



CEDAR VALLEY STARTUP SOCIAL

# The Cedar Valley Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The Makers, Doers and Dreamers

The Cedar Valley region of eastern Iowa is a long way from Boulder, Austin, Miami or other celebrated entrepreneurial ecosystems in the United States. Yet this small region in the heart of the Midwest represents an emerging movement among small and midsize cities for building community around entrepreneurs.

In 2019, Danny Laudick of the nonprofit Red Cedar organization and Andy Stoll of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation began a conversation about telling the story of the Cedar Valley ecosystem.

“We did not want an academic case study nor a ‘congratulations, our work here is complete’ report,” Laudick notes. “Instead, we wanted to pause, capture, and reflect upon the community, connections, place and people that make up this ecosystem.”

The stars in this story are the entrepreneurs who have created startups and scale-ups in this region and who live and dream this work. They, in tandem with a cast of visionary community leaders from both public and private sectors, have created a special kind of place in the Cedar Valley. Here the energy is palpable—and for many, it is magic.

This project uses a generative lens to discover where the life is in this ecosystem. It strives to be as close to those moments as possible through individual accounts, then connect those stories in a useful way to seed new possibilities in building community and connections.

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*Mo Collins*

This project was led by Mo Collins, an American speaker, researcher and trainer dedicated to serving communities and entrepreneurs navigating the new economy. [MoCollins.com](http://MoCollins.com)

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Photography gives life to this report. Photographer Tim Dodd captured many of the moments, connections and the beauty of the Cedar Valley through his lens. Thank you for sharing.

## Ecosystems

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Over the past decade, an enormous amount of research and field work has been conducted on the topic of entrepreneurial ecosystems, generally characterized as regions that have purposeful environments supporting high levels of entrepreneurial activity.

Short term, these places have more startups and scale-ups and enjoy a vibrancy that attracts other entrepreneurs. Long term, they are transformed by expanding cycles of entrepreneurial activity and a particular kind of vitality—a shift in community thinking, perhaps—that fosters population and economic diversity, innovation and creativity.

These places provide an extraordinary quality of life for their residents.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are the perfect climate for the new economy, but how to best create them remains elusive. There is consensus that no one person or group of people creates ecosystems. It takes a variety of contributors generously working together, including entrepreneurs and those from support organizations. There are requisite assets—cultural, historical, natural and created—that seem important as well. The resulting ecosystems are different in every community. Many things, large and small, have contributed here, including strong entrepreneurial leadership, community investments, Internet speeds, a university pipeline and more. And there is further work to do around collaboration, inclusion and benchmarking.

During the winter of 2019–’20, personal interviews were conducted with more than two dozen community and entrepreneur support organizations, entrepreneurs and civic champions in the Cedar Valley. These perspectives and the accompanying narrative strive to build upon the relatedness of each interview, conversation and every experience to showcase how the magic was sparked and why it continues. There is shared exuberance and hope in the valley—coupled with positive discontent, as there is so much more to do.

This is the story of the Cedar Valley.



## This Is the Valley

The Cedar Valley is a multi-county region nestled in the river valleys of northeastern Iowa with a population of approximately 170,000 people. It is anchored by two contrasting communities: Cedar Falls (pop. 41,048) and Waterloo (pop. 67,587). Like most regions in the country, the shift to a technology-led economy has been characterized by incremental economic change over the past two-and-a-half decades, deeply punctuated by the 2008 recession and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The recession slowed the economy short term but accelerated the pace of technology adoption. The impact of COVID-19 remains unknown.



### *Cedar Falls*

Traditionally white collar, Cedar Falls has taken off as a vibrant hub for tech-led entrepreneurship. Startups and scale-ups are prominent players in the central business district, at the University of Northern Iowa and in the tech park. The number of locally owned firms—one measurement of entrepreneurial activity—has grown by nearly 10% in recent years.



Density has grown too. This downtown has evolved from a vacancy-ridden parkade in the 1980s to a national award-winning entertainment and residential district today. It is an eclectic mix of retail, entertainment, tech, niche services, residential living and outdoor amenities. Sixty new companies have launched in the district since 2014 and many more from Mill Race cowork, a local collaborative workspace for startup and scale-up businesses. More than 200 urban-style housing units have been constructed, doubling the tax base and increasing the number of downtown residents. A notable number of graduating students from the University of Northern Iowa are staying in the region; others are finding their way back.

Entrepreneurship of all kinds is expected here.

## ***Waterloo***

In neighboring Waterloo, the shift has been slower, more methodical. Waterloo was a powerhouse manufacturing region for most of the 20th century. John Deere, Rath meatpacking and Conagra dominated the city's economy for decades, cultivating a talent pool of makers and builders in lieu of programmers and coders. The 2008 recession accelerated the push for automation among local manufacturers—a trend already underway—resulting in high unemployment and displaced workers.

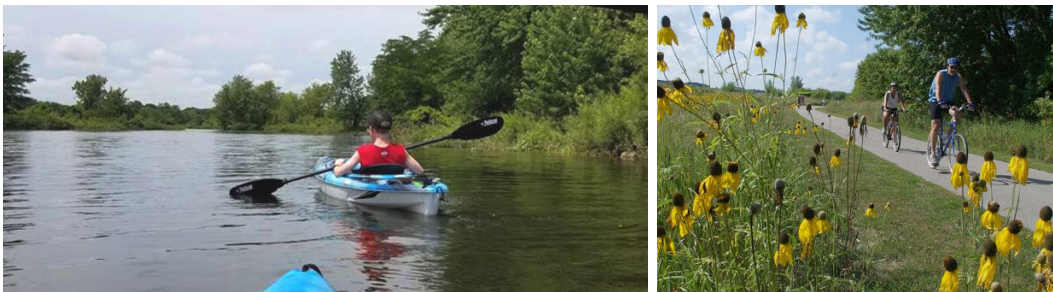
Waterloo is diverse for Iowa. It has the highest percentage of African Americans in the state at 15.5%. Unemployment rates, however, hover in the double digits for African Americans, resulting in necessity-vs.-opportunity entrepreneurship and high churn rates, something service organizations there want to change. A maker movement is slowly emerging, too, as residents are unlearning generations of worker culture and cautiously ramping up startups in the trades.



Traveling east from Cedar Falls on Highway 218, one can see a towering brick manufacturing complex once belonging to John Deere at the edge of Waterloo. It is now a planned campus called TechWorks, featuring collaborative research space and multiple design labs supporting the transition to automated, advanced and additive manufacturing including, the nationally acclaimed University of Northern Iowa Additive Manufacturing Center, which leads innovation in the foundry industry. Here, corporate manufacturing is in the early stages of advantageous collision with makers and doers. Makers in both communities have access to a 5,500-square-foot makerspace at TechWorks. There are nearly 80 local members, many of whom are former John Deere workers. They lead classes and offer mentoring across a wide range of welding and machining applications and in Arduino software for robotic projects.

Entrepreneurs here get their hands dirty.

