

A RECIPE FOR INNOVATION

BY MICAH MERTES

Making cakes to support charitable causes, developing a food app, restoring sneakers and designing eco-friendly fishing bobbers. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive in Creighton students. Through the Greisch Center for Enterprise Value, budding entrepreneurs can take their bold ideas to a new level.

A few years ago, a group of students in the Heider College of Business launched the Entrepreneurship Club, where like-minded innovators could bring their ideas to life.

Like any successful startup, it not only grew quickly — to more than 150 members and counting — but in ways its founders didn't anticipate. Weekly meetings led to 10-hour startup challenges, then to the annual JayTank competition, where students pitch their ideas for thousands of dollars in donor-funded awards.

Building on the Entrepreneurship Club's momentum, the Heider College of Business has launched the Greisch Center for Enterprise Value, which the center's director, Nathan Preheim, BA'96, calls a new model for entrepreneurship education.

"We wanted to build something that doesn't exist at any other college in the country, and I think we're doing just that," Preheim says. "The goal is to put Creighton on the map as the entrepreneurship hub of higher education, a nationally renowned program that attracts the most out-of-the-box thinkers and doers."

Mary Margaret Mellen, a junior who co-founded the Entrepreneurship Club, is equally excited about the possibilities.

"Through the Greisch Center, we'll have even more resources for entrepreneurship, all based in a school of thought that drew me to Creighton in the first place: innovation and creative thinking that looks to solve problems in ways that truly matter," she says.



© Creighton student Mary Margaret Mellen, left, co-founder of the Entrepreneurship Club, and Nathan Preheim, BA'96, director of the Greisch Center for Enterprise Value.

The Diabetes Care Foundation recently committed \$4 million to support the Greisch Center for Enterprise Value, named in honor of foundation board member Jim Greisch, BSBA'80.

"As a Jesuit university," Greisch says, "Creighton is particularly good at translating mission into real-world application and creating value for the communities it serves. The center is a perfect way for the University to capture not only monetary value, but every variety of intrinsic value that makes communities, employers and individuals prosper."

Dozens of Creighton entrepreneurs have already launched (or developed) their ventures with support from the Greisch Center for Enterprise Value. A few of Creighton's entrepreneurial students are featured in the following pages.



REBECCA GRATZ

MARY MARGARET MELLEN

Startup: *Cakes for a Cure*

A junior from Minneapolis, Mellen is double-majoring in finance and marketing and double-minoring in Spanish and entrepreneurship. She is a Scott Scholar; co-founder and head of operations for the Entrepreneurship Club; and works with the nonprofits CIRA and the Northstar Foundation. With Carson Holt, BSBA'25, Mellen is writing the investment memorandum to guide the deployment of hundreds of thousands of dollars into Creighton-affiliated startups.

MELLEN STARTED HER NONPROFIT when she was 11, after two of her cousins had been diagnosed with neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder in which tumors grow on nerve tissue throughout the body. Their experience drove her to act.

Thanks to her grandmother, Mellen was becoming a proficient baker. She went online, honed her skills further and started her own cake-making nonprofit. Over the next decade, she took Cakes for a Cure statewide. Mellen

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NATHAN PREHEIM, BA'96

would make a cake from scratch for anyone, anywhere in Minnesota, and hand-deliver it. Instead of charging a fee, she asked her customers to donate an amount of their choice, through her and Cakes for a Cure, to one of the charities she supported.

She raised more than \$40,000 to fund more than 45,000 meals for children around the world, 10 life-changing reconstructive surgeries for children born with cleft palates, and medical research on neurofibromatosis and Parkinson's disease.

Mellen ended Cakes for a Cure when she came to Creighton. But her efforts could take a new form after graduation. Thanks to her hands-on education in entrepreneurship, she'll have a few more ingredients at her disposal.

"Cakes for a Cure shaped my entrepreneurial journey," Mellen says. "Everything that's followed in my life is an outpouring of lessons learned from that experience: action creates change; faith makes that change steadfast; and passion, not age, drives it all forward."

