

### **Contestant Capacity**

#### **Organizational Background:**

Western Technical College (Western) is a public two-year institute of higher education based in La Crosse, WI. Since 1912, Western has been providing essential education and training to people throughout the 7 Rivers Region in western Wisconsin. With more than 65 degree programs, GED/HSED classes, English Language Learners programming, apprenticeship training, and seven campus locations, Western touches the lives of nearly 20,000 people in its district every year.

After significant community input, Western developed an Entrepreneurship Technical Diploma in 2015. The program consists of 30, one-credit courses offered online, making them easily adaptable to many modes of instruction beyond their current online format. The courses guide students from ideation to a business canvas, a marketing plan, and an operations plan. Soft and technical skills are addressed from selling and customer service to management and leadership. Area businesses participate on the program's Advisory Board to ensure the course objectives maintain currency with entrepreneurship trends.

In 2012, Western was one of three recipients of the Promoting Reentry Success through Continuity of Educational Opportunities (PRSCEO) grant through the Department of Education. The grant funded the creation of Project PROVEN (Promoting Resources and Opportunities to address Vocational and Educational Needs) to assist current county jail inmates and formerly incarcerated community members with their educational and employment needs. In 2015, Western received the Improved Reentry Education (IRE) grant, also through the Department of Education, which expanded the success of the original Project PROVEN. This grant allows for more employment and educational support for La Crosse participants, outreach to the rural communities (specifically Trempealeau and Monroe counties), and an increased connection with the prisons in Western's district.

This Challenge Award will build on Western's expertise in entrepreneurship and serving ex-offenders by offering students an additional pathway to education and employment. Western is well established in western Wisconsin to serve its 11 county district with support from businesses, community organizations, and local law enforcement, all of whom want to see the ex-offender population succeed. While most of this Award will focus on La Crosse, Western will use the project to build partnerships and relationships with entrepreneur resources for reentry populations in Trempealeau and Monroe counties.

The La Crosse area has traditionally lagged the state and the nation in entrepreneurship which was one of the catalysts for the recent creation of the technical diploma. Anecdotal evidence suggests a high number of PROVEN participants would benefit from entrepreneurial education if it can be provided in a face-to-face format.

The contact person for this project is Liz Wallace, Resource Development Specialist [(608) 785-9433 and [WallaceE@westerntc.edu](mailto:WallaceE@westerntc.edu)], who will work with the Management Team to execute the terms of this Challenge.

#### **Background of Management Team:**

The management team of the execution of this Award will consist of the Project PROVEN Coordinator, the Associate Dean of Business, and the Resource Development Specialist.

- *Tonya Van Tol* has been the Project PROVEN Coordinator since the program's creation in 2013. She was responsible for achieving the project outcomes of the first grant and developing the project frame for a second funded grant. She has a Masters of Social Work, 12 years' experience in the criminal justice field, experience teaching at the collegiate level, and is currently working on her doctorate of social work.
- *Tonya Wagner* is the Associate Dean of Business at Western, a role she assumed in 2015. She was instrumental in the development of Western's Entrepreneurship Technical Diploma. She has a background in marketing, sales, and business development and is currently working on her doctorate of education.
- *Liz Wallace* is Western's Resource Development Specialist. She worked with Ms. Van Tol to develop the IRE grant project to expand the mission of Project PROVEN and coordinates with the PROVEN staff to submit required reporting. She has experience in non-profit development and is currently working on her MBA.

### **Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution**

#### **Participant Recruitment Plan:**

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, almost 100 million American citizens have a criminal history and, more specifically, 1.374 million Wisconsin residents have criminal histories (or 24% of the state population) (2012). Project PROVEN assists western Wisconsinites who have criminal histories achieve their education and employment goals. For this challenge, PROVEN staff will recruit students from the student population they already serve while also working with community partners, formal and informal networks, and social networks to make the ex-offender population aware of this opportunity. Many people have found out about PROVEN through word of mouth, and this project will capitalize on those existing networks to make qualified individuals aware of this opportunity. PROVEN staff are uniquely qualified to recruit for this specific population given the work they already do is to serve the currently jailed and reentry populations. PROVEN serves an average 150 participants per year in and out of the jail with this number increasing every year of the project. Anecdotally, many participants have expressed an interest in starting their own business, but they lack the entrepreneurial training and access to capital to implement their dreams. According to one PROVEN participant, “Lots of guys up here [the jail] want to do their own thing. They just need to learn the ins and outs and have someone show them what it takes to do it right.” This Challenge Award will provide access to entrepreneurial education in a format (face-to-face) that is better suited to the learning style of this population. To recruit and enroll students into the entrepreneurship classes, Western will conduct a two-hour pre-program seminar in the jail three times within the year as way to recruit students into this career pathway upon release from jail.

