

TULANE INNOVATION INSTITUTE

INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM MEET & GREET

The Tulane Innovation Institute Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet brought together the New Orleans entrepreneurial community on September 23, 2025, at the Nieuw Society, for networking and to gather insights on how city leadership and the entrepreneurial ecosystem can better support innovation.

The interactive free community event drew 100+ participants—including startup founders, students, faculty, and support organizations—and featured four discussion stations on **permits and City Hall**, **big ideas, talent and training**, and **affordable spaces** to grow.

These themes were selected based on recurring challenges and opportunities identified across the local ecosystem, ensuring the conversation centered on areas where policy, infrastructure, and coordination could have the greatest impact.



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REPORT OVERVIEW

INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM MEET & GREET ACTIVITIES

The Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet employed structured, participatory, discussion-based activities to examine prevailing challenges and emerging opportunities facing entrepreneurs and startup ventures in New Orleans. Participants provided qualitative input through written responses at four thematically organized stations; this data was then collected and analyzed by graduate researcher and PhD candidate Inngide Osirus.

This analysis will help to guide the development of actionable recommendations, including policy considerations, program design, and municipal strategies to strengthen the regional innovation ecosystem. A summarized overview of key findings is provided below, with the full analytical report starting on page six.

HOW WE COLLECTED AND ANALYZED INPUT

FOUR DISCUSSION STATIONS

We set up four themed stations where participants shared ideas on:

- Permits & City Hall
- Big Ideas
- Talent & Training
- Affordable Spaces to Grow

HOW WE ENGAGED PARTICIPANTS

Each station included guiding prompts to spark conversations and gather practical suggestions. Tulane staff documented the comments of each participant

ANALYZING THE FEEDBACK

Similar responses were grouped together to identify common themes and priorities across all stations.

Percentages shown represent the proportion of responses at each station that mentioned each theme; totals exceed 100% because individual responses often addressed multiple topics.

This helped us understand what matters most to participants and where opportunities for improvement exist.



PERMITS, LICENSING & CITY HALL

STATION OVERVIEW

This station asked participants to identify ways to make the city's permitting and licensing processes more transparent and entrepreneur-friendly without sacrificing oversight, and to consider how city officials could better support startups.

TOP THEMES (% OF RESPONSES AT THIS STATION)

- Process Improvements (64%)
- Funding & Financial Support (50%)
- Equity & Inclusion (39%)
- Community Engagement (28%)
- Customer Service (22%)

RESPONSE SUMMARY

Simplifying processes, expanding support structures, and investing in digital infrastructure will not only reduce barriers to entry but also build trust, transparency, and equity into the city's business environment.

SAMPLE OF SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

- Streamline the permitting process
- Create a single intake workflow
- Create a live help desk
- Establish entrepreneur liaison

BIG IDEAS

STATION OVERVIEW

Through this discussion, participants explored what it would take for New Orleans to become the startup capital of the South and reflected on the strengths that already make the city an attractive place to build companies.

TOP THEMES (% OF RESPONSES AT THIS STATION)

- Branding & Positioning (37%)
- Culture & Community (34%)
- Funding & Capital Access (34%)
- Job and Entrepreneur Opportunities (29%)
- Urban Development (29%)

RESPONSE SUMMARY

Participants emphasized that the city has the creative and cultural foundation needed for innovation. Still, success depends on pairing that identity with financial capital, infrastructure, rebranding, and inclusive opportunity creation.

SAMPLE OF SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

- Position New Orleans as a creative tech hub
- Leverage local culture as an advantage
- Create/expand microgrants and seed programs
- Expand mentorship programs
- Increase tech training and creative industry pipelines



TALENT & TRAINING

STATION OVERVIEW

Focusing on the future workforce, participants considered which skills will be essential over the next decade and which training and learning opportunities—across city agencies, schools, businesses, and community programs—hold the most promise, particularly for underrepresented groups.

TOP THEMES (% OF RESPONSES AT THIS STATION)

- AI & Technology Skills (54%)
- Education & Training Systems (38%)
- Entrepreneurship & Business Skills (31%)
- Resources (i.e., Training, Mentorship) (26%)
- Adaptability (21%)
- Equity & Inclusion (21%)

RESPONSE SUMMARY

Workforce readiness emerged as essential, with participants emphasizing AI and tech skills, entrepreneurship, adaptability, and equity to prepare New Orleans' workforce for a competitive, evolving economy.

SAMPLE OF SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

- Integrate AI and digital literacy into education
- Expand coding bootcamps and community programs
- Expand public transit access to training and job sites
- Upskilling initiatives

AFFORDABLE SPACE TO GROW

STATION OVERVIEW

At this station, participants examined existing funding for startup and workspace development, identified gaps, and discussed the biggest barriers to accessing affordable, flexible commercial space in New Orleans.

TOP THEMES (% OF RESPONSES AT THIS STATION)

- Funding Gaps & Needs (50%)
- Space Availability & Affordability (45%)
- Structural Barriers (35%)
- Awareness (25%)
- Logistics & Accessibility (23%)

RESPONSE SUMMARY

Participants identified limited access to affordable, flexible commercial workspace as a significant barrier for entrepreneurs in New Orleans, citing funding gaps, constrained availability, and structural challenges related to startup and workspace development.