Geographically, Waterloo and Cedar Falls are separated only by a wide greenbelt, featuring a premier 1,400-acre public park called George Wyth State Park. Trailheads in each city meet in the middle of Wyth and radiate outward to more than 100 miles of bicycle paths, fishing spots, sporting waterways and campsites. It is an emerging sports tourist destination spurred on by recent riverfront improvements in both cities. The economies of these two communities were on very different trajectories in the old economy, but their futures are deeply intertwined, much as they are physically connected by the greenbelt. Part of the opportunity and the excitement around ecosystem building here is in riding the intersecting waves of people, cultures and ideas.



## Early Waves of Entrepreneurs: A Virtuous Cycle ---

According to a 2018 report by consultant Dr. Erik Pages of Virginia-based EntreWorks, “Places with robust ecosystems can often trace their development back to a small handful of entrepreneurs or company leaders who in turn helped spawn new firms as serial entrepreneurs, investors, mentors or partners.” Several entrepreneurs who launched startups in the last century are standout contributors to the ecosystem cycle today.

### ***Mark Kittrell***

Sixty-two-year-old Mark Kittrell of Eagle View Partners is a downtown developer in Cedar Falls and was among an early wave of technology entrepreneurs in the valley. His company, Team Technologies, was acquired at the height of the dot.com boom, leaving him free to retire at 40; however, it didn’t stick. “I realized pretty quickly that this wasn’t how I wanted my life to go,” he says. “I wanted to be part of something bigger than self. I went from technologist to community developer with Eagle View. Now I carry a different staff.”

Kittrell knew that urban downtown lifestyles were attracting young entrepreneurs, and he saw an opportunity to build-out a small brownfield site sandwiched between Main Street and the Cedar River. He didn’t pull the trigger on the project, however, until one morning when he arrived at his offices to find a startup company founder sleeping in his conference room. He describes that moment as a reality check: “If we offer a high quality of life in the valley, I think we have a shot at keeping some of these young entrepreneurs. I want to be here, but we have to take it to the next level to keep other entrepreneurs here.”

**“I want to be here, but we have to take it to the next level to keep other entrepreneurs here.”**

—Mark Kittrell, Eagle View Partners

In 2014, Kittrell launched an ambitious \$50M riverfront live-work-thrive development. His vision included both housing and retail. He designed townhomes, apartments and studios with rooftop balconies and pet-friendly policies, then overlaid placemaking amenities like housekeeping, concierge and dog walking services, and public hubs with fireplaces, coffee and tea. He set aside studio space for Airbnb rentals and created an outdoor pavilion for summer gatherings and ice-skating during Iowa winters.

Currently, the 200 residential units that make up the River Place development are home to approximately 300 millennial downtown residents (average age of 26), who work primarily in the valley’s technology, healthcare, education and engineering space. In a recent survey, 60% of those residents indicated they were attracted in from outside the Cedar Valley, affirmation that today’s economic vitality is tied to place as strongly as roads and rail were tied to attracting the last century’s innovators.

### ***Andy Van Fleet***

On the other side of the valley, 45-year-old Andy Van Fleet is the founder and CEO of a leading User Experience (UX) strategy and product design agency serving multiple commercial sectors. Launched on the heels of the dot.com bust, Visual Logic emerged from those ashes as an anchor technology firm in the valley. The company provides UX expertise for some of the nation’s most pressing challenges. For example, they recently developed an IED detection interface used by the Department of Defense to locate and dismantle mines in Afghanistan and Iraq.





Since its inception, Visual Logic (VLG) has held another mission beyond the complicated technology interface it creates. “Our company could operate from anywhere,” says Van Fleet, “and perhaps it would have been easier to grow in another location—but we exist to create great jobs in the Cedar Valley because the Cedar Valley has been so good to our family. It is part of our mission.”

**“We exist to create great jobs in the Cedar Valley because the Cedar Valley has been so good to our family.”**

—Andy Van Fleet, Visual Logic

In 2014, Visual Logic purchased and renovated an iconic 8,500-square-foot downtown property in the heart of the Waterloo district. The main floor build-out became a beta for a collaborative space called id8, which welcomed community entrepreneurs, organizations and idea generators to engage with the VLG team and other scaling companies. Central to the concept was the place: an expansive open floor plan, mini-conference space and a raised central gathering hub with barista-worthy amenities. The collaborative space was flanked by flex-lease private offices with other unusual benefits including ensuites, showers, a laundry and bike storage. Happening@id8 became a siren call for social, educational and collaborative events. Van Fleet sunset the space in 2019 for his own team but not before fundamentally altering the district culture around coworking and collaboration.



Van Fleet also created one of the first private-sector-led UX academies in the country; an immersive training and experiential learning program. The project required nearly 1,000 hours of professional staff time to create and has served more than 50 students. “We wanted to ensure we had the quality of talent needed here,” he says. “This solution fits with our human-centered mission and provides our local graduates with one more reason to stay.” As of 2020, a dozen graduates are employed full time at Visual Logic and a majority remain in the Cedar Valley.

Individuals like Kittrell and Van Fleet are not alone. There are others. These earlier waves of entrepreneurs are widely acknowledged to be part of a virtuous cycle of innovation, shared resources and broad community contribution, serving as an inspiration for current entrepreneurs in leadership roles.

## A New Wave of Entrepreneurs: Change Agents

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Along State Street on an unseasonably warm January afternoon in 2020, the energy is palpable. Brick-front townhouses and studios line one side of the street. Colorful Mill Race flags advertise coworking and office suites from second-floor windows. Glimpses of the wide-flowing Cedar River are visible between buildings and an abundance of shore birds soar and dive on the water. Dog walkers and bundled-up joggers move on the river path in the distance.



On the opposite side of the street, a line of historic storefronts hugs the sidewalk. Their plate-glass windows magnify groups gathered in the crowded Tea Cellar and the State Street Brewery. Farther down, the iconic Hurts Donuts is full of high schoolers, and next door, an only slightly older group stands outside Hurling Hatchets drinking beer. People call to one another across the street, cars circle like hawks—there is literally nowhere to park. No one seems to mind. This is the hub of a small-city ecosystem.

Like many regions of this size, the resources and services available to support this kind of economic vitality are robust. In the past, the rate of entrepreneurial activity here climbed with the introduction of new programs, leadership or economic shifts, then fell again in response to similar downturns. For many, this seemed the natural rhythm of things, but others asked why.





### ***Trace Steffen***

Sitting in the windowed nook at the Tea Cellar, entrepreneur and ecosystem champion Trace Steffen politely waits for a little timer to ping, announcing that the pair of aromatic teapots have steeped long enough to pour. He reflects upon those peaks and valleys. “I am that guy”, he says, “that is always asking why.” Steffen believed long before others, that a supportive community of like-minded innovators could rise to form a kind of ‘connecting tissue’ to keep the momentum sparked and organically push out waves of ongoing creative entrepreneurial activity into every sector of the community. It was a big vision and he was the lone man dancing for a long time.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman issued a report in 2015 called “Measuring an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem” which touched on this. In it, the authors describe the importance of “density” in ecosystems, suggesting that the “mere existence of programmatic resources is not the same thing as effectiveness, let alone vibrancy.” They suggest that dense networks of connections matter more.

Steffen maintains that it is entrepreneurs who can drive that density. He and others began focusing efforts to connect people, resources and community in 2014. They forged informal alliances over coffee or beer, solved shared problems and accelerated the movement of those solutions through their growing network. Their efforts attracted others of differing backgrounds, cultures and lifestyles, leading to novel approaches that might not otherwise have emerged, and ultimately launched more companies in the valley.

