



10th Annual 2023 Metro East Start-Up Challenge to Offer More than \$25,000 in Prizes

by Submitted by Jo Ann Di Maggio May
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WOOD RIVER – Entrepreneurs and new business startups are invited to compete in the 2023 Metro East Start-Up Challenge (MESC), [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's](#) 10th annual regional business plan competition.

The MESC is organized by the Illinois Small Business Development Center ([SBDC](#)) for the Metro East at SIUE. The purpose of the challenge is to identify, encourage and support entrepreneurs and business startups across the SBDC's service area, including Jersey, Calhoun, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe, and Randolph Counties. The competition continues to expand its reach, adding Fayette and Montgomery Counties in 2021. This year, the MESC is again extending its reach to include Macoupin County.

The first-place winner will receive a \$10,000 cash prize. Second, third, and fourth place winners will receive \$6,000, \$4,000, and \$2,000, respectively. The four prize winners will also receive an array of in-kind professional services to include a 2023 membership to Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, legal assistance from Carol Sparks, Attorney at Beckemeier LeMoine Law, accounting services from Kerber Eck & Braeckel, LLP (KEB), web design services by Codd Interactive, and co-working space at The Lodge. The Illinois SBDC for the Metro East at SIUE plans to secure other in-kind services to offer the four winners.

The SBDC is also expanding the two additional monetary award categories it introduced in 2021. Besides Rural Business of the Year, sponsored by Dieterich Bank, the second category, Woman, Minority, or Veteran Business of the Year, will become three individual prizes. The City of O'Fallon is sponsoring the Veteran Business of the Year Prize, Justine Petersen will support the Minority Business of the Year, and the Bank of Springfield is sponsoring the Woman Business of the Year. Each category will have the opportunity to take home \$1,500 in prize money.

Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois will also continue to provide more mentorship opportunities through the Council's vast network of business professionals and community leaders.

The Metro East Startup Challenge is made possible through tremendous regional support. Sponsors include the [SIUE School of Business](#), the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, Anders CPA & Advisors, Madison County Economic Development, the City of Edwardsville, Dieterich Bank, Heartland Bank and Trust Company (Edwardsville and Fairview Heights locations), City of Highland, Carrollton Bank, St. Clair County Economic Development, Bank of Springfield, Growth Corp, the City of Alton, Regions Bank, Riverbend Growth Association, FCB Banks, Monroe County Economic Development Corporation, and University Park at SIUE.

BMO Harris Bank and Ameren Illinois Energy Efficiency Program are this year's Platinum and Gold sponsors of the Mentor-Semifinalist Networking Event to be held at the Gateway Center in Collinsville.

SIUE's School of Business, the SBDC's host organization, will assist with facilitating the competition.

"The Metro East Start-Up Challenge elevates the discussion of, and support for, entrepreneurship across our region," said Jo Ann Di Maggio May, SBDC Director. "Interest in the annual Challenge continues to grow with each passing year."

The 2023 MESC encourages for-profit entrepreneurs and startup businesses to apply. For a startup business enterprise to be eligible, it must have been established after April 30, 2023, and be headquartered in the SBDC's nine-county (plus Fayette, Montgomery, and Macoupin Counties) service area. For pre-venture entrepreneurs, proposed new business operations will need to be located within the same counties.

Past winners say they are grateful to have competed and that the MESC positively and productively extended their business efforts, strengthening their entrepreneurial journey.

"The Metro East Startup Challenge is an INCREDIBLE opportunity for local startups that deserves much broader recognition," said business partners and founders of A2 Creative, Inc.--3d Gloop! Andrew Mayhall and Andrew Martinussen who took home the top prize in MESC 2021. "The process of writing a formal business plan with the structure, and guidance provided through the IL SBDC and SIUE will help any startup, regardless of phase, thoroughly understand their business, market, and growth strategy. Having participated in multiple startup-focused contests, we can confidently say the resources offered through this competition are second to none. If you are local and thinking of starting a business or trying to get your business going, the MESC provides you with an opportunity few areas in the entire country can compete with. The cost to participate is free and Jo Ann and Marti have created a network to nurture startup growth that is worth well more than any cash prize."

