



The Small Business Opportunity Center

ENTREPRENEUR TESTIMONIALS JULY 2025

ENHANCED ACCESS TO INNOVATION INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH THE VCU BUSINESS SCHOOL & THE DA VINCI CENTER

The SBOC is administered by the VCU School of Business, is supported by the VCU Office of Community Development, and is housed in VCU's award-winning da Vinci Center for Innovation, whose Shift Retail Lab won Fast Company's prestigious 2023 Innovation by Design Award. This strategic partnership provides SBOC entrepreneurs with access to the da Vinci Center's innovation ecosystem, including product innovation and venture creation certificate programs, the Shift Retail Lab for real-world market testing, design thinking courses, pitch competitions, and micro-credential programs.

The da Vinci Center offers additional pre-commercialization and market testing programs with prototyping workshops, retail spaces, and networking opportunities through the Shift Labs Network™. As part of this collaboration, under-resourced entrepreneurs gain access to the same high-quality innovation resources available to traditional university students.

OUR COLLABORATIVE APPROACH LEADS TO DIFFUSE RESOURCE KNOWLEDGE & ACCESS

VCU's multidivisional institutional partnership to implement the SBOC Center enhances the capacity to deliver its proven programming while maintaining its core mission of creating opportunity. Further, the strategic partnerships with municipalities, state universities, regional entrepreneurship support organizations, and government agencies that the SBOC has developed across Virginia's eastern regions and our digital resource sharing helps create a coordinated ecosystem of support for aspiring and existing traded sector founders and increases awareness of all ecosystem resources. This collaborative business model ensures the continued impact of the SBOC's proven small business support approach, ensuring that under-resourced entrepreneurs have knowledge of and can access comprehensive, merit-based programming from VCU and our partners. This will result in continued business creation, job development, and economic impact across participating regions.

ROAM CREATIVE

Kim Price,
COO & Co-founder

"This program gave me the experience of pitching in front of a live crowd, not only did I win but the success here propelled me into other rooms (ultimately raising 100k). This couldn't have been accomplished without the MSBLC program."

useroam.io

THE ARAMINT GROUP

Danielle Graves,
Founder & CEO



The Aramint Group
A COACHING & CONSULTING FIRM

The Center has sponsored unique opportunities to promote my business and network in spaces that I ordinarily wouldn't have considered.

<https://www.thearamintgroup.com/>

MAXXTELL CREATIONS

Chantel Williams,
CEO



MAXXTELL CREATIONS, LLC
Graphic Design Services

"I was able to benefit a great deal from this program. I was able to scale and enhance my business's development, which opened up many opportunities to train and grow. The tools, resources, and connections made were very helpful in allowing me to reach my next level. . . I was able to tap into key areas that I hadn't put much focus on before. Also, having the blueprint for a lot of my business operations helped a great deal. . ."

www.maxxtellcreations.com

PARTNER TESTIMONIALS

FROM 2025 GO VIRGINIA APPLICATION FOR THE SMALL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY CENTER

METROPOLITAN BUSINESS LEAGUE

Floyd Miller,
President & CEO



The Metropolitan Business League has been a core partner for the implementation of the Minority Small Business Launch Center since 2022. We believe that since it was founded in Region 4 in 2021, the ... Center has had a real and positive impact on the entrepreneurship ecosystem. As the program expands [as the Small Business Opportunity Center] to other regions—Regions 5, 6, and 7—we believe it will continue to have a similar positive impact and connect under-resourced entrepreneurs to resources that they might not otherwise have accessed or known about.

CENTRAL VA AFRICAN AMERICAN CHAMBER

Charmaine Tucker,
Managing Director



Central Virginia African American
Chamber of Commerce

Through expanded partnerships, targeted training, and regional connectivity, the center can help unleash the full potential of diverse entrepreneurs who are ready to thrive but need a clearer path. We are especially excited about the program's ability to bring together institutions, support organizations, and local leaders to build an ecosystem that truly serves our communities.

STARTUP VIRGINIA

Richard Wintsch,
Executive Director



Since 2021, the MSBLC has empowered under-resourced entrepreneurs through training, certifications, and access to critical resources such as student interns, pitch competitions, and business networks. This program has transformed the entrepreneurial ecosystem by helping minority entrepreneurs launch and scale their businesses successfully. SVA's collaboration with the MSBLC and our partnership with the VCU da Vinci Center for Innovation have been impactful in advancing shared goals....

VIRGINIA'S SBDC NETWORK

Jody Keenan,
State Director



Through their entrepreneurship training academy, certification programs, and access to other valuable resources to help under-resourced entrepreneurs launch or grow their businesses, including free student interns, pitch competitions, chamber memberships, and connections to other long-standing entrepreneurship support organizations, agencies and programs, we believe this program can help prepare minority entrepreneurs for success and augments our statewide entrepreneurship ecosystem.

THE VA DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS & SUPPLIER DIVERSITY

Willis A. Morris,
Agency Director



The ... Center fills a critical gap by creating a supporting entrepreneurship pre-accelerator customized to .. community needs to enable group members more opportunities to access resources to enable their launch of scalable, sustainable enterprises.