How this spiraling network of connections begins and grows is an important part of understanding ecosystem building.



### ***Danny Laudick***

Danny Laudick is the executive director of Red Cedar, the nonprofit recently organized to formalize these efforts. He steps out of his office, a narrow, windowless broom closet tucked inside of Mill Race in downtown Cedar Falls. At one end is a metal shelving unit, crowded

with bottles of Iowa whiskey in various stages of undress from the most recent Whiskey Friday social hour. At the other end is a tiny desk piled with papers, shaded by a complicated-looking Regional Innovation Network map, a wayback-machine find he often points to in describing how connections are formed.

At 31, Laudick is engaged in all sides of ecosystem building; on one hand, he is an entrepreneur on the hunt for the startup cause that will allow him to change the world, but until then, he works to build the environment where other entrepreneurs can thrive. Laudick and Steffen are the super champions of the Cedar Valley ecosystem.

They gather around the table for conversation at the Community Main Street office, along with several other entrepreneurs, who by their collective admissions have drunk a lot of whiskey, hosted strangers in their living rooms and invested hundreds of hours in supporting one another in launching companies.

The meetup is a couple of weeks before Christmas, and the Main Street office is busy with people darting in and out of the conference room picking up full-size costumes of Santa and elves. As many as 10,000 visitors descend upon downtown over the holidays for Holiday Hoopla. It's a thing. Between the elf entrances and exits, Steffen shares his entrepreneurial story.

In 2014, he launched HowFactory, a Cedar Falls software startup serving the manufacturing industry. HowFactory was ranked on #TechCrunch's Battlefield Leaderboard as a disruptor to watch as they debuted a better way to create employee training and instruction manuals online.



Steffen migrated nearly 50 miles south to a Cedar Rapids accelerator program called the Iowa Startup Accelerator to support his launch. During the big Launch Day graduation event that attracted more than 800 attendees, Steffen saw a number of locals in the crowd. “None of us really knew one another until that day. It was the first time I realized there was anyone else in the Cedar Valley.”

**“It was the first time I realized there was anyone else.”**

—Trace Steffen, HowFactory

Laudick was serving as the director of talent development at a regional economic development organization called Grow Cedar Valley in 2014. Even then, he believed entrepreneurship was under-supported, but there was little appetite at the time from his employer to develop new strategies around startups. “No one in our office was charged with intentional work with startups, so I just took it up,” he says. He joined a busload of Cedar Valley supporters attending

the Iowa Startup Accelerator Launch Day where Steffen was pitching. After seeing Steffen on stage and learning he was from Cedar Falls, Laudick had many questions. “One of the things I asked myself at the time,” he says, “was why did Trace have to go to another community to get what he needed for his startup?” That question was quickly followed by, “Why don’t I know this person?” He sought out Steffen that night, putting a pin in one of the first connections. “We know first-hand,” Laudick says, “the importance of serendipitous collisions.”

## “Why don’t I know this person?”

—Danny Laudick, Red Cedar

Back in Cedar Falls, Steffen, his wife, Angie, and others were gathering for semi-regular meetups, including some that took place in the Steffens’ living room. A dozen UNI students joined in, to volun-task on a project for the HowFactory. Soon, “What are you guys having for dinner, Angie? That smells delicious,” became a passcode and an expectation.



One of those students was Trevor Carlson. Carlson came to UNI from Ida Grove, a tiny, western Iowa community full of castle-themed architecture. (Note: There is a real moat around their Pizza Hut.) Carlson was accepted into the R.J. McElroy Student Business Incubator, a program of the UNI John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center (JPEC), where he launched a business that failed. He describes his initial involvement as a defensive move. “I was hell-bent on figuring this thing out,” he says. “I tried to get in front of every person I could who might have something interesting I could learn from.” He found that and more in the Steffens’ living room.

Carlson was attracted to the conversations underway between Steffen and Laudick, in part because of the welcoming comradery he found there. He was determined to expand it. He sent out cold emails, inviting people to a Startup Coffee, which attracted a few entrepreneurs then dozens more. At the University of Northern Iowa, a few people were experimenting with something called Bar Camp and hosting 1M Cups and Startup Weekends, which attracted many of the same creatives. Angie Steffen coordinated an Agile Training. The network was informal but growing, driven by half a dozen entrepreneurs and supporters willing to put in time, effort on social media, and then show up ... over and over. Events were organized around work schedules and kids, pocket money and access to free space.

After only a few months it became clear that a physical space was needed to further the momentum. UNI had a new campus building with incubation services, but the challenges of parking passes and what was described as “ticket roulette” muddled much of the networking there. The new downtown River Place development included a blueprint for a proposed coworking space, but the plans in 2014 were still fluid.





Laudick and Steffen discovered a vacant property that was temporarily available in the downtown core. Formerly a Chamber of Commerce office, the building was on “pause” waiting for the site development that would either move or demolish the structure. Laudick approached developer Kris Hansen, CEO of Western Home Communities, to ask if the group could use the space on a temporary basis to cowork. By temporary, Steffen notes, they accepted the idea of being kicked out at any time in exchange for access. In spite of the potential liability and with little knowledge of any of the entrepreneurs involved, Hansen said yes. It was a small but notable leap of faith. “I am constantly trying to bring innovation to what we do at Western Homes,” Hansen says, “so it wasn’t as big of a leap as you might think. I understood what they were trying to do.” The benefit to the loose network of entrepreneurs was profound. The building offered a hub that was local, visible and accessible to entrepreneurs, plus the association with Western Homes, however loose, sanctioned their efforts.

Once Western Homes bought in, so did Cedar Falls Utilities (CFU) who provided free 1G connectivity to the coworkers, thanks in no small part to Steffen, who made the bold ask and put another pin in the map by directly involving CFU, then widely broadcasting the utilities’ supportive involvement with entrepreneurship economic development.



The building was a blank slate, devoid of fixtures or equipment. “When we initially moved in,” Angie Steffen says, “it was all sticky notes and chalkboard paint.” She went to a UNI salvage sale to buy desks. They called the work space Mill Race in tribute to its place by the river, where a water-driven mill once operated. Mill Race became an open call to any creative wanting a place to engage or work, on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. The opening week was capped by a social hour—they called it Whiskey Friday. A few people showed up that first Friday; almost 50 crowded the space the following week. “After that, any money that came in went toward buying more whiskey, notes Trace Steffen with a laugh. “In a room full of engaged people, folding tables and blank walls didn’t really matter.”