#### **Classroom Instruction:**

Western already provides instruction for currently jailed and ex-offenders to prepare students for college level coursework by educating them in basic skills, employability, and technology literacy. PROVEN provides GED and Adult Basic Education courses in the county jail that mirror the same courses available on campus. The courses are contextualized around employability to teach the soft and life skills needed for sustainable employment. PROVEN is the link for the ex-offender population between the education they receive in the jail and the education available to them at Western after they are released. Any students with criminal histories, not just those who are recently released from jail or prison, are eligible to receive support from Project PROVEN. As such, all students who benefit from this Aspire Challenge will also benefit from the supports of Project PROVEN. A focus group with PROVEN participants conducted on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017, stressed the importance of readiness training for entrepreneurial courses. In combination with the existing readiness training, PROVEN staff will work with the Business division to incorporate additional readiness training to ensure the success of participants.

Western’s 30-credit Entrepreneurship Technical Diploma is currently offered entirely online as one-credit courses. Online delivery is a challenging instruction mode for ex-offenders who often lack consistent access to the computers and internet needed to succeed. For this project, the courses in the first term of the diploma will be adapted and offered in a face to face format that creates student cohorts for optimal learning for this student population. These first 12 credits will build into a *Fundamentals of Entrepreneurship* certificate. The goal is to enroll 12 students in each cohort with a max capacity of 25 in each cohort with a 50% completion rate. Given the many obstacles the ex-offender population typically faces, a 50% completion rate would be a significant accomplishment. An additional goal is for 15% of students who complete the certificate and a business plan indicate the ability and drive to start their business within 12 months of completion. The courses will be offered once a week over the course of five to seven weeks in the evenings to better accommodate the schedules of working adults.

The program’s existing online resources will remain accessible to students through Blackboard to supplement the instruction. Students who lack the technology needed to access online supports will be granted scholarships to assist with purchase of equipment. Students who wish to pursue the second and third term programming to complete the diploma will be able to join online cohorts utilizing their newly acquired collegiate experience, self-efficacy, and awareness of community and campus supports that exist to help them succeed.

Western's Entrepreneurship program is designed to help students explore their entrepreneurial vision and give them the resources and skills necessary to bring that vision into reality. In this program, students will gain the knowledge and skills necessary to establish and manage an independent small business. The courses offer a comprehensive look at all aspects of business, including enterprise planning and entrepreneurship, challenges of the small business, hiring employees, capitalization and investment, taxes, business law and regulations, ecommerce, and home businesses. The courses that will be specifically modified for this project are: Community Resources; Funding Models Evaluation; Ownership Strategies; Profit Overview; Challenges; Communication Tools; Idea Scanning; Leadership Fundamental; Mindset; Growth Trend Identification; Niche Development; and Social Media Strategies.

**Mentoring:**

As part of Project PROVEN, students receive ongoing case management specific to the population. PROVEN's case manager works with each participant to address their unique needs and ensure access to the resources they need to succeed, such as access to financial aid, course materials and technology, housing, food, assistance with gaining employment, and others. This student population is at high risk of recidivating due to lack of structure and stability. Project PROVEN has found that keeping a job provides the stability and income participants need to meet their basic needs, laying the necessary foundation for them to focus on their educational goals and increase their probability of success. The education they receive is contextualized around employability, drawing on their employment experiences, and uses that to foster entrepreneurial skills.

Mentoring around entrepreneurship and business acumen will provide further structure for this population. Western's Challenge Award will recruit community members, specifically reaching out Western's Entrepreneurship and Business Management program advisory committee members, Western's alumni, and other interested community members to provide business mentoring for students enrolled in the program. Steps will be taken to ensure this mentoring model is sustainable and utilized beyond the tenure of the Challenge Award. Additionally, Western's Challenge Award will collaborate with the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center at UW-La Crosse (SBDC) and the UWL Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI) to enable participating students to access no-cost consulting, low cost training and other resources to further support student success in this program.

**Community Connections:**

Students in this program will have access to the SBDC which is part of a national network to support small business growth. Students will be encouraged to enroll in the Entrepreneurial Training Program (ETP) offered at the SBDC where they will further test their business idea and create a business plan, prepare them to qualify for loans, and gain access to community lenders. The SBDC is well connected to the region's traditional and non-traditional lenders.