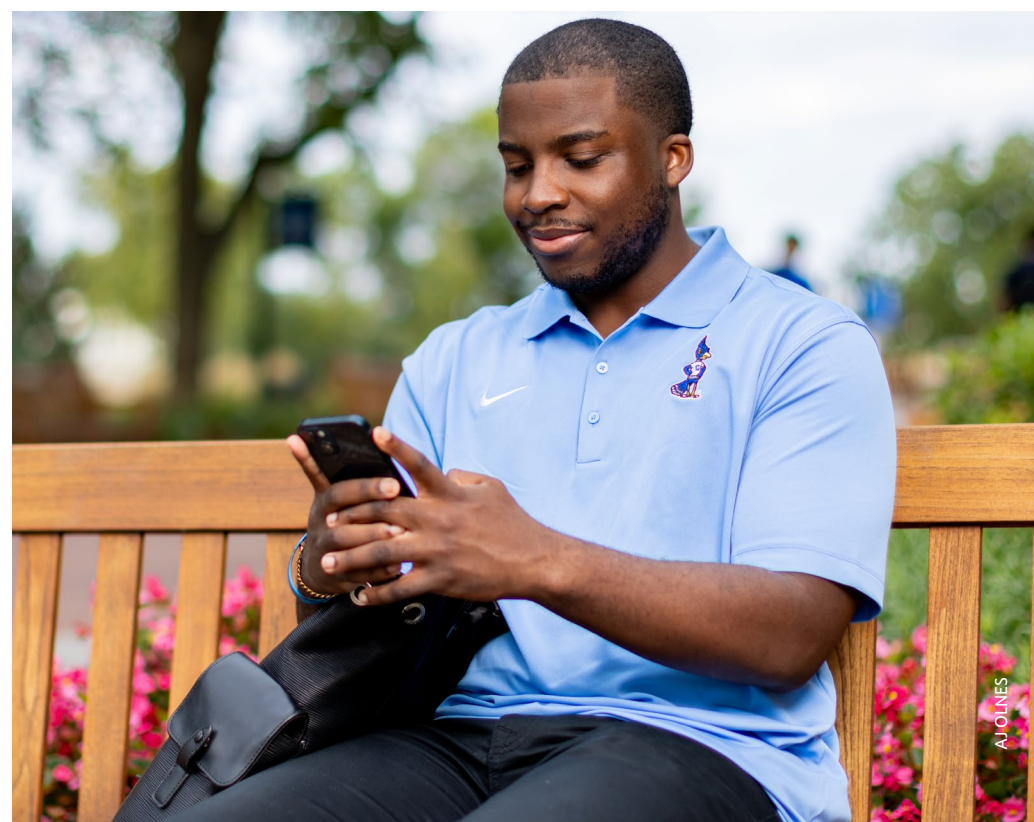


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© Will Smalley with part of his personal sneaker collection. Smalley is co-founder of the Entrepreneurship Club.

In addition to those featured in this story, student startups include a mobile barbershop, a service that provides animal therapy in hospitals, and businesses that make smoothie bowls, college preparation packets, indestructible dog beds and more.

© Valery-Elvis Shafack, BSBA'25, is the founder of NIYOU.



AJOLINES

WILL SMALLEY

Startup: TNKR, LLC

A senior from Blue Springs, Missouri, Smalley is majoring in management and marketing, and minoring in entrepreneurship. He is a Scott Scholar and co-founder and president of Creighton's Entrepreneurship Club.

DRAWING FROM HIS longtime passion for sneakers from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s (and his knowledge of the rarefied subculture), Smalley kickstarted a business connecting sneakerheads with professionals who clean, restore and customize shoes. In 2025, Smalley launched the TNKR mobile app but soon pivoted to a business-to-business model that provides sneaker restorations to dozens of clients nationwide, building and managing a sneaker services supply chain.

"It's the classic founders' dilemma," Smalley says. "You always have this vision for your business, but you will usually need to step back and just listen to the market and respond accordingly. It's been so rewarding to navigate TNKR's changes and gain so much hands-on experience in the process."

Learn more at tnkrsneakers.com.

VALERY-ELVIS SHAFACK, BSBA'25

Startup: NIYOU

A 2025 Heider College of Business graduate from Omaha, Shafack majored in marketing and was a member of the Entrepreneurship Club. NIYOU helps student-athletes navigate Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) partnerships and secure sponsorships.

SHAFACK HAS ALWAYS BEEN entrepreneurially inclined. At 10, he started his own juice stand; at 13, his own sneaker restoration business; in high school, his own production company. At Creighton, Shafack started NIYOU.

Shafack's idea grew out of his work as a marketing intern in Creighton Athletics, where he got to know many of the University's student-athletes. He saw that most of them didn't have time to explore their NIL options and were missing out on opportunities. NIYOU could help fill the gap.

Shafack says he owes much of NIYOU's success to the alumni and donor network that supports students.

Learn more at ni-you.com.

THE GREISCH CENTER FOR ENTERPRISE VALUE HAS FOUR PILLARS

ACADEMIC

The center is enhancing the entrepreneurship minor, open to students of any major, and will include specialized minor tracks based on students' interests. It is also developing courses on intrapreneurship — entrepreneurial thinking applied to innovating within your organization.