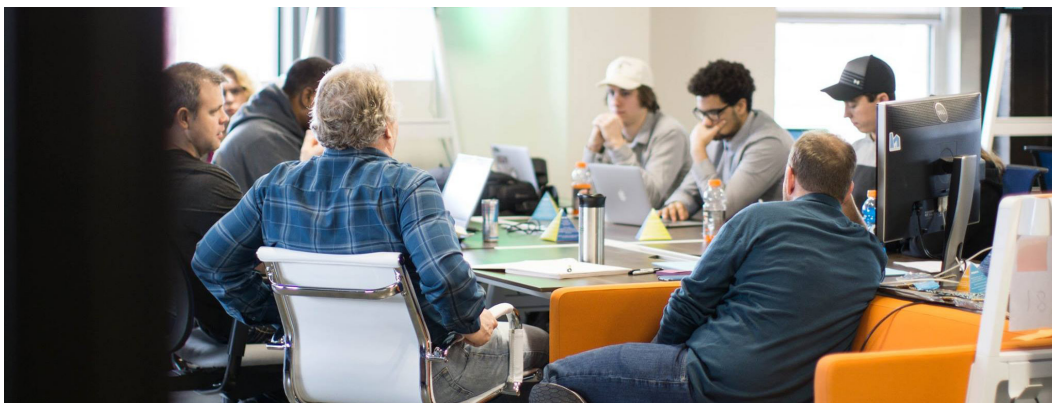
When River Place opened in September 2015 with a second-floor coworking space, Mill Race jumped ship from the old location to a new one. By then there were scores of entrepreneurs who had been engaged, connected and networked. Steffen and Laudick knew every one of them by name and could speak in intimate terms about the ventures they were working on, their needs and the talents they brought to the network. Carlson took on a solivigant journey. He traveled to Thailand, Sweden, Bosnia and Vietnam bringing home perspectives, ideas and connections with entrepreneurs living far different lives than that of Midwestern entrepreneurs. His insights inform the local ecosystem- and a broader swath of entrepreneurs internationally- through his human experience centered 'Formula Podcasts'.

## Red Cedar

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The move to the new Mill Race loosely coincided with the planning and subsequent formation of the nonprofit Red Cedar. There was community-wide agreement that the valley would be better served by a formal organization but how to do that in conjunction with existing regional institutions and leadership was the first hurdle for the entrepreneurial leaders.

On the entrepreneur side of things Steffen and Laudick plus a handful of others were showing up every day to support events, trainings, meetups and more. Turnover among volunteer champions and potential slag periods in the energy were still concerns. Steffen pointed to stories in other regions of burnout among champions who also ran startup companies. Many of them were feeling the pinch. "I couldn't and won't just step away," he says, "but we had to have a way to continue broadening the network." Steffen envisioned fully-dedicated people building the community—connectors who aren't "feeding any other machine" or working for anyone else.



Laudick shopped the idea of a new, stand-alone nonprofit organization called Red Cedar among public and private community leaders. He suggested the nonprofit could be led by entrepreneurs and supported by service organizations in the region, improving collaboration and aligning the allocation of resources more closely to the needs of entrepreneurs. Moreover, once formed, Red Cedar could raise money, invest and become a point of contact for entrepreneurs. At the nearby University of Northern Iowa, Randy Pilkington, the director of Business and Community Services was quick to see the benefits. "I believed creating a system with public and private partners would move the Cedar Valley to success not previously realized," he says. "The Red Cedar approach offered a platform for bringing the Cedar Valley together with the educational institutions to collectively support entrepreneurs." It was done. Laudick was tapped to lead it, and Mill Race became Red Cedar's first operational program. Public and private sector funding followed.

Under Red Cedar's management, Mill Race in 2020 is a long way from sticky notes. It boasts all





the amenities: trendy movable furniture, whiteboard walls, inspirational quotes, a kitchen with many requisite coffeepots and 1G Internet. It would not look out of place in an urban hub. In fact, it has been compared to the American Underground cowork in Raleigh, North Carolina—except Raleigh’s has a walk-in beer cooler filled every month by sponsoring local microbreweries. Mill Race has all that Iowa whiskey.

Christian Gray is the community builder at Mill Race (or at least he was), a connecting human presence on site, forging referrals, listening to community needs and facilitating upward of 150 networking events annually. Gray just stepped away from Mill Race after being selected to participate in the Iowa Startup Accelerator’s EdTech program for his own venture called Apprenticeship America. The accelerator is an iteration of the same 12-week intensive program Steffen took part in during 2014. Gray is stoked.

“Have you heard of PIE?” he asks, while driving the two-hour round trip back from his first day in the accelerator. “It is one of the core values at Mill Race: Permission, Inspire and Empower. That is what Danny asked me to create in the community. Now I am doing it for myself.”

**“Have you heard of PIE? It is one of the core values at Mill Race: Permission, Inspire and Empower.”**

— Christian Gray, Apprenticeship America

The organic rise of entrepreneurial leadership in the Cedar Valley brought needed connections to the startup community and improved the communications between support organizations and entrepreneurs. Now, through the creation of Red Cedar, there is a sustainable cycle of what

Laudick calls “engineered serendipity,” connecting hundreds of entrepreneurs in the Cedar Valley at Mill Race—and more importantly going forward—beyond those walls. “When we first secured the downtown space, we needed a gateway for people to connect with the ecosystem,” Laudick says. “Proximity is important and we needed that door. But now in 2020, we have outgrown the idea of a simple gateway. Next, I think we need a beacon, projecting out, as compared to waiting for others to come in.”

## The University Pipeline

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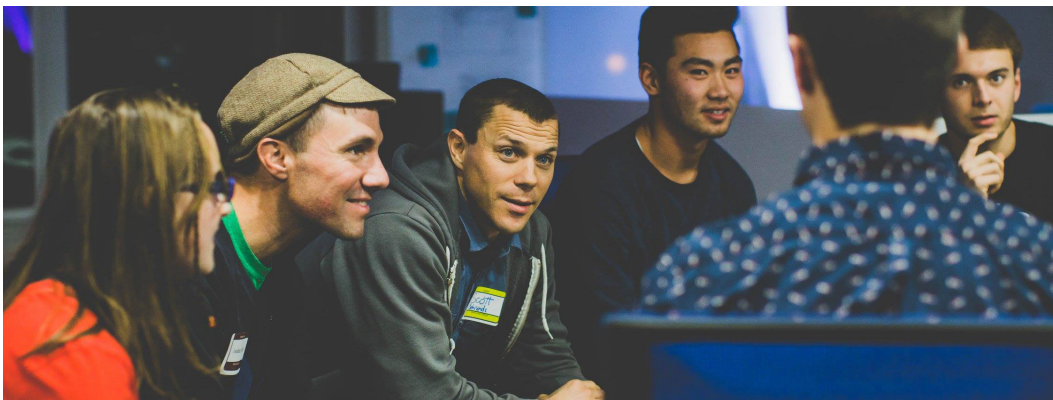
Identifying and engaging entrepreneurs are arguably two of the most difficult aspects of ecosystem building. The most promising startup may come from an individual in the back of a coffee shop—unknown, unnoticed and unserved. In the valley, one doesn’t have to dig very deep to discover that most innovators are connected in some way to the University of Northern Iowa. That pipeline is an invaluable asset.



UNI is a comprehensive public university and Iowa’s hometown school, with more than 85% of its 12,000 students coming from within the state. Geographically speaking, the campus is located on what is affectionately known as “The Hill,” about two miles from the downtown riverfront—a meandering path through two historic districts and just far enough to require a car.

Some universities contribute to ecosystem building in the form of licensing intellectual property. Others feed student and faculty innovators into the talent pool. Still other universities provide direct programming and coordinate resources. UNI has done all of these things in the Cedar Valley for more than 20 years through a dedicated outreach division called Business and Community Services (UNI BCS), headed up by Pilkington, who is widely considered an anchor ecosystem champion.