Couleecap, La Crosse's community action agency, provides job and business development training to income-qualified individuals through their Job and Business Development and Skills Enhancement Program. Western already refers a number of PROVEN participants to Couleecap for these and other resources. This Challenge project will provide Western the opportunity better integrate Couleecap's training with the training students will receive at Western and the SBDC.

Access to these additional community business training programs will create multiple career pathways participants can follow that culminate in a business plan, access to lenders, and eventually, the start of their own business. The flexibility of multiple entry and exit points allow students easy onboarding into the program if at any point they are derailed from their educational and career goals. The Challenge Award will help Western work with community partners to better map the various entry and exit points between the service providers to best support the variety of students the program will serve.

In addition to the business training partners, Western will collaborate with the Consumer Credit Counseling Service (CCCS) in La Crosse which educates participants in financial literacy, debt management, bankruptcy, and other financial topics. Participants in the Challenge will work with CCCS to learn specifically how to increase their credit scores to achieve better borrowing rates from lenders.

### ***Access to Capital***

#### **Access to micro-lending:**

La Crosse entrepreneurs have access to several community-based financial resources, such as local revolving loan funds and micro lenders, through traditional and non-traditional means. The SBDC will connect participants with lenders that best suit the entrepreneurs' needs. Couleecap is a non-profit community action agency based in La Crosse that provides microloans for income-qualified entrepreneurs who may have trouble securing loans through traditional lenders in addition to the business training mentioned previously. The La Crosse Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC) organization also is a non-traditional lender for entrepreneurs with a focus of serving underserved populations, including men.

For people outside of La Crosse but still within Western's 11-county district, the Western Dairyland Business Center (Dairyland) is a program of the Western Dairyland community action agency based in Eau Claire, WI, that provides funding access and training for entrepreneurs in outlying counties of Western's district. While residents of La Crosse will be able to utilize the services provided by Couleecap, Dairyland will provide similar services to the areas of Western's district that are not covered by Couleecap, thus broadening the potential reach of this program.

#### **Connection to capital and funding opportunities:**

Access to conventional funding is often instrumental in allowing a business to expand and grow. However, conventional lenders often won't lend to entrepreneurs with criminal history due to the stigma associated with having a criminal history. In order to address this obstacle locally, Western will work with the SBDC to reach out to local conventional lenders to create awareness of the non-traditional borrower and establish two-way communication on the possibilities and benefits for lenders and borrowers alike. The outreach will be provided in ways, an Access Challenge event and an Access to Funding Outreach event.

*The Access Challenge* – Western will co-host with SBDC an event to bring together decision-makers interested in economic development and lending practices that impact access to capital to address the unique needs and challenges that persons with criminal histories face in accessing financial and other resources to start and grow a business. This event is meant to start a dialogue with regulators in the financial industry, such as the FDIC and the Federal Reserve, to address concerns lenders have in approving funding for people with criminal histories. While banks will give an entrepreneur with a criminal history time to hear their business plan, they often will not fund them because banks assume the candidate will not pass the character test. This discussion is meant to bring the concerns of the bank to the forefront of the regulatory industry and determine avenues to assuage their apprehensions in order to facilitate more loans for traditionally overlooked borrower candidates.

*Access to Funding Outreach* – Western will co-host with SBDC and other interested parties *Access to Funding Outreach* events to educate local lenders and other funding sources and connect them with entrepreneurs that have challenges of accessing capital and other resources needed to start and grow a business. This outreach also prepares the participating students to seek and obtain funding for their ventures.

One *Access to Funding Outreach* event will be an Entrepreneurial Challenge. This "Shark Tank" inspired event will invite local lenders and interested community members to listen to each entrepreneur in the program "pitch" their business plan in an effort to secure funding. It will also serve as a meet and greet, so participants can become familiar with the available funding avenues within the community. Western has hosted one event like this for its traditional Entrepreneurship program to great success which we hope to replicate with this student group.

Citizens in western Wisconsin with criminal histories are truly an underutilized resource in our community as they are typically smart, creative, out-of-the-box thinkers who are well suited for an entrepreneurial pathway. An entrepreneurial pathway also provides career options many are not eligible for in traditional career paths. Western's PROVEN participants find this opportunity "... exciting. It will help keep people from coming back in here [the jail] by giving them a chance to be in business [for themselves] and make money in a legit way." This Challenge Award will open the door a little wider for them to achieve their business dreams with holistic support from the community.