APPLIED

The center offers practical application of what students are learning, giving burgeoning entrepreneurs access to seed funding and helping them launch their ideas to market, including **Flight School**, a 12-month, postgraduate accelerator for venture creation and bringing research to market. The donor-supported **First Flight Fund** will bolster student and faculty ventures.

RESEARCH

The center will support research University-wide, helping to secure publishing and commercialization opportunities while enabling faculty members and the University to reap the benefits of intellectual property being created across campus.

The center will also explore the factors that drive startup success, tracking students' experiences over time for internal insights and external scholarship. A proprietary assessment tool will measure the potential of founders and teams.

ACTIVITIES

The student-led Entrepreneurship Club will continue to host events for all students — regardless of major or experience — to explore innovation and connect with creators. These include a weekly speaker series with entrepreneurs, investors and innovators; a 10-hour team competition to develop a startup; team problem-solving sprints; and JayTank, an annual pitch competition.



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© From left, Kirtan Patel, Rian Jacobs and Anush Samiev have received support from Heider College of Business faculty and the Entrepreneurship Club to pursue their business ventures.

KIRTAN PATEL

Startup: *FreshPlate*

A senior from Toronto, Canada, Patel is majoring in computer science and graphic design.

PATEL'S "LIGHT-BULB" MOMENT came standing at the fridge, looking dejectedly at wilted produce and random food items. "It was my first time buying groceries, and I tended to buy too much," Patel says. Yet, nothing seemed to add up to a meal.

Having moved off campus and away from student meal plans, he was struggling to manage his food purchases and meal planning. He thought, "There's got to be a better way." The wheels of entrepreneurship began turning. "I wondered how I could solve the problem," he says.

The idea for FreshPlate was born. The app is intended to help users reduce food waste

and save money by tracking pantry inventory, monitoring ingredient expiration dates and generating meal ideas based on available items.

Patel, a member of the Creighton tennis team, says juggling school, practices, matches and his startup has been a lot of work. But, he adds, he has received support from so many, including classmates, teammates, faculty members, the Athletic Department and Creighton's Entrepreneurship Club.

"I had no idea how to build an app when I came to Creighton," Patel says. He did all the coding for FreshPlate, which is in beta testing as of this writing. He originally thought users would be college students moving off campus and, like him, having to buy groceries for the first time. But FreshPlate has found wider appeal.

"Some faculty members have told me they could use this," he says. "It's given me a sense of confidence. Owning a business has been a dream for me."

RIAN JACOBS

Startup: *BioBobbers*

A sophomore from Olathe, Kansas, Jacobs is majoring in general marketing, sports business marketing and management, and minoring in Spanish and Hispanic studies. Jacobs' winning presentation at JayTank had the judges hook, line and bobber.

FOR JACOBS, FISHING IS MORE than a hobby; it's a way of life. Her earliest memories include spending afternoons with her dad at the pond in their backyard. She also has an entrepreneurial spirit. "I love creating new things and positively contributing to the world," she says.

The two came together when Jacobs noticed plastic bobbers, often used by children, washing ashore. It's common for bobbers to detach from fishing lines, but traditional bobbers rarely biodegrade. So, with the help of the

Entrepreneurship Club, she created BioBobbers — an eco-friendly alternative.

"BioBobbers are designed to break down over time if they get lost in the water," says Jacobs, who designed her bobbers on a 3D printer in the Creighton library. "They offer a sustainable solution that doesn't leave plastic or harmful residues behind."

Learn more at biobobbers.com.

ANUSH SAMIEV

Startup: *Automation Rabbit*

A senior from Omaha majoring in finance and business intelligence and analytics, Samiev is a Scott Scholar, and a co-founder, and runner-up at the 2025 JayTank pitch competition.

SAMIEV STARTED AUTOMATION RABBIT with his older brother, who, while working in the trucking industry, noticed opportunities

to use artificial intelligence to eliminate inefficiencies and fraud. Soon after, they launched their own software consulting and development firm, which now has several clients in Omaha and Texas.

"When it started, our focus was trying to automate the repetitive parts of work so people could focus on making more creative, impactful decisions," Samiev says. "That mindset later expanded into building end-to-end digital solutions, including websites and platforms that help businesses think, act and grow more intelligently."

Samiev says the Entrepreneurship Club has given his business a huge boost. "It's a great opportunity to work with motivated, like-minded students who are launching their own startups. We learn from each other's experiences, which is making us more successful, collectively and as individuals."

Learn more at automationrabbit.com.