Since 2000, the university has dedicated millions of dollars and operated multiple programs to support entrepreneurial activity in the Cedar Valley, including three business incubators; capacity-building educational programs (serving minorities, women and growth companies);



the region's initial regional angel investment network; the Small Business Development Center; the Center for Business Growth and Innovation, and even business concierge services. It is a long list. According to university data, more than 200 businesses have been served with incubation services including the graduation of more than 40 student business startups directly into the Cedar Valley.

### ***Therese Stevens***

Therese Stevens is one of those student business graduates. Stevens followed her older brother to UNI from Boone, Iowa (a common occurrence according to the admissions office, that speaks to the tight-knit student experiences here). During her sophomore year, Stevens took a part-time campus job working for a startup company called Belly Bling. “I literally looked at the job board to find the one job that paid the most, and marketing belly button rings was it,” she says with a grin.

Her unlikely exposure to the startup scene changed the trajectory of her life. Within a few months, Stevens launched her own incubator startup in tandem with two other students at the JPEC incubator. The initial company was called SEO Solutions.

Laurie Watje is the associate director at JPEC and leads the student business incubator. Some of the students Watje has served here have seen more of Laurie than their own families during their college experiences, and it shows; she often refers to incubator students as her “kids,” although her background as a CPA belies that softness. Her students are exceptionally well prepared for startup and scale-up activities. Stevens is a great example of this.



Over a two-year period, SEO Solutions built a client base then merged with another startup. That company was acquired by the Cedar Valley marketing firm Mudd Advertising. Stevens experienced startup, scale-up and exit all before graduating from UNI. She ultimately stayed with Mudd for four years after her graduation as part of an earn-out agreement. “The day I left Mudd, however,” she says, “Shaun Linderbaum (another UNI grad), the founder of BraceAbility, reached out to see what my plans were. I landed there the following week. That is the power of this community. Your whole life can occur here.”

**That is the power of this community.  
Your whole life can occur here.”**

— Trace Stevens, BraceAbility

Today, Stevens is BraceAbility’s chief operating officer. The company is an ecommerce retailer of orthopedic braces and the second successful startup for its founder Linderbaum. As COO, Stevens is not currently engaged in the startup scene as a founder, but she says the role of



supporting talent should not be underestimated. “There are founders and there is talent. I am no longer a founder, but I make sure people like Shaun can execute (usually in 492 steps and color-coded!),” she says. “Honestly, without people like me, many of our companies could not scale. So the question becomes, how do we continue to build this pipeline of founders and talent?”

Of all the resources UNI has dedicated to the valley over the years, this rich pipeline of people has repeatedly been cited as having had the greatest impact on the ecosystem. To date, the movement of this talent is more organic than systemic. Measuring, formalizing and putting a strategy around this pipeline are critical next steps for the Cedar Valley ecosystem.

## Place

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In the realm of ecosystem building, placemaking is central to attracting, supporting and nurturing entrepreneurs and the talent they hire. Creating that environment is part art, part culture and part economic development. Community Main Street (CMS), an award-winning downtown revitalization program in Cedar Falls, has played a central role in placemaking here.



The default coffee meetup hub in downtown Cedar Falls is a hip corner storefront called Cup of Joe. Its long, narrow interior is lined with half a dozen vivid-hued chrome and Formica kitchen tables and chair sets. A scratchy, low-slung, orange sofa from the 1950s is an iconic beast in the storefront window. People actually sit on it. Here, the wood and tile floors talk back, there are real newspapers on the counter, and the smell of coffee is dark and sweet. When Carol Lilly walks through the towering glass entrance doors, a chorus of hellos greets her.

Lilly is a longtime director of Community Main Street and the economic numbers she shares are breathtaking. More than 60 businesses have opened in the past six years alone: Donuts, beer, specialty meats, tattoos, tea, yoga, bikes and more are within strolling distance. Collectively, these downtown gems have created a total of 325 new jobs since 2014.



**“I think ecosystem builders could learn a lot from downtown revitalization. We have a lot of experience with collaboration, patience and community building.”**

—Carol Lilly, Community Main Street

The recent River Place development has added nearly 300 millennial residents. The riverfront hotel (newly built over the old Mill Race site) has attracted more tourism to downtown. This kind of environment is like breathing air to entrepreneurs—necessary and critical for them to thrive.

All of these efforts have been important, Lilly says, but it did not happen overnight or without some pain. Collaboration among developers, city hall, entrepreneurs and merchants was tightly wound at times. “Frankly,” she says, “I think ecosystem builders could learn a lot from downtown revitalization. We have a lot of experience with collaboration, patience and community building.”

## Relationships Drive Resources

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Collaboration is key to ecosystem building, yet many are quick to note that it hasn't come easily or quickly in the Cedar Valley. Entrepreneur support organizations like Grow Cedar Valley, Community Main Street and UNI were initially wary of their interactions with the entrepreneurs and one another in 2014.



At first, Grow Cedar Valley, the regional economic development organization struggled with sharing a leadership role with the university and others when their resources were in play. Community Main Street worried that the smallest of firms were being overlooked and undervalued in the ecosystem. After decades of being the single provider of entrepreneurship services in the valley, UNI was challenged to share the work and shift to a collaborative service delivery model that included the entrepreneurs themselves. Red Cedar became the vehicle to shift those perceptions and bring institutions together in support of entrepreneurship economic development.

As the executive director of Red Cedar, Laudick has formed a personal ethos around “relationships first, resources second” in accomplishing these goals. In quiet moments he reflects on the enormity of balancing the desires of stakeholders with the needs of entrepreneurs, especially when they are not aligned, which is often the case. The lesson here, according to Laudick, is that relationships can and will transcend.



At Red Cedar, UNI, Grow Cedar Valley and in the entrepreneurial community at large, a small number of individuals have come together to purposefully cultivate trust-driven bonds, which they say result in far better organizational collaboration and improved sharing of resources, credit and leadership. A good example is found in the approach used by incoming director at Grow Cedar Valley Cary Darrah, who speaks not of her own ambition but says, “My service may be most important here as a change agent to bring forward support for the people and ideas of the next generation of economic developers.”



Patrick Luensmann is another leader in this space. He is a senior program manager at the University of Northern Iowa. Over the past five years, he often found himself in the midst of collaborative conflicts at the tactical level. “We held Startup Weekend on campus the first time, then some people assumed it would stay there the second time around, but TechWorks wanted to host. Mill Race had a great meetup spot too. Navigating those conversations can be exhausting. If you stop at the organic, surface relationships we all build, that person at TechWorks may be my adversary and not my collaborator when we discuss who leads, who follows, who pays and who gets credit,” he says. “Finding a way forward is far easier when I know his dog died last week or she knows we are expecting another baby. We purposefully cultivate that.”

Just being present and accounted for is a big part of it he says. “A community of entrepreneurs requires being a bit philanthropic with one’s time to build strong relationships. You’ve got to show up,” Luensmann says, “not necessarily to get something back but to re-seed the positive.”

Collectively, these unusual champions model the kind of relationship and learning-focused leadership needed for ecosystem building. It is a critical lesson for most every community in how to “get along.”