SAMPLE OF SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

- Expand awareness of funding programs
- Establish city-backed programs
- Repurpose vacant commercial spaces for below-market startup use
- Reduce insurance burden for small businesses



KEY FINDINGS

New Orleans has the creativity, culture, and talent for a strong innovation ecosystem. Growth is constrained by structural barriers and outdated systems.



PARTICIPANTS CALLED FOR

Streamlined city processes to reduce startup difficulties

Targeted early-stage funding and microgrants

Equitable access to education, mentorship and workspace

Modernized infrastructure and digital systems aligned with entrepreneurial growth

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Through collaboration between city leaders, universities, investors, and communities, New Orleans can turn ideas into action and build an inclusive innovation economy.

01

Launch pilot programs for entrepreneurs

02

Create ongoing feedback loops with government entities and the startup ecosystem

03

Apply data-driven evaluations and decisions.

04

Evaluate and elevate regional branding

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Tulane Innovation Institute | Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet

September 23, 2025

Report by | Inngide Osirus, MPH, PhD Candidate at Tulane University

Overview | Tulane Innovation Institute's Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet

The Tulane Innovation Institute (TUII) Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet served as both a community gathering and a data collection activity to capture and exchange ideas from across New Orleans' entrepreneurial ecosystem—and to explore how city leadership can create an environment where innovation thrives. This event was designed to be experiential and drew 100+ participants, including startup founders and staff, aspiring student entrepreneurs, faculty researchers, and support organizations within the entrepreneurial ecosystems. The perspectives documented in this report are derived from participant responses and are not intended to represent the official views, policy positions, or endorsements of the Tulane Innovation Institute.

Data Collection

Four (4) themed discussion stations were set up: (1) Permits & City Hall, (2) Big Ideas, (3) Talent & Training, (4) Affordable Spaces to Grow. Each station was guided by prompts designed to elicit practical insights and forward-looking recommendations. This structure encouraged open, participatory dialogue. Participants wrote responses on large-format index cards and submitted them to a station moderator. Upon completion, the participant would receive a stamp on their passport for each station. To complete the activity, participants were invited to visit all four stations to be entered into a prize drawing. Not all participants visited all four stations; responses were distributed across stations based on participant interest and time constraints, resulting in 36-40 responses per station.

Methods | Content Analysis Approach

Content analysis is a systematic qualitative method for interpreting textual data by identifying recurring patterns, themes, and meanings in participants' responses. It allows the transformation of open-ended input into organized categories that reveal shared priorities and insights. This approach was particularly well-suited to the Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet, as participants provided short written reflections. By coding each large-format index card for key ideas and aggregating them into themes, the analysis captured both the frequency and the nuance of community perspectives into clear, actionable findings that can inform city and ecosystem strategy.

Data Preparation

- Transcribed all handwritten notes verbatim into a spreadsheet (one row = one response). Original spelling, phrasing, and emphasis were preserved to maintain the authenticity of participants' voices and to allow for direct quoting in the findings.
- A second Tulane Innovation Institute team member reviewed and confirmed responses for completeness and accuracy before coding began.
- Reviewed all responses in detail to familiarize with the content and tone, noting early patterns and recurring ideas.

Codebook Development

- Developed an initial deductive codebook based on the discussion prompts (e.g., Funding, Equity, Infrastructure). These broad categories ensured that the coding reflected the event's core focus areas.
- During familiarization, additional inductive themes that naturally emerged were identified (e.g., AI Skills, Opportunities, Structural Barriers).
- Refined definitions and examples to ensure clarity, consistency, and minimal overlap between codes.

Coding Process

- Coding was conducted at the response level, meaning each row (one written response) was reviewed and tagged with all relevant themes.
- For each code, a binary system was used (1 = theme present, 0 = theme not present)
- Responses could contain multiple codes (for example, a comment that mentioned both “funding” and “affordable space” would be coded as 1 for Funding Gaps & Needs and Space Availability & Affordability).
- The researcher first coded a small subset of responses to test the codebook, then refined categories.

Analysis and Interpretation

- After coding was complete, the dataset was analyzed to identify patterns across participants and stations. For each code, the number of responses coded “1” was summed and divided by the total number of responses for that station to generate a percentage (i.e., Process Improvements appeared in 64% of responses at the Permits & City Hall station)
- Representative quotes were selected for each central theme to illustrate participants’ language and priorities. Preference was given to quotes that were clear, specific, and captured sentiments echoed by multiple respondents.
- Finally, findings were summarized for each of the four stations. For each station, the analysis linked (1) most frequent themes, (2) example quotes, and (3) suggested solutions that could inform city and ecosystem key findings by section and linked to strategic action areas.

Results

The resulting data provides a snapshot of the local entrepreneurial climate, highlighting key priorities for strengthening the city’s startup ecosystem, including workforce development and access to capital, as well as policy reform and inclusive growth. These insights can serve as a shared civic artifact to inform city leaders and guide post-election discussions with the TUII team on actionable strategies and partnerships.

PERMITS, LICENSING AND CITY HALL

1. What would make the city’s permitting and licensing process more transparent and entrepreneur-friendly without losing oversight?
2. If you were a city official, how would you support startups?

Overview

Reforming New Orleans’ permitting system is central to cultivating a thriving startup ecosystem and a business-friendly environment. Therefore, simplifying processes, expanding support structures, and investing in digital infrastructure will not only reduce barriers to entry but also build trust, transparency, and equity into the city’s business environment.