HENRICO COUNTY

John Vithoulkas,
County Manager



As the largest municipality in the Richmond market, we think it is of the utmost importance that Henrico County conveys its sincere support for this program to expand beyond Region 4, and into Regions 5, 6, and 7. . . The Minority Small Business Launch Center has been an integral part of providing training, certifications, mentorships, and other valuable resources to help nearly 300 minorities launch new firms. Henrico County is proud to help support these dreams become realities.

HENRICO EDA

Anthony J. Romanello
Executive Director



Since it was founded in Region 4 in 2021, the program has positively impacted the regional entrepreneurship ecosystem. We believe that with its new [GO Virginia] application, it will continue to have a positive impact on our region and beyond, and connect more under-resourced entrepreneurs with training, networking opportunities, entrepreneurship support organizations, and other resources that can help them launch and scale viable businesses.

CHESTERFIELD EDA

H. Garrett Hart, III,
Director



As a locality committed to advancing economic growth and supporting the success of . . . under-resourced entrepreneurs, we recognize the vital role that the . . . Center has played in empowering businesses to thrive. Expanding the program's reach through VCU will further amplify its impact across the Commonwealth.

PRINCE GEORGE COUNTY

Jeffrey D. Stoke,
County Administrator



The organization's commitment to train and provide resources to entrepreneurs and business owners in the region is a valuable asset. Prince George County and the region as a whole will surely benefit from continued business creation. **A business accelerator at Virginia Commonwealth University would complement, not compete with, existing resources and would be invaluable in providing access to mentors and to capital.**

CHARLES CITY COUNTY

Michelle Johnson,
County Administrator



The resources, technical assistance, and training provided by the Center have been instrumental in creating opportunities for local entrepreneurs who often face significant barriers in accessing the tools needed to launch and sustain their businesses.

PARTNER TESTIMONIALS

FROM 2025 GO VIRGINIA APPLICATION FOR THE SMALL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY CENTER

CAPITAL REGION MINORITY SUPPLIER DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Sharon R. Pinder,
President & CEO, CRMSSDC
Operator, Virginia MBDA
Business Center



Many of the enrollees in the program were from outside of Region 4 and valued the program's offerings, we believe this program's expansions to Regions 5, 6, and 7 will help prepare minority entrepreneurs for success and augment our statewide entrepreneurship ecosystem.

ACTIVATION CAPITAL

Elizabeth O'Donnell
Vice President of
Finance & Operations



Expanding this program will create new opportunities, foster opportunity for all entrepreneurs, and strengthen our regional entrepreneurial network, including in the biosciences sector where our organizations' missions strongly align.

VIRGINIA HISPANIC CHAMBER & VIRGINIA HISPANIC FOUNDATION

Michel Zajur
Pres/CEO Virginia Hispanic
Chamber Commerce
Lisa Zajur
Executive Director Virginia
Hispanic Foundation



The Virginia Hispanic Foundation is proud to partner with the Small Business Opportunity Center to provide . . . support aimed at training entrepreneurs on Hispanic culture and best practices for building meaningful business relationships within the Hispanic community in the Richmond, Northern Virginia, and Hampton Roads regions.

DOWNTOWN ASHLAND ASSOCIATION

Antonio Miller
Executive Director



We believe this initiative will serve as a vital resource for individuals looking to launch & grow businesses, particularly in areas where access to ..support has historically been limited. We are especially excited about the Center's emphasis on reaching rural entrepreneurs. The Downtown Ashland Association is happy to assist. . . We see this as a natural extension of our commitment to nurturing small business growth throughout our community and region.

CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Brian Donahue
Director, Portsmouth
Economic Development



We support this effort from Virginia Commonwealth University and hope that you will approve this grant application. The City of Portsmouth Department of Economic Development aims to empower entrepreneurs to successfully steward business ownership and operation.. We look forward to engaging with this organization.."

LIGHTHOUSE NETWORK

Debbie Irwin
Executive Director
Lighthouse Network



We see the SBOC as an essential and non-duplicative addition to our ecosystem. It meets founders where they are, particularly those who have historically been underestimated and excluded from larger opportunities. By offering trusted guidance and a direct on-ramp into the marketplace, the program empowers these entrepreneurs to pursue bigger goals, strengthen their businesses, and build the confidence and capacity needed to scale.

WIRELESS INFRASTRUCTURE ASSOCIATION

Tim House
Executive Vice President
and Chief Operating Officer



WIA believes that the previous business training and outreach program and resources led by [the SBOC director] had a significant positive impact on entrepreneurship throughout Virginia. . . VCU's proposed grant application to GO Virginia, when funded, will create new growth opportunities for small businesses and strengthen the expanding ecosystem in our sector.

VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY

M. Omar Faison, PhD
Associate Vice Provost,
Research & Economic
Development



The value this initiative will bring to Virginia State University is significant. Not only will it provide critical resources and support to minority entrepreneurs, but it will also contribute to our broader mission of fostering economic development and innovation within our region.... Through our continued participation in this program, we expect to continue to see increases in the number and capability of small and minority-owned businesses in the region, particularly those with scalable, sustainable business models.