## Connections During Crisis

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Understanding how ecosystems can support entrepreneurs during difficult periods has not attracted much attention in the research or field, yet stories in the valley suggest those relationships can be instrumental in holding up companies when they struggle—or even fail. Chad Feldman, a founder at Far Reach Technologies—a leading technology firm in the valley—

believes support for struggling entrepreneurs is why places with mature ecosystems like the Silicon Valley have so much entrepreneurship. “If it doesn’t work out over here, I can always go over there for a while and come back to try it again. It’s OK to do that,” he says. “When we take that chain off from around people’s necks, we release so much innovation.”

Trevor Carlson, for example, was an early champion for the ecosystem, in part because he was supported through failure. Even though his first venture didn’t take off, he found no stigma around his loss; rather it inspired him to get in front of that experience and create new connections to learn more.

Those same kinds of connections created a lifeline for Visual Logic when it suffered an overnight catastrophic loss of revenue in early 2016. The company, globally scaling their UX strategy and product design services, dedicated nearly all of its efforts for a time to a single major client in a multiyear contract supporting 27 professional staff. Mid-contract the client pulled the plug, and the company’s revenue went into free fall.



Visual Logic CEO Andy Van Fleet describes those first moments as surreal. “There was a lot of guilt,” he says. “Should I have seen it coming? Could I have managed better? Of course. Everyone’s job was at risk, and I was responsible for it.” Alone, struggling to determine what to do next, he made a decision.

Over a two-week period, he reached out to key connections—individuals with whom he had built relationships. These were people who knew him, his company and his ethos the best. He called them “The Greats.” He sat across the table from each of these individuals and shared his story in its entirety and openly asked for their advice. “It was humbling,” he says, “and so many good things came from this.”

After the very first conversation, he lost his fear. “Over and over, these individuals said to me, ‘Yes, I have been there too. You aren’t alone, Andy. You must do the work by yourself because it is yours to do, but you aren’t alone. Have confidence.’”

**“It took the power of community to breathe opportunity into this crisis.”**

—Andy Van Fleet, Visual Logic

From those conversations, Van Fleet was able to map out multiple strategies to rebuild, rethink and pivot Visual Logic back to solid ground. His banker stepped up, allowing the company to

continue their line of credit for more than a year, unsecured. Van Fleet describes that time as a race between time and money. “We literally went back to day one—winning one new contract, then two and then three. It was exhausting, difficult and humbling work, but day by day, things improved, sometimes by just a few dollars.” Over the course of three years, Visual Logic got back on track with a more diverse client list and a promising future—taking up where they left off in 2016. Van Fleet says, “It took the power of community to breathe opportunity into this crisis.”

## Contributing Assets

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Passionate entrepreneurs, a vibrant place, a rich pipeline of talent and all those densely intersecting pins connecting people, resources and ideas have contributed to the creation of the ecosystem in the Cedar Valley. There are other contributing assets here as well, including Internet speed and a city government actively striving to become more responsive to new economy businesses.

### ***Bandwidth***

Readily available high-speed bandwidth has been a fundamental game changer for Cedar Falls—and a critical weakness for Waterloo. Cedar Falls Utilities (CFU) introduced high-speed bandwidth all the way back in 1996 in response to a forward-leaning public referendum. Today, the community is among the best connected in the United States. Team Technologies, Mark Kittrell’s startup company, for example, moved to Cedar Falls to take advantage of that connectivity. They employed more than 400 full-time employees before being acquired. “It would not have been possible for us to have launched the kind of technology company we did anywhere else,” Kittrell says. “Our entire business model was built around this bandwidth.”

In 2013, Cedar Falls became Iowa’s first gigabit city. Google named Cedar Falls the best ecommerce city in the state later the same year. Throughout the Cedar Falls community today, residents and entrepreneurs simply expect speed. According to Steffen, connectivity at HowFactory isn’t even a blip on its radar. “Our connectivity is so good, we take it for granted. How many communities can say that?”

Rob Houlihan is the chief technology officer at CFU. He admits that the forward-leaning leadership at CFU is unusual for a public utility. “We are cautious and mindful, but we are not afraid of change. In fact, I hate that phrase, ‘we’ve always done it that way,’” Houlihan says. “I am often asked, ‘Why do we need to be a gig city? What exactly will people do with it?’ My answer is always the same: ‘I don’t know who needs this, and that is why we’re doing it.’”

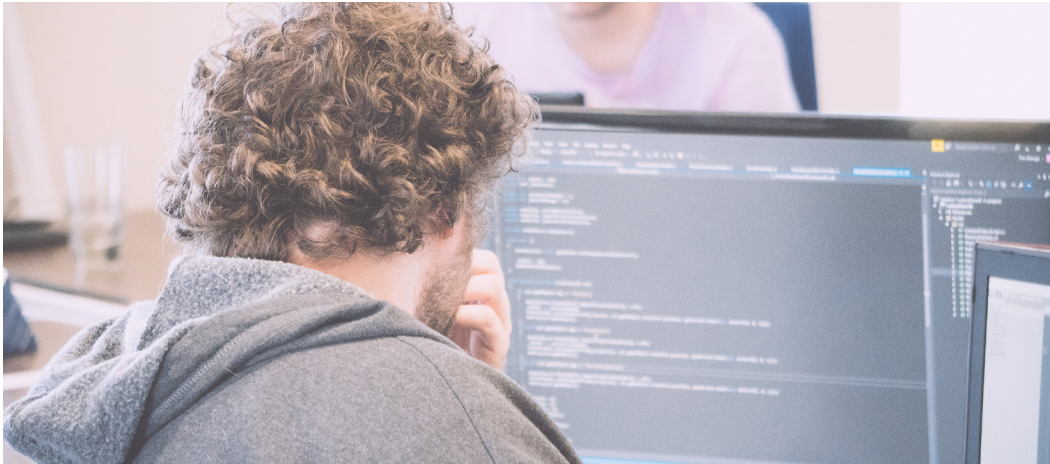
**“I am often asked, ‘Why do we need to be a gig city?  
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—Rob Houlihan, Cedar Falls Utilities

The tech-led stories rising from this ecosystem are powerful. A young Nick Cash stumbled across CFU connection speeds while enrolled in an afterschool program at his Cedar Falls middle school in the early 2000s. “About 30 other kids and I figured out we could link up the computer lab to play games with online gamers around the world,” he says. Soon after, Cash discovered that many of the online games were open-source, so he downloaded code and learned to modify his favorite games. He was 13 years old.

Cash's exposure to gaming in middle school led to a passion for programming. He graduated from high school with more than 40 credit hours from UNI in computer sciences and subsequently launched an award-winning tech company in the JPEC incubator. In 2015, he was recruited by Jam City, a huge global gaming company with tens of millions of gaming customers worldwide. The plum job offer came with a stipulation that he move to the Silicon Valley in California.

He refused.



In a perfect example of “company follows talent,” Cash convinced Jam City to open an Iowa office at the emerging Mill Race cowork instead. Since then, Jam City’s Iowa presence has grown to nine local programmers, and they recently signed a long-term lease in the new State Street suites downtown. The Cedar Falls team uses all-fiber gigabit Internet. Cash says the other offices are jealous. “In our industry, the joke is, ‘Well, I’m waiting for my code to compile,’” he says. “But one of the perks of living in the Cedar Valley is our gigabit Internet. If we have Skype connection issues during our daily standup, it’s always on the Silicon Valley end. We tell them we have ‘corn-fed’ bandwidth here.”