Summary

Permitting and licensing processes emerged as the most frequently discussed challenge among participants, with 64% of responses calling for significant process improvements and 50% citing the need for funding and financial support to offset regulatory costs. Many emphasized that the current system is “opaque,” “outdated,” and “inefficient,” creating barriers for entrepreneurs trying to launch or scale their businesses. Respondents pointed to the need for a modern, customer-oriented approach; the demand for digital transformation was also notable (19%), underscoring the importance of online systems, automated workflows, and centralized platforms to simplify navigation and reduce delays. At the same time, 22% of respondents expressed frustration with limited customer service and a lack of dedicated support staff. Equity and inclusion also featured prominently (39%), with respondents highlighting that the current system disproportionately burdens small and minority-owned businesses. Respondents called for reforms that would simplify requirements, expand access to funding, and engage underrepresented entrepreneurs through regular listening sessions and community partnerships.

Streamlining Permitting through Digital Access and Process Improvement

Digital transformation was viewed as critical to modernizing the permitting landscape. The most common theme, mentioned by 64% of participants, was the need to modernize and streamline the city’s permitting and licensing processes through digital solutions and clearer workflows. Respondents repeatedly called for a “one-stop shop” online platform that consolidates all permit-

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related information and processes. Many suggested end-to-end streamlining and the creation of a single, centralized intake portal, "One website to cover everything that is needed in order to obtain a license permit," one participant explained. Others suggested automation or self-service scheduling to reduce inefficiencies, such as "access to a calendar to schedule the inspection ... instead of waiting days for a response."

Participants also stated that better notification systems and transparent process updates would improve compliance and trust. For example, one noted, "Better notification when permitting changes are made and giving terms that allow for changes to be made in time with leases." Additional ideas included automated routing, transparent fee tracking, and public dashboards. A respondent envisioned "an online process that tracks and compiles reporting available to the public, sharing monetary values tied to specific projects." These comments point to an urgent need for digital transformation and a more user-friendly permitting experience.

Expanding Financial and Policy Support

Half of the responses (50%) highlighted the importance of financial incentives and policy reform in enabling startups to thrive and support the quality of life for entrepreneurs. Participants emphasized the financial burden of permitting and licensing, advocating for flat fees, payment plans, and startup-specific incentives. For example, one respondent recommended, "One flat fee until the startup passes a defined growth point," while another called for "a pool of money set aside for startups to apply and pitch their ideas." Others called for tax incentives, grants, and matched funding, which were frequently mentioned as tools to encourage entrepreneurship and offset regulatory costs, especially to ease the financial burden on small businesses.

Over 20% of participants mentioned policy reform, requesting simplified permitting structures and clearer governance. One participant noted, "Permitting needs to be a simple, straightforward, transparent process ... with assurances of a time-limited process from start to finish." The responses highlighted the need for policy-level alignment to foster entrepreneurial goals.

Strengthening Customer Service and Human Support

The participants stated that the permitting process is not only burdensome but also discouraging due to limited support. There were concerns about customer service in 22% of responses, with many expressing frustrations at the lack of available guidance and support. As one participant described, "I feel that the process should be a bit easier than it is now. It's very discouraging when people don't understand the process, and people are too busy to assist." The lack of timely response from city staff and accessible help channels was seen as a barrier to business creation and growth. Suggested improvements included a dedicated liaison for entrepreneurs and enhanced communication channels, such as phone-based support lines and inspection scheduling calendars. Additionally, participants suggested regular town halls to maintain communication between city officials.

Embedding Equity and Community Engagement

Several responses underscored the need for a more equitable permitting system, noting that existing processes can reinforce inequities. Hence, equity and inclusion were mentioned in 39% of the responses, with participants calling for more intentional outreach to underrepresented entrepreneurs and community-centered approaches. 28% of respondents highlighted the need for more community engagement. Ideas ranged from "second chance" programs for formerly incarcerated individuals to regular listening sessions prioritizing historically marginalized entrepreneurs and small business owners in shaping policy reforms. One participant suggested, "Hosting regular town halls to hear directly from entrepreneurs because needs are constantly shifting." This suggestion illustrates the need for ongoing dialogue and responsiveness with the community.

Table 1. Frequency Table | Permits, Licensing, and City Hall | Theme Counts & Percentages

Theme	# of Responses (out of 36)	% of Responses	Example Quote
Process Improvements	23	64%	"Permitting needs to be simple, straightforward, transparent process."
Funding & Financial Support	18	50%	"One flat fee until the startup passes a defined growth point."
Equity & Inclusion	14	39%	"Create fair access for all, not just those already in the know."
Community Engagement	10	28%	"Hosting regular town halls to hear directly from entrepreneurs because needs are constantly shifting."

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Customer Service/ Human Support	8	22%	"It's very discouraging when people don't understand the process and people are too busy to assist."
Policy/Governance	8	22%	"Permitting needs to be a simple, straightforward, transparent process ... with assurances of a time-limited process from start to finish."
Digital/Online Processes	7	19%	"One website to cover everything that is needed in order to obtain a license permit."

