program recruited a local business leader to serve as Program Coordinator, charged with convening stakeholders and recruiting mentors. In the pilot model, the workforce board assumes its normal role of recruiting and qualifying participants. Startup Quest® staff coordinate event planning and training facilitators certified by Startup Quest® teach the curriculum. An updated guidebook lays out each stakeholder’s responsibilities and procedures for operating the program. As follow-up, Startup Quest® is planning to offer virtual roundtable sessions on entrepreneurial topics. The leaner model, if successful, represents an approach to scaling Startup Quest® in the future.

As of September 2015, staff are working with many publicly funded research institutions to expand access to technologies, providing more choice and a higher potential for alignment between a particular technology and a mentor’s background. Program leaders are also working, beyond the pilot, to replicate Startup Quest®, promoting Startup Quest® to workforce boards and institutes of higher education around the country and authoring white papers on, among other topics, how entrepreneurship fits under WIOA and how to fund entrepreneurship using training dollars and other resources. Two regions in Florida have committed to continuing the program in future years using Adult and Dislocated Worker funding.

Interested in Learning More?

To learn more, visit [http://www.startupquest.org](http://www.startupquest.org).
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OBSTACLES OVERCOME

Recruiting in Rural Areas: The advanced degree requirement for participation as well as a lack of qualified unemployed participants presented recruiting challenges for less populous regions with fewer possible participants. In response, Startup Quest® targeted outreach to veterans (who are not subject to random selection)—a set of flyers read “we are here for veterans” and the program hosts veteran only events—as well as expanded geographic eligibility beyond residency in a particular workforce area. Staff has also had success using the state labor exchange system to identify and outreach to eligible individuals.

While cities offer startup incubators, universities, and venture capital firms from which to recruit mentors, speakers, and judges, recruiting them in areas with lower concentrations of technologists and entrepreneurs has likewise posed a challenge. To compensate, Startup Quest® has leveraged local workforce board and economic development networks, as well as contracted with the Florida Institute for Commercialization of Public Research. The Institute works with companies that are commercializing public research and has a large network of entrepreneurs throughout the state from which Startup Quest® can recruit.

ADVICE TO PRACTITIONERS

Entrepreneurs Add a New Dimension to the Workforce System: As of July 2015, 292 entrepreneurs have served as Startup Quest® mentors. Their experience in the program has alerted many mentors, and by extension many businesses, to the presence of hardworking advanced degree holders in the workforce system. Likewise, in many regions in Florida, Startup Quest® has led to entrepreneurs sitting on workforce boards, offering insight on a different side of business than traditional job search and placement activities.