**“We tell them we have ‘corn-fed’ bandwidth here.”**

— Nick Cash, Jam City

These kinds of stories are gratifying to everyone at CFU. “I didn’t know that happened,” Houlihan says, “but I believe those things and more are possible.” By way of an exclamation point, CFU just rolled out 10G connectivity and in June 2020 was named the fastest internet service provider in the United States by PCMag.

Conversely, the city of Waterloo floated a referendum in 2001 for a public telecommunications utility. A portion of the referendum passed, creating a Telecommunications Board, but funding to support installation of a municipal system did not. Some 20 years later, a task force is working its way through a long and arduous feasibility study phase once again. The comparative lack of bandwidth in Waterloo has arguably slowed ecosystem development there. Andy Van Fleet now chairs that task force. “We invested an enormous amount to get bandwidth into Visual Logic’s building—otherwise we couldn’t be here. This is a barrier we all know needs to be broken and soon.”

#### ***Guide and Support vs. Regulate and Bar***

City governments have a profound influence upon ecosystem development. From planning



and zoning to ordinances, licensing and business regulations, city hall can incentivize or dis-incentivize entrepreneurial activity. In recent years, planning departments have been pummeled by new business models, including Uber, Airbnb, pop-up retail and mobile food trucks, coworks and now an unprecedented rise in solopreneurs and remote workers. Many communities do not have ordinances in place to guide the operations of these new models. A trio of voices from the public and private sectors suggest things are improving, albeit slowly.

Paul Farmer of Cedar Falls is a well-known serial entrepreneur with an appetite for an array of business models, many of which have challenged old economy regulations. One of Farmer's first companies was a 3D printing business, launched in 2010 before 3D printers were widely available. His company, a first in the valley, provided 3D-printed prototypes to local industry. Farmer was accepted into the UNI campus incubator supporting technology transfer, but less than two weeks in, he was asked to vacate the office because the 4x4-foot floor-standing printer couldn't pass current code and no one was certain how to make it comply. According to the incubator director there at the time, his only option was to wait for a review and hope it could pass layers of bureaucracy to be exempted. Knowing the effort would distract from his launch, Farmer stepped away, losing the value of the incubation services and office space. Everyone lost.



In 2012, Farmer converted a 24-foot trailer into a sleek mobile gaming business called Gameliner. The bold red-and-black unit featured a 16-foot expansion with four 50-inch high-definition screens and custom sound for gaming parties and events. It was cool. He scheduled his grand opening celebration in a public space adjacent to Mill Race. He completed the requisite city paperwork but missed a line in the application that indicated a vote from the full city council was required before his event. "I should have read the application more carefully," Farmer notes, but it took Mayor Jim Brown's kind intervention to keep the grand opening from being entirely derailed. The mayor, in overriding the rule, stated he was committed to doing more common-sense decision-making.

**“We are creating a better, more easily approachable city hall now, and that makes it easier for people like me to innovate.”**

— Paul Farmer, Hurling Hatchets

It should be no surprise then, when Farmer caught wind of a hatchet-throwing, beer-drinking trend catching on elsewhere in the country, his first call went back to the mayor. The mayor's tongue-in-cheek response was, "Hmm, axes and alcohol—what could possibly go wrong?" Farmer's request was expedited, however, to the right folks, who cleared the business within a day with minimal paperwork or trips to city hall. Farmer believes the valley is making progress. "I wonder if a business such as Hurling Hatchets would have even been considered a decade ago," he says. "We are creating a better, more easily approachable city hall now, and that makes it easier for people like me to innovate."



Nick Taiber is a local city councilman and the corporate development director for the private equity firm CPM Holdings—he also helped paint the walls at Mill Race. He notes that pushing change in bureaucracies is difficult and slow, while the Internet has our foot on the accelerator. “People,” he says, “have a right to try. We don’t realize how much of an impact the regulatory environment has on innovation here.”

Business bureaucracy extends to the university as well. Denita Gadson is the academic adviser for diversity and inclusion at UNI and a longtime advocate for small business in the valley. “Even at this university,” she says, “there are rules that prohibit companies that cannot provide proof of extremely high insurance coverage from doing business with us, effectively screening out the startups who most need to be included. All of our public sector entities need to rethink those old rules to ensure we are providing equal access to business opportunities.”

## Widening the Arc

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There is an old story about Waterloo and Cedar Falls that goes like this: When the site of the county courthouse was given to Cedar Falls in 1843, a group of disgruntled Waterloo residents drove a team of horses to Cedar Falls in the middle of the night and pulled the building over to Waterloo, acting upon the prairie adage of “whoever has the building has the county seat.” Supposedly, the rift between the communities has continued in one form or another through modern times. Comparisons, in fact, between the two communities were still common during interviews 177 years later.



Danny Laudick is a one-man champion out to put that perception to bed once and for all. “This place, this ecosystem is made up of all us, not some of us. We are here to support one another—everyone in the entrepreneurial stack matters, and I don’t care if they are from Waterloo, Waverly, Cedar Falls or somewhere else in the valley. We will move forward together.”

Widening the arc from the vibrant hub in Cedar Falls and the sparks at TechWorks to include the broader region in meaningful ways is an important goal, and there is much enthusiasm to listen, connect and serve entrepreneurs throughout the region in bigger, more meaningful ways.

Stevens at BraceAbility notes that the first priority should be on careful active listening to understand people’s experiences in the ecosystem. “Whether it’s at Mill Race or somewhere else, we should be thoughtful,” she says, “of what entrepreneurs need from the community and understand their experiences by gender, age, industry, race, stage of business, etc.”

This is particularly challenging—and an opportunity—for minority entrepreneurship in the valley. Gadson points out that Waterloo was ranked the #1 worst place in the country for African



Americans to live by USA Today in 2019. In February of that year, the unemployment rate among African Americans was 23.9% vs. 4.4% among whites. It's a clear crisis. There is a fundamental opportunity here, and entrepreneurship can be a part of the solution, but it will need the connections and passion of the ecosystem to solve. She adds, "If we are a community, then everyone should eat, not just be welcome at the table."

Red Cedar's inclusive vision is huge and critical. Recent work in this space has been fruitful. New entrepreneurs are emerging to stake a claim in the startup space in Waterloo. Organic networks are forming and a clear call to action is underway. Part of the opportunity lies in sharing the network of meaningful connections that straddle the valley to include culturally distinct entrepreneurs.

## Measuring the Value of an Ecosystem

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- Trace Steffen boldly launching a cowork community in tandem with a startup.
- Nick Cash recruiting a global gaming company to Cedar Falls instead of leaving for a job.
- Therese Stevens finding a life in the valley through entrepreneurship.
- Andy Van Fleet navigating a business crisis through a connected network of "greats."
- Christian Gray rolling down the highway exuberant about his new company.
- Paul Farmer launching his fifth company in the valley.

The stories from this valley are powerful, inspiring. This is one measurement of success.

The value of this ecosystem cannot be fully understood by traditional economic data collection alone. Jobs, capital, business startups and scale-ups are key indicators of old economy monetary impact, yet there are equally compelling community and social benefits emerging as a result of connections among people, ideas and resources in the valley.