Table 2. Identified Challenges | Permits, Licensing, and City Hall | Suggested Solutions

Theme	Challenges Identified by Participants	Suggested Solutions
Process Improvements (64%)	Complex, slow, and redundant permitting workflow; lack of coordination across agencies	Streamline permitting process; introduce clear timelines; create single intake workflow
Funding & Financial Support (50%)	High cost and fees, particularly burdensome for startups or small businesses	Introduce flat fees, phased payments, startup tax incentives, tiered fee, grant system
Equity and Inclusion (39%)	Structural barriers for minority or small business owners; inequitable access to information and resources	Equity-focused reforms and community outreach; launch inclusive outreach initiatives; town halls; entrepreneur programs
Community Engagement (28%)	Limited collaboration and lack of direct communication between entrepreneurs and city leadership	Establish recurring town halls; create feedback loops between City Hall and business owners; integrate entrepreneurs in policy co-design
Customer Service (22%)	Lack of guidance or human support	Establish entrepreneur liaison, create live helpdesk, town halls
Policy/Governance (22%)	Lack of consistent oversight and coordination across agencies; unclear policies	Create a centralized city of innovation office; standardize policies; ensure time-bound permitting decisions
Digital/Online Processes (19%)	Opaque, slow, paper-based permitting system; no unified platform	Develop centralized digital "one-stop shop" portal; automate scheduling and notification; increase transparency.

"BIG IDEAS"

1. What would it take to make New Orleans the startup capital of the South?
2. New Orleans is a great place for startups because...

Overview

To become a regional startup capital, New Orleans will need to align its cultural identity with tangible economic investments. Participants emphasized that the city already has the creative and cultural foundation needed for innovation. Still, success depends on pairing that identity with financial capital, infrastructure, rebranding, and inclusive opportunity creation. The combination of financial, cultural, and physical capital is necessary to set the foundation for long-term positioning in a competitive field.

Summary

When asked how New Orleans can become the startup capital of the South, participants envisioned structural shifts that combine financial investment, infrastructure improvements, cultural branding, and equitable opportunity creation. The most frequent themes included positioning and branding (37%), culture and community (34%), and funding and investments (34%), alongside calls to expand opportunities (29%) and improve infrastructure and urban development (26%).

Collectively, participants envisioned a city that celebrates its creative identity while providing the practical tools (funding, mentorship, and modern infrastructure) to compete nationally and globally.

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Branding, Positioning, and Culture as Competitive Advantages

New Orleans' cultural vibrancy, resilience, and strong community were highlighted as unique assets that distinguish it from other markets in the startup landscape. Many participants (34%) emphasized that the city's social and cultural assets can serve as a foundation for building a uniquely supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem. One respondent wrote, "New Orleans is a great place for startups because of the people and their resilience." Another shared, "Our culture is unique, and we should use those strong community bonds to overcome obstacles." Others also shared that this culture of connection and hospitality can help create a uniquely supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Participants (37%) urged city leaders to integrate this cultural narrative into a bold new branding and positioning strategy. One participant recommended leveraging its geography as the "Northernmost Caribbean City" identity to attract international partnerships and innovation events in Central and South America. "Given the international reach of Tulane and its Tropical Medicine partnerships, these relationships already exist and can be leveraged," one respondent noted.

Branding, however, must extend beyond cultural storytelling. It should also signal innovation, opportunity, and ambition to national and global audiences. "New Orleans is a great place for startups because the city is full of innovators," one participant shared. A different participant mentioned, "We need to show that [New Orleans] is a city not just of history, but of the future – one where startups want to launch and grow."

Funding and Capital Access as Cornerstone

Access to capital was described as the single most important driver of a thriving startup ecosystem. Over one-third (34%) of respondents identified investment as a critical gap, noting that without it, New Orleans will continue to lag behind peer cities. One participant stressed, "Investors [must be] more willing to write that FIRST check," underscoring the challenges of securing early-stage funding.

Several participants called for city-backed incentives, venture capital attraction strategies, and public-private partnerships to boost local investment. "We need leadership to bring the money to small businesses," one respondent said plainly. Others emphasized that a lack of accessible capital leaves entrepreneurs unable to scale. One respondent stated, "We have the land, the resources, and young people," ... but without investment, participants shared that New Orleans can't compete.

Participants also highlighted the need to diversify funding opportunities, including microgrants and seed funding, as well as city tax incentives. By strengthening investor engagement and building trust with founders, the New Orleans city government was seen as essential in positioning New Orleans as a destination for startup capital. One participant even suggested to "increase incentives for firms and individuals to relocate to [New Orleans]."

Expanding Opportunities and Equity

Expanding job creation, entrepreneurial pathways, and equitable access to opportunities was a central theme in nearly 30% of responses. Many participants emphasized that the desire to build and grow businesses in New Orleans already exists. "People DO want to be here," one participant shared, urging city leaders to focus on harnessing and retaining local talent. However, retaining talent requires tangible opportunities. As participants summarized, "Job opportunities" and "More opportunities highlighting AI and tech development" must become priorities for city leaders.

Respondents also framed job creation as both an economic imperative and a retention strategy to help young professionals and their families envision long-term futures in the city. As one participant explained, "Promoting the entrepreneurial spirit, I believe, requires more engagement from young professionals. To put it in a nutshell: more events, more internships, and part-time opportunities. Another echoed this sentiment by emphasizing the importance of intentional community engagement, "Good opportunities from TU Institute Innovation [should be] open for all in the city, not just Tulane."

