



Director's Report – Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI)

September 2025

Overview:

September was a month of continued momentum for the Don Ryan Center for Innovation, marked by expanded AI integration, strategic grant development, and the addition of new program companies. Highlights included the submission of the Relentless Challenge Grant Pre-Application, delivery of several high-impact presentations, further progress in the Furman University Strategic AI Program, and enhanced mentor engagement. Community visibility and partnership-building were also at the forefront as the team advanced its goals to foster innovation and economic growth in Bluffton and beyond.

Entrepreneur Program Update

STARTUP Companies

Our STARTUP pipeline continues to grow, with new diligence meetings and program milestones achieved.

- **OPFOB**
- **Part of the Family**
- **AMA Private Dining**
- **Lisa Sulka Consulting**
- **Vital Bridge Wellness**
- **Bright Beginnings Academy**
- **New – Diversity Nursing Academy (Hardeeville)**

GROWTH Companies:

Supporting established businesses in their expansion efforts remains a priority for DRCI.

- **Bluffton Electric**
- **Delta Roofing**
- **Nexus Business Technology**

THRIVE Companies

Ongoing long-term work with established Growth companies

- **Universal Bookkeeper**
- **Beachside Tire**
- **Noble Hearts Human Resources**
- **HardeeGreens**

Mentor Program

Mentorship Network:

- Mentor Handbook update completed and distributed
- Mentor Working Lunch held to review program structure and plan for 2026
- Mentor teams established for incoming STARTUPS
- Ongoing outreach and engagement to strengthen mentor network

Economic Development Update

- Completed the **economic development package** for *Spartina 449*
- Held tenant coordination meeting regarding *Unit 103* at The COVE
- Supported EDIP communications and content planning

Operations, Events and Meetings:

- Relentless Challenge Grant Pre-Application submitted after prep and webinar participation

Presented at:

- GBCC “Get to Know Your Chamber”
- United Way – AI for Nonprofits
- Beaufort Digital Corridor – AI Ethics & Privacy

Attended:

- GBCC Coffee & Connections
- GBCC After Hours

- HHI–Bluffton Chamber Conversations & Cocktails
- Old Moreland Dental Grand Opening
- Town Council Meeting – Bylaw changes approved

Hosted:

- DRCI Mentor Lunch – Planning 2026
- OneBlood Bus Blood Drive at The HUB
- Military & Business Alliance Meeting supporting veterans and military families in workforce transition

Technology and Innovation

- Built new internal-use agents:
 - Bluffton Code Buddy – AI support tool for code-related inquiries
 - Grant Summary Generator – AI tool for summarizing applications for internal records
 - Economic Development Report Agent – Supports staff report, ordinance, and motion creation
- Delivered internal AI Update Presentation to senior staff
- Participated in AI product refinement with *Madison AI* – call and proposal review
- Continued strategic work on second-gen internal AI tools
- AI integration tied closely to operations, programs, and marketing automation

Education and Professional Development

- Continued coursework in Furman University’s Strategic AI Program
 - Completed Module 1
- Participated in Relentless Challenge Grant webinar
- Held exploratory conversations about additional AI programs in partnership with:
 - *Furman University*
 - *Zschool*

Partnerships

Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Diversity Nursing starting the Hardeeville STARTUP program end of this month. Attended their Ribbon Cutting ceremony. Scheduled regular quarterly updates with Hardeeville City Manager Josh Gruber
- **BlacQuity:** Classes held Wednesday night at The HUB
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects including collaboration. Attended board meeting.

- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses and attended. Continuing to host lunch and learns for the GBCC and represented DRCI at their monthly Member Benefits Meeting
- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several ribbon cuttings and networking events
- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Ongoing membership, Met with Alex to discuss space at the COVE and potential tenants for the first floor. Registered for the Connecta Business Expo in October
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Beaufort Digital Corridor:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Furman University:** Ongoing collaboration through Strategic AI Program; exploring expanded offerings
- **United Way:** Engaged through AI presentation and follow-up conversations
- **Military & Business Alliance:** Hosted and attended. Goal is for regional support for veteran and military family integration through entrepreneurship and workforce development