There is overwhelming support for more—and better—data collection and consensus that Red Cedar and UNI should come together to build a model to do this. "Traditional economic development metrics of business startups, jobs and investment are important, and we do it," says Paul Kinghorn, director of the Center for Business Growth and Innovation at UNI. "But if we stop there, we have an incomplete picture. We need to expand what we measure to include things we haven't considered before."

## A Final Note

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This project began during the exuberant winter holidays of the economy that was, and is ending in the trough of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the space of only 60 days, the economy of the Cedar Valley—as it has everywhere—has paused. As of this writing, vibrant State Street is deserted, and TechWorks is partially closed. Cup of Joe is shuttered, and Mill Race is dark. The entire region is quiet, holding its breath through the tunnel. There is not enough distance as of yet to understand what the next normal might look like, but surely this period will test the strength of these connections, which have now become a supportive net, holding the community close during this disruptive time. These times will be a new pin in the continuing story of the Cedar Valley ecosystem and another collection of stories are already emerging to be told.



# LESSONS LEARNED

## Cultivate Cycles of Champions

Previous waves of entrepreneurs have circled back to contribute in substantial ways to the ecosystem. These entrepreneurs fill gaps in the ecosystem that might otherwise go unfilled and ramp up the pace of innovation. We should look for and celebrate these individuals and their contributions and encourage others to continue the cycle.

## Entrepreneurs Are Rising

Decades of entrepreneurship support resources and programs built terrific momentum in the Cedar Valley but failed to hold a sustained flame until entrepreneurs rose to meet the challenges. The organic rise of entrepreneurial leadership has been disruptive but brings momentum, passion and dense connections to the startup process, improving and expanding the environment for all. Bringing entrepreneurs to the center is critical to this ecosystem and likely others.

## A Recipe for Density

The authenticity of the entrepreneurial voice gave life to this ecosystem. Peer-led networks, volunteerism and generous sharing of expertise, experiences and support attracted entrepreneurs across the spectrum in ways institutional programs and resources could not.

## Ecosystem Structure Matters

Vibrant ecosystems require communities to fundamentally shift traditional economic development thinking toward collaboration, nontraditional leadership and entirely new economic development tools. Navigation of these changes—especially collaborative efforts between entrepreneur support organizations and entrepreneurs—has been improved by the creation of the nonprofit Red Cedar. Because of Red Cedar, entrepreneurship is now part of the language of economic development, and entrepreneurs have a place at the table.

## Relationships Drive Resources

Within this ecosystem are a small number of relationship drivers, individuals who cultivate a set of relationships to support organizational collaboration, resulting in improved sharing of resources, credit and leadership. Trace Steffen at How Factory, Patrick Luensmann at UNI and Danny Laudick at Red Cedar are among a handful of individuals who have been instrumental in building trust, comradery and support among collaborating partners.

## The University Pipeline

The University of Northern Iowa is a rich contributor of innovative ideas and talent, resources and programs—sowing people, ideas, knowledge and diversity—into the Cedar Valley where it thrives. To date, it is more organic than systemic. Measuring, formalizing and celebrating this pipeline are critical next steps for the valley.

## Bandwidth

The municipally owned utility CFU brought bandwidth to Cedar Falls as early as 1996 and continues to lead the nation in connection speed. There is evidence of stunning economic impact among startups, scale-ups and talent attraction as a direct result of CFU's efforts. The lack of bandwidth in Waterloo has arguably stifled innovation and startup activity, contributing to slower ecosystem development.

## This Ecosystem Emerged from Place

The Cedar Valley ecosystem initially coalesced around the colorful vibrancy and placemaking energy of the central business district in Cedar Falls. Although not a goal of either the entrepreneurs or entrepreneur support organizations, "place" has been central to early ecosystem building here. As community builders strive to widen the arc, they foresee a stronger focus upon connections between people.

## Guide and Support vs. Regulate and Bar

Changes in the regulatory environment to reflect new economy business models and the needs of fast-moving innovators have been slow. Political champions like the mayor of Cedar Falls can guide and support innovation rather than regulate and bar it. When leaders at the top take even small steps to improve these processes, culture change results and new innovative approaches from innovators like Paul Farmer can emerge and be tested in the marketplace.

## Connections in Crisis

While most ecosystems focus solely upon creating a supportive environment around startups and later scale-ups, community connections are even more critical during times of crisis. These key connections, labeled "The Greats" by Andy Van Fleet during his own business crisis, can be leveraged to guide and support, rally resources and bring ideas together to solve unimaginable challenges.

## Inclusion

There is so much to learn about the intersection of inclusion and diversity in this ecosystem, and there is widespread desire to be open, inclusive and welcoming. Red Cedar has an opportunity to augment the current community by extending leadership roles to diverse entrepreneurs and implementing strategies to hear and respond to voices outside the ecosystem especially in response to current critical needs in Waterloo.

## Widening the Arc

The assets, economic drivers and entrepreneurial populations of Cedar Falls and neighboring Waterloo are strikingly different. Ecosystems are emerging in both communities but not in tandem. Waterloo can learn from the experiences of Cedar Falls, but their self-determination is to build an appropriate culture for themselves. This offers an opportunity for novel collaboration and new models of entrepreneurial support.

## Measuring Success

Powerful evidence is emerging to validate the good work in the Cedar Valley but it is largely anecdotal, with the exception of ongoing data collection from the University of Northern Iowa. New and rigorous collection of data—including community and social metrics—is critical to support these efforts and validate best practices.

## Voices From the Valley

During every interview there were ‘aha’ moments—perspectives voiced that didn’t necessarily have a place within the context of these pages, and yet were too important to discard with the notes. **Here are some of those moments:**

**“The point of all this is not our businesses—they are a means to an end. Ecosystems help us accelerate needed changes, moving us to live inspired lives in thriving communities.”**

—Therese Stevens, BraceAbility

**“There is a whole generation of entrepreneurs that believe the experience is the goal.”**

—Paul Farmer, Hurling Hatchets

**“We are working so hard to cast a vision for how things might be done differently, perhaps better.”**

—Trace Steffen, HowFactory

**“Just being present, authentically present, is a contribution. Deep connections get deeper; shallow connections float away.”**

—Patrick Luensmann, UNI



**“It’s a long game. You cannot manage an ecosystem by quarter or even by year.”**

—Nick Taiber, Cedar Falls City Councilman

**“We welcome, we adapt, and we change—we try to meet everyone where they are.”**

—Carol Lilly, Community Main Street

**“You must love this work and this place very much.”**

—Diane Sorenson, Mark Kittrell’s mom

**“The farmer cannot support the broader community with food unless the community supports the farmer. I think that is how it works here.”**

—Rob Williams, SourceLink

**“The information highway ends at a two-lane road, but not here.”**

—Rob Houlihan, CFU

**“We need to ask ourselves, ‘Does our ecosystem create culture in and of itself?’ Do we inspire outsiders to look at us and say, ‘That community has edge—I want to live there.’?”**

—Nick Taiber, Cedar Falls City Councilman

**“There is only a limited amount of time, so what are you going to do?”**

—Andy Van Fleet, Visual Logic