Also, participants (21%) stressed that building an equitable startup ecosystem will require inclusive access to networks, mentorship, and resources to level the playing field. One respondent highlighted a common frustration, "New Orleans is all about 'who you know!' We need to level the playing field, so access is available to all startups." Several participants also called for initiatives that bridge the gap between established entrepreneurs and emerging founders, noting that mentorship and relationship-building are often inaccessible to those outside existing networks.

This emphasis on inclusion extended beyond current entrepreneurs to the city's future workforce as well. Respondents encouraged efforts to build a robust education and talent pipeline that connects residents, especially historically underrepresented groups, to

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emerging opportunities in technology, entrepreneurship, and creative industries. One participant pointed to promising examples: "At the Tulane Innovation Institute, there are incredible programs and opportunities for funding." Others pointed out that while the city's setting is an asset, structural inequities persist. "The vibe and culture are great for supporting startups," one participant observed, "although things could be better for Brown women." Ultimately, to build a thriving startup ecosystem, it will require investments in people and opportunities for communities.

Infrastructure, Space and Urban Development

Infrastructure was widely acknowledged as a baseline requirement; over 25% of respondents highlighted infrastructure and space as needs, with calls for better roads, transportation systems, and manufacturing spaces. Participants linked these improvements directly to business attraction and retention: "Better infrastructure," and "People need reliable roads, power, internet, water to sustain innovation and businesses!" Urban development (29%) was also cited as critical, with a focus on repurposing vacant land and emphasizing sustainability. The absence of these basics was seen as a competitive disadvantage relative to peer cities.

Table 3. Frequency Table | BIG IDEAS | Theme Counts & Percentages

Theme	# of Responses (out of 38)	% of Responses	Example Quote
Branding & Positioning	14	37%	"We need to show that [New Orleans] is a city not just of history, but of the future."
Culture & Community	15	34%	"New Orleans is a great place for startups because of the people and their resilience."
Funding & Capital Access	13	34%	"Investors must be more willing to write that FIRST check."
Opportunities (i.e., Job Creation, Entrepreneurial Opportunities, Cooperation)	13	29%	"New Orleans is all about 'who you know!' We need to level the playing field."
Urban Development	11	29%	"People need reliable roads, power, internet, water to sustain innovation and businesses."
Infrastructure	10	26%	"Better infrastructure"
Equity & Inclusion	8	21%	"Building a welcoming environment where people feel safe sharing their ideas without judgement!"

Table 4. Identified Challenges | BIG IDEAS | Suggested Solutions

Theme	Challenges Identified by Participants	Suggested Solutions
Branding & Positioning (37%)	Limited national visibility and inconsistent branding	Leverage local culture as a competitive advantage; brand/rebrand NOLA as the "startup capital of the South"; position New Orleans as a creative tech innovation hub
Culture & Community (34%)	Need to strengthen collaboration across creative, tech and business sectors	Build cross-sector partnerships; host regular innovation festivals; celebrate local founders through storytelling and media
Funding & Capital Access (34%)	Limited early-stage funding and lack of local investor engagement	Create/expand startup microgrants and seed funding programs; attract venture capital; launch city-backed incentive programs
Opportunities (29%)	Talent retention and workforce development; Lack of or inequitable access to opportunities (mentorship and local investment networks)	Expand mentorship programs; connect emerging founders with established entrepreneurs; increase internships, tech training and creative industry pipelines;
Infrastructure (29%)	Inadequate digital and physical infrastructure for startups to operate to scale	Invest in high-speed internet, reliable utilities, and shared coworking/manufacturing spaces; improve transit access

Urban Development (26%)	Vacant or underused building and limited affordable workspace	Repurpose vacant commercial spaces for startups; offer below-market leases
Equity & Inclusion (21%)	Barriers to participation for marginalized entrepreneurs; more safe and inclusive innovation spaces	Develop inclusive entrepreneurship programs; create city grants for women and minority-led startups; host equity-centered networking events

Talent & Training | Growing an Innovative Workforce for the Future

1. What skills will New Orleans' workforce need to thrive in the next decade?
2. What are the training and learning opportunities across city, schools, businesses, and community programs that you're most excited about? How do we ensure these opportunities reach underrepresented groups?

Overview

Workforce readiness emerged as the key player of New Orleans' long-term competitiveness. Participants envisioned a workforce ecosystem that is technologically skilled, entrepreneurial, adaptable, and inclusive. Achieving this vision requires coordinated action through embedding AI and tech skills in educational pipelines, strengthening business and soft skills, investing in equitable access, and addressing quality-of-life barriers, which will position the city's workforce for success. Both entrepreneurs and employees should be prepared to adapt and navigate a changing economy, ensuring that innovation translates into opportunity. Together, these strategies will position New Orleans not only to compete but also to lead the economy in the next decade.

Summary

Preparing and adapting New Orleans' workforce for the next decade emerged as a central theme across responses. Over half of respondents (54%) prioritized AI and technology skills, followed by education and training systems (38%), entrepreneurship and business skills (31%), and cross-cutting needs such as adaptability (21%) and equity and inclusion (21%). Respondents framed workforce development as a long-term investment, emphasizing early preparation, inclusive opportunities, and alignment with dynamic industry needs.