CITY OF NORFOLK

Sean White, Director,
Department of Economic
Development



The SBOC's "commitment to empower and provide resources to entrepreneurs and business owners is commendable. We look forward to engaging with this organization as they provide resources, technical assistance and training to create opportunities for local entrepreneurs that often face barriers in accessing tools needed to launch and sustain their businesses."

BLACK BRAND

Blair Durham
Co-Founder/President + CEO
Black BRAND



The Launch Center is a vital resource in that it brings its industry focus and structure to an area that has already been invigorated by the opportunity to participate in business education and training programs. These efforts harmonize with our mission to provide community empowerment resources.. We are excited to support the project as the core implementation partner for...Hampton Roads.

PARTNER TESTIMONIALS

FROM 2025 GO VIRGINIA APPLICATION FOR THE SMALL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY CENTER

NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Dr. Moncef Belhadjali,
Dean School of Business



Since its inception, the [Center] has had a significant, positive impact on...entrepreneurship in the state of Virginia. This has been through...valuable resources to help under-resourced entrepreneurs launch or grow their businesses, ...free student interns, pitch competitions, chamber memberships, and connections to other long-standing entrepreneurship support organizations, agencies, and programs. We believe this program can help prepare minority entrepreneurs for success and augments our statewide entrepreneurship ecosystem...we are committed to increasing economic opportunities for all Virginians through our educational programming and believe that the ... Center program is aligned with our commitment.

FAIRFAX COUNTY EDA

Victor Hoskins
President & CEO



Since it was founded in Region 4 in 2021, the program has positively impacted the statewide entrepreneurship ecosystem, and based on its wide support and past success, we are encouraged that it will continue to do so. We believe that with its new application, the...Center will have a positive impact on our region and beyond, and connect more under-resourced entrepreneurs with training, networking opportunities, entrepreneurship support organizations, and other resources that can help them launch and scale viable businesses. ...The program's efforts are in line with those of the FCEDA ...and we strongly support Virginia Commonwealth University's application.

757 COLLAB

Paul Nolde
Managing Director
757 Collab



The [SBOC] is a catalytic resource that brings important connections, counsel, and training to underestimated founders seeking to bring their entrepreneurial visions to life. Additionally, the [SBOC] mission aligns strongly with that of 757 Collab...To that end, 757 Collab is pleased to provide access to our platform of high-growth focused incubation and acceleration programming for applicable...participants as well as access to our extensive network of entrepreneurial mentors for all...participants.

ALEXANDRIA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

Marian Marquez
Senior Vice President



The program's efforts are in line with those of the AEDP, where we hold a deep and longstanding commitment to the success of [underresourced] business, and we strongly support Virginia Commonwealth University's application. The AEDP is prepared to help host meetings ..., provide information on how to navigate local government business processes, and identify local and regional business assets in the City of Alexandria and Northern Virginia in support of [SBOC] programming and events.

NORTHERN VIRGINIA BLACK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Tonya Poindexter
Board Chair



We understand what it takes to support entrepreneurs who are often overlooked: consistency, credibility, and the ability to meet people where they are. Since its founding...the [SBOC] has demonstrated that it understands this...It has made a meaningful contribution to the entrepreneurship ecosystem by providing under-resourced entrepreneurs with focused, practical support that meets real needs. The proposed expansion is timely and necessary. It reflects a statewide commitment to...business opportunity and complements NVBCC's work in Region 7. We are prepared to support this expansion through outreach, referrals, and aligned engagement in training or programming where appropriate.

ARLINGTON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ryan Touhill, Director
Arlington Economic Development



On behalf of Arlington County, I enthusiastically support... Virginia Commonwealth University's application to expand the [Small Business Opportunity Center]...I am pleased to commit Arlington Economic Development (AED) to provide...in-kind support to facilitate the success of the program's efforts...

VIRGINIA BLACK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Ernisha M. Hall
Founder/President & CEO



We are excited to support this project as a core implementation partner for the Fredericksburg region...we aim to create a robust ecosystem conducive to the growth and success of minority-owned businesses. The...Center represents a critical resource, bringing industry focus and structured educational opportunities to regions eager for business education and training.

STAFFORD DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Liz Barber
Director



I am pleased to indicate that my municipality will provide the program with ... in-kind support in order to facilitate the success of the program's efforts...to support the launch, expansion, and development of a supportive ecosystem of minority and other under-resourced enterprises in our region.

VIRGINIA MINORITY CHAMBERS

Samuel Wiggins, CEO

As an organization dedicated to advocating for diverse chambers...including the NVBCC, the Asian American Chamber of Commerce, the VA Hispanic Chamber..., and other minority business organizations throughout the Commonwealth...I am pleased to offer our enthusiastic support for the Small Business Opportunity Center and its mission to unite entrepreneurship resource providers in support of under-resourced entrepreneurs across Virginia.

FREDERICKSBURG ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM

Josh Summits, Director



The program's efforts are in line with those of our municipality, and we strongly support VCU's application.