"An exceptional experience that allowed ArtSculpt International to advance in the fundamentals and engage in a creative process for starting a successful and profitable business," added David Kniepkamp and Catharine Magel, of ArtSculpt International, located in Fairview Heights, who won first place in 2020's MESC. "Focus, direction, and implementation were the take-aways for accelerating a business plan that allowed us to create a stronger and vibrant company, positioned to exceed customer expectations. The experiences cultivated and learned will last a lifetime."

"One of the many positive things I'd like to stress are the individuals to start with, specifically Paul, Marti and Jo Ann," said Sharon and Michael Sabo's *Tricentum Technologies LLC*, of Monroe County, earned \$4,000 for third place in MESC 2019. "They were incredibly supportive, you could always approach them with any question, and they always helped you think. The business plan was a huge part of this. I'm not going to even call it confidence building because confidence building indicates that you don't have confidence. I'm going to call it confidence discovery. Because discovering what you really desire and what really will drive you forward was what this competition provided. It was incredible. Since the point of last year, we've achieved our patents, we've achieved our tool and die, so we have our die created. And that was partly possible through these award funds."

Tyler Mueth and his 5 brothers won the MESC 2018. Their aquaponics company, *Vast Produce* has been keeping them very busy. Here is what they had to say about the opportunity: “The business plan competition was a truly rewarding experience. The opportunity to network and discuss our idea and business plan with industry experts and leaders of the community was invaluable. We continue to grow and learn with the help of the SBDC and leaders we met through the competition.”

“The competition itself is a really great experience for anyone interested in owning their own business,” said Joshua Colclasure, owner of *Pint Perfect, LLC*. “I am happy we could be a part of something so awesome! After winning the competition in 2017, I have been able to launch my company and start taking on clients! We were excited then and we are even more so now. Going to the SBDC is easily one of the best decisions we have made for our company. Jo Ann is wonderful and is truly passionate about seeing others succeed on their path to entrepreneurs. The team at the SBDC are great people and are a great resource not just for new business owners, but for any entrepreneur. I look forward to the long relationship to come with Jo Ann, her staff, and the SBDC. It is truly incredible to have such support. The MESC competition is icing on the cake!”

“Although it was a lot of work to put together a thorough business plan, we are very thankful that we took the time to do so and participate in the Challenge,” said 2015 third-place finisher Tammy Rahm, co-owner *Stubborn German Brewing Company*. “It forced us to look at every detail of the business and plan its direction. Now that we’ve been open for a year, we’re in the process of reviewing the business plan and ensuring we’re on the right track.”

“The MESC was an invaluable experience,” said 2014 second-place finisher Adam Stumpf, owner of *Stumpy’s Spirits*. “It allowed us to hone our business plan and define a route to market before launching our distillery. The feedback from the judges was an integral part of guiding our business in its first year. Bootstrapping our distillery forced us to stretch every dollar we had, and the award provided by the MESC was a key part in getting our business off the ground.”

The MESC includes three rounds, beginning with a brief questionnaire and executive summary submittal that is open to all applications that meet the eligibility guidelines. Participants selected for the second round are invited to expand on their entrepreneurial concept by submitting a full business plan. These semifinalists are paired with business professionals who will mentor them through the competition and potentially beyond. The last round is the “final pitch” in front of a panel of business experts.

For more information on the 2023 MESC, or to initiate the application process, visit siue.edu/metroeaststartup. The initial entry deadline is Sunday, Aug. 13. Semi-finalists will be announced Tuesday, August. 25. Finalists will be notified on Tuesday, Oct. 20. The

Challenge culminates with an announcement of its four top cash prize winners on Friday, Nov. 3 during the monthly Leadership Council SW IL meeting.

The Illinois SBDC Network is a service to the community supported, in part, by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), the Illinois Dept. of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), and the [SIUE School of Business](#).

SIUE operates two [Small Business Development Centers](#) and the [International Trade Center](#). All three Centers provide resources, information and support to entrepreneurs, and small business owners in the nine-county Metro East region of Jersey, Calhoun, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe and Randolph. By aiding entrepreneurs and companies in defining their path to success, the SBDC positively impacts the Metro East by strengthening the business community, creating and retaining new jobs, and encouraging new investment. When appropriate, the SBDC strives to affiliate its ties to the region to support the goals and objectives of both the SIUE School of Business and the University at large.

To learn how the SBDC can help your small business, contact the Illinois SBDC for the Metro East at SIUE (618) 650-2929 or sbdcedw@gmail.com.