Building a Workforce Skilled in AI and Emerging Technologies

More than half of participants (54%) identified AI and technology skills as critical components for the future workforce. Respondents emphasized both basic digital literacy and advanced technical capabilities. As one participant explained, "Those who learn how to use AI will win rather than be replaced by AI." Others stressed the importance of going beyond adaptation, "Do not just adapt to stay relevant! Adapt to dominate the competition, put [New Orleans] on the map."

Participants calling for integrating AI and technology into education appeared frequently, urging earlier and broader exposure to emerging technologies. "New Orleans needs more programs geared toward technology and AI starting in elementary schools." Another emphasized, "NOLA workforce needs to adapt and embrace new tech to thrive and lead the next decade."

Participants also noted the importance of aligning workforce development with industry trends beyond AI. As one observed, "Manufacturing skills will be as important as science/engineering trades," pointing to the need for a balanced skill portfolio that combines new technologies with foundational trades. This provides the community with the opportunity to continue upskilling.

Education Systems and Equity as Cornerstones of Workforce Growth

Participants called for a comprehensive approach to pipeline development, beginning in schools and extending into higher education and community training programs, appearing in 38% of responses. One participant recommended, "Accessible education policies and services to address K-12 persistence to graduation and beyond." Additional participants highlighted the need for robust K-12 pipelines, affordable housing for startup workers, and expanded STEAM programming. Others noted the importance of aligning training with emerging industry needs such as biotech, manufacturing, and creative industries.

Additionally, ensuring that new training opportunities reach underrepresented groups was a consistent concern, as equity, access, and inclusion were cited by 21% of participants. Suggestions included intentional industry outreach, second-chance programs for formerly incarcerated individuals, and partnerships with HBCUs. "We need industry outreach, particularly toward the

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underrepresented." It was noted that inequities in education and access risk leaving communities behind. "Invest in the next generation by putting technology in their hands directly and letting them create," urged one participant.

Developing Entrepreneurship, Soft Skills, and Business Competencies

Beyond technical skills, respondents highlighted the need for training in finance, management, and business operations. Specifically, entrepreneurship and business skills were mentioned in 31% of responses, with participants calling for expanded training in business operations, accounting, and grant writing. These competencies will help residents "understand systems and how to run a business."

Soft skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication, were also identified by 13% of participants as essential complements to technical expertise. Additionally, 21% of participants stated that adaptability and flexibility are necessary for thriving in a rapidly changing economy. As one participant put it, "Efficiency and adaptation to emerging technologies" must become a workforce-wide mindset.

Infrastructure, Quality of Life, and Workforce Conditions

Participants noted that workforce development cannot occur in isolation from broader quality-of-life and infrastructure issues. This was referenced by 13% and 10% of respondents, respectively. Affordable housing, healthcare, public safety, and reliable infrastructure were identified as critical enablers of workforce development and retention in New Orleans. One participant warned, "Without an affordable quality of life, no growth will happen." Others tied this directly to workforce readiness, pointing out that transportation, broadband access, and stable housing are prerequisites for sustained workforce participation.

Table 5. Frequency Table | Talent & Training | Theme Counts & Percentages

Theme	# of Responses (out of 39)	% of Responses	Example Quote
AI & Technology Skills	21	54%	"Those who learn to use AI will win rather than be replaced by AI."
Education & Training Systems	15	38%	"Accessible education policies and services to address K-12 persistence to graduation and beyond."
Entrepreneurship & Business Skills	12	31%	"We need more training that helps people understand systems and how to run a business."
Resources (i.e., Training, Mentorship, Networking, Jobs)	10	26%	"Good opportunities from TU Institute Innovation should be open for all in the city, not just Tulane."
Adaptability	8	21%	"Efficiency and adaptation to emerging technologies must become a workforce wide mindset."
Equity & Inclusion	8	21%	"Invest in the next generation by putting technology in their hands directly and letting them create."
Awareness	6	15%	"We need industry outreach, particularly toward the underrepresented."

Table 6. Identified Challenges | Talent & Training | Suggested Solutions

Theme	Challenges Identified by Participants	Suggested Solutions
AI & Technology Skills (54%)	Limited access to AI and technology education; workforce not currently equipped for digital transformation	Integrate AI and digital literacy into K-12 and vocational training; expand coding bootcamps and community programs; partner with industry to create certification pipelines
Education & Training Systems (38%)	K-12 education to career pipeline; misalignment between education programs and industry needs	Strengthen K-12 initiatives; expand STEAM and technical education; align higher education with emerging industries like biotech, AI and creative sectors

Entrepreneurship & Business Skills (31%)	Lack of business management and financial literacy training	Offer small business workshops, accounting, grant writing courses; embed entrepreneurship education in schools and universities
Infrastructure & Urban Development (26%)	Barriers from limited broadband, transportation, and affordable housing	Invest in affordable housing for workers; expand broadband and public transit access to training and job sites
Adaptability (21%)	Difficulty adjusting to rapid technological and industry changes	Incorporate adaptability and problem-solving into workforce training; promote lifelong learning and upskilling initiatives
Equity and Inclusion (21%)	Unequal access to training and professional opportunities	Create targeted outreach programs for underrepresented groups; partner with HBCUs and community college launch "second chance" training pathways
Awareness (15%)	Low awareness of existing training and workforce programs	Centralize communication about opportunities; launch citywide awareness campaigns to connect residents to programs and funding

Affordable Space to Grow

1. What funding exists for working and startup spaces—and what's missing?
2. What's the biggest barrier you face in finding affordable, flexible workspace in New Orleans?

