

McKenna Center

Miami, FL - Build Up Program – The Idea Center at Miami Dade College

Location: Miami, FL

Venue: Miami Dade College

Intro to the City and Overview of the economy

Miami offers a unique blend of assets that make it an attractive place to start a business: a diverse and growing population with strong global ties, especially to Latin America and the Caribbean; a vibrant startup ecosystem with accelerators, incubators, and co-working spaces; and a strategic location for international trade and logistics. The city's favorable tax environment, robust tourism and hospitality market, and growing tech and innovation hub add further appeal. With access to talent from local universities and a resilient, adaptable business community, Miami provides fertile ground for entrepreneurs looking to launch and grow new ventures in a dynamic, opportunity-rich environment.

Miami's entrepreneurial ecosystem is vibrant and rapidly evolving, fueled by a strong culture of innovation and a multicultural, globally connected community. Ranked #1 in the nation for startup activity by the Kauffman Foundation, Miami boasts 107.8 startups per 100,000 people and a growing network of accelerators, incubators, co-working spaces, and mentorship programs designed to support early-stage founders. High-profile events like eMerge Americas and the influx of venture capital have strengthened the city's reputation as a rising tech and startup hub, while local institutions—such as The Idea Center at Miami Dade College and the Florida Small Business Development Center—provide critical resources for entrepreneurs.

Miami-Dade County faces significant challenges related to poverty and financial instability. As of 2023, approximately 14.1% of residents live below the federal poverty line, a slight decrease from previous years. However, this figure doesn't capture the full extent of economic hardship. The 2023 United Way ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Report indicates that 34% of households are ALICE—working individuals who earn above the poverty threshold yet struggle to afford basic necessities like housing, childcare, food, transportation, and healthcare. Combined with the 17% living in poverty, this means that over half (51%) of Miami-Dade households are either in poverty or one emergency away from it.

The program

Name: Build Up

The Build Up Program at The Idea Center at Miami Dade College leverages the UPBI methodology, in partnership with the University of Notre Dame, to empower individuals in economically disadvantaged situations to launch their own ventures and improve their quality of life through entrepreneurship.

The program serves a highly multicultural and resilient community of aspiring entrepreneurs in Miami-Dade County, where 54% of residents are foreign-born and 75% of business owners are immigrants. Many participants come from low- to moderate-income backgrounds, reflecting broader local challenges: 14.1% of residents live below the poverty line, and 34% fall into the ALICE category (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed), meaning they work but struggle to meet basic needs. The demographic makeup is predominantly Hispanic/Latino, followed by Black/African American and other minority groups, mirroring the county's multicultural profile. Many entrepreneurs are first-generation business owners, often balancing business goals with family responsibilities, and seeking opportunities to formalize, stabilize, and grow early-stage ventures.

This program depends on the collaboration of key players in our existing network of partners. These organizations are seasoned in supporting small businesses in South Florida and include:

The Idea Center (TIC) at Miami Dade College: TIC, the College's entrepreneurship hub, will manage daily operations like recruitment, staffing, and program delivery.

Local Financial Institutions: We partner with local CDFIs, commercial banks, and grant-awarding institutions such as Ascendus, Urban League of Broward, TD Bank, and the Miami Foundation to equip participants with tools and tips to access capital.

Technical Assistance Providers: Providers like Axis Helps and Prospera will share resources to support participants beyond the program.

Local Government: We collaborate with county and municipal economic development offices, utilizing Active Business Lists to identify and promote the program to small business owners. Key partners include Miami Dade County, and cities like Miami, Doral, and Homestead.

Community Organizations: Recruitment is supported by groups serving underrepresented minorities and niche groups. For example, we partner with the Haitian American Chamber of Commerce, the Arts and Business Council, and the County's Asian American Advisory Board. To increase access for individuals with unique abilities, we work with the WOW Center.

Annual Cycle: The program will begin in August each year and will end in June

What sets our approach apart is the experience and proven success we bring through The Idea Center's flagship Scale Up program, which has helped over 500 small businesses grow and strengthen their operations. With a track record of guiding established businesses to the next level, we are now expanding our impact by launching the Build Up Program—designed specifically for aspiring entrepreneurs at the very beginning of their journey. This new program complements Scale Up, allowing us to leverage our existing expertise, resources, and network of instructors and mentors to provide early-stage founders with the tools and support they need to successfully launch and sustain their ventures. By integrating lessons learned from scaling businesses, we ensure that participants are set up not only to start but to build strong foundations for long-term

success.

We aim to make the Build Up Program a key pathway for aspiring entrepreneurs in Miami-Dade, running one cohort each year and serving 40 to 50 participants. Our goal is to expand access to entrepreneurship, while building a seamless pipeline that connects early-stage founders to continued growth opportunities through programs like Scale Up. Over time, we hope to deepen impact and strengthen Miami's entrepreneurial ecosystem by equipping more individuals with the tools to succeed.

Contact: [The Idea Center at Wolfson Campus](#)

315 NE 2nd Ave, Building 8, 5th floor.

Miami, FL 33132

Telephone: 225.578.0313

Fax: 225.578.6606

Email: ideacenter@mdc.edu



OFFICE OF THE PROVOST ,
KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS ,



McKenna Center

Notre Dame, IN 46556 USA

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