Overview

Expanding funding mechanisms, reducing structural barriers, and repurposing existing infrastructure can significantly improve access to affordable workspaces in New Orleans. Addressing transportation and logistics barriers will further enable entrepreneurs to start and scale businesses, while shared facilities and equipment offer scalable solutions for innovation and growth. A coordinated approach through policy reform, targeted investment, and infrastructure planning is essential to building a workplace ecosystem that supports long-term entrepreneurial success.

Summary

Securing affordable, flexible workspace was cited as a significant barrier by participants, with 50% citing funding gaps and needs, and 45% highlighting challenges related to space availability and affordability. Additional issues, such as structural barriers (35%), logistics and accessibility (23%), and the cost of living (15%), reveal how interconnected systems, from transportation to insurance, further complicate the ecosystem for new and growing businesses.

Expanding Access to Funding and Capital for Workspace

Participants consistently described limited funding streams as one of the most significant challenges for securing workspace, with half of the respondents (50%) emphasizing the need for new, more accessible forms of capital tailored to the realities of early-stage businesses. As one participant put it plainly, "Funding is the only thing stopping us from finding resources." Others echoed this sentiment, pointing out that without financial support to cover space costs, even strong business ideas struggle to move forward.

Many respondents emphasized the need for smaller, flexible funding pools to support early-stage risk-taking and experimentation. "We need smaller pots of funds for early-stage companies, not everything has to be a big grant," one suggested, which highlights the gap between large, competitive funding opportunities and the smaller-scale investments that early ventures require. Another noted, "More help is needed to cover fees and insurance costs for startup businesses," pointing to the layered financial barriers that extend beyond rent alone.

Participants proposed several strategies to fill these funding gaps. Popular ideas included pitch competitions to incentivize innovation, city-backed microgrants specifically for workspace costs, and private-sector investment to de-risk early-stage ventures. One respondent called for a broader coalition of funders, explaining, "There needs to be more venture capital activity here. We're missing the largest tech-funded investments." Others envisioned a collaborative funding model among the city government, philanthropy, and private investors to ensure a more predictable, sustained funding environment for startups.

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Several participants also underscored the need for greater transparency and awareness of existing programs, noting that many entrepreneurs are unaware of the opportunities available or how to access them. "I'm not sure what funding exists, but I would love to learn more," one participant admitted. Another added, "There doesn't seem to be publicity around funding for workspaces for startups. I haven't heard of any." These perspectives highlight the importance of expanding funding availability and improving communication and outreach to ensure resources reach the businesses that need them most.

Addressing Space Availability and Affordability Challenges

Nearly half of the participants (45%) cited the high cost and limited availability of workspace as a major barrier. "New Orleans does not have enough affordable working spaces for startups," one respondent explained. Many respondents noted that even when space is technically available, high rent, long-term lease requirements, and additional expenses such as parking or utilities make it inaccessible to small businesses and emerging entrepreneurs.

Participants called for repurposing vacant commercial properties into affordable hubs, offering below-market rent for startups, and exploring public-private partnerships to expand access to flexible spaces across neighborhoods and safe communities. One participant suggested, "Work with the city to utilize vacant commercial space for below-market rent," pointing to the need for public-private collaboration. Others called for shared use coworking models that combine affordability with flexibility, particularly in areas that lack startup infrastructure.

Importantly, participants stressed that improving affordability is not just about cost but also about designing spaces that meet evolving needs. As one entrepreneur noted, "having bigger meeting or collaboration rooms at affordable rates is a challenge. Many spaces are beautiful but don't meet practical needs." Additional suggestions include hybrid work options, shared manufacturing facilities, and adaptable coworking environments.

Tackling Structural Barriers to Reduce Costs and Complexity

35% of participants identified structural barriers, including insurance costs, zoning restrictions, and deteriorating infrastructure, as major contributors to affordability challenges. These systemic issues drive up costs and create additional hurdles for small businesses seeking workspace. One participant urged city leaders to "Improve infrastructure, reduce insurance," linking physical conditions directly to business costs. Participants called on city leaders to address these upstream barriers through policy reform and targeted investment, emphasizing that without systemic change, even increased funding or new space options may have limited impact. One participant stated that the concerns around cost of living "not just working space... [but also] living space. [The] next generation will need survivable space to live and thrive." Participants also shared that addressing these barriers could yield broader benefits for the city's entrepreneurial ecosystem, reducing entry costs and enabling a more diverse range of businesses to participate in and contribute to economic growth.

Improving Logistics and Accessibility for Entrepreneurs

Nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) identified transportation, parking, and general accessibility as practical but critical barriers. "Parking is a huge barrier in finding affordable, flexible workspace," one participant noted, highlighting how location and public transit options can influence business location decisions.

Others emphasized that accessibility is more than a convenience; rather, it's a driver of startup success. "We need fast, convenient access to our workspaces, vehicles, and technology," one respondent explained, adding that the distance from clients and customers often determines whether a location is viable. Participants proposed expanded and reliable public transit, protected bike lanes, and pedestrian-friendly street design as essential steps to ensure spaces are accessible to workers and clients alike. It's important to address these issues not only to attract startups but also to connect them with customers, suppliers, and talent.

Expanding Access to Facilities and Shared Equipment

Some participants highlighted that access to specialized equipment and shared facilities can be as important as the physical space itself. Approximately 20% emphasized the value of high-tech equipment, fabrication labs, and co-manufacturing facilities as shared resources that can lower costs and further innovation. One respondent recommended more "access to high-tech equipment or core facilities open to the public at reasonable prices." At the same time, another advocated for "rapid prototyping spaces and inexpensive materials for startups." These types of shared infrastructure were seen as a way to reduce individual costs, supporting collaboration, and enabling small businesses to compete in emerging industries.

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Participants also stressed that expanding shared facilities could strengthen the city's broader innovation ecosystem, positioning New Orleans as a more attractive destination for entrepreneurs. As one respondent put it, "access to the right tools can make the difference between an idea staying on paper and becoming a viable product."

Table 7. Frequency Table | Affordable Space to Grow | Theme Counts & Percentages

Theme	# of Responses (out of 40)	% of Responses	Example Quote
Funding Gaps and Needs	20	50%	"Funding is the only thing stopping us from finding resources."
Space Availability and Affordability	18	45%	"New Orleans does not have enough affordable working spaces for startups."
Structural Barriers	14	35%	"Improve infrastructure, reduce insurance."
Awareness	10	25%	"I don't know of funding specifically for workspaces, but workspace is typically available if you participate in any of the many accelerators or incubators."
Logistics and Accessibility	9	23%	"Parking is a huge barrier in finding affordable, flexible workspace."
Facilities and Equipment Access	8	20%	"Rapid prototyping spaces and inexpensive materials for startups."
Cost of Living	6	15%	"..not just working space... [but also] living space. [The] next generation will need survivable space to live and thrive."

Table 8. Identified Challenges | Affordable Space to Grow | Suggested Solutions

Theme	Challenges Identified by Participants	Suggested Solutions
Funding Gaps and Needs (50%)	Limited or no access to startup funding for workspace cost; insufficient early-stage investments	Establish city-backed microgrants programs; create small-seed funding pools for workspace costs; incentivize private investors and venture capital activity; expand awareness of funding programs
Space Availability and Affordability (45%)	High rent, long-term leases; limited flexible options for startups	Repurpose vacant commercial spaces for below-market startup use; promote coworking and hybrid workspace models; establish short-term leasing incentives through public-private partnerships
Structural Barriers (35%)	High insurance costs; zoning restrictions; outdated infrastructure increasing operational costs	Reform zoning and permitting policies; reduce insurance burden for small businesses; invest in modernized infrastructure and utilities to lower long-term costs
Awareness (25%)	Lack of knowledge about available spaces, funding opportunities, or incubator programs	Create a centralized online hub for workspace listings, funding opportunities, and startup resources; improve outreach and communication through city and community networks
Logistics and Accessibility (23%)	Parking shortages; limited public transit; poor connectivity via public transportation to business hubs	Improve public transportation routes to innovation areas; invest in parking solutions and protected bike lanes; enhance connectivity between coworking hubs and city neighborhoods
Facilities & Equipment (20%)	Limited access to high-tech equipment; fabrication labs; shared resources	Develop shared manufacturing and rapid prototyping facilities; partner with universities for open-access equipment; offer subsidized membership to shared labs and maker spaces
Cost of Living (15%)	Rising housing and living costs limiting workforce and entrepreneurial sustainability	Expand affordable housing initiatives near innovation areas; provide housing incentives for startup founders and employees; align workforce housing with economic development goals

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Limitations

This analysis reflects the perspectives of participants who attended a single community event in September 2025. The sample may not represent all New Orleans entrepreneurs, particularly those unable to attend evening events or unaware of the opportunity. Sample sizes varied across stations (36-40 responses), and not all attendees completed all four stations. Additionally, as a snapshot in time, these findings capture priorities at a specific moment and may evolve as the ecosystem develops.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The findings from the TULI Innovation Ecosystem Meet & Greet highlight that while New Orleans possesses the creativity, culture, and talent to anchor a thriving innovation ecosystem, persistent structural and procedural barriers inhibit and limit future economic growth. Across all discussion stations, participants consistently emphasized the need for:

- Streamlined city processes that reduce friction for startups and small businesses.
- Targeted funding mechanisms that fill early-stage capital gaps.
- Equitable access to education, mentorship, and space to ensure inclusion in the city's innovation economy.
- Modernized infrastructure and digital systems that align with the pace of entrepreneurship.

Collectively, these priorities point toward a shared vision: one in which New Orleans builds a startup ecosystem rooted in collaboration, connectivity, and opportunity for all.

Looking forward, the next phase should focus on translating these insights into policy and programmatic action, which includes the following recommendations:

1. Developing pilot initiatives such as city-backed microgrants, shared workspaces, and workforce training partnerships that directly address identified gaps.
2. Establishing ongoing community feedback loops (e.g., town halls, surveys, innovation roundtables) to maintain engagement with local entrepreneurs.
3. Integrating data-driven evaluation to track progress on permitting reforms, investment growth, and equity outcomes.
4. Positioning New Orleans regionally through branding and ecosystem storytelling that ties cultural identity to innovation leadership, creating a place that welcomes, values, and nurtures entrepreneurial ideas.

Through sustained collaboration between city officials, universities, investors, and community partners, New Orleans can move from idea to implementation by transforming participant insights into a blueprint for an inclusive, resilient innovation economy.