



Center for
Innovation and Entrepreneurship
MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

Future Solvers Rulebook



2026 FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge

About

The FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge focuses on students developing innovative ideas that address challenges facing our region.

Undergraduate college students from southern Minnesota and northern Iowa are invited to compete in the FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge, an agricultural pitch challenge offering nearly \$30,000 in cash prizes. Student teams are presented with a scenario depicting an economic challenge facing our region and will compete to develop the most innovative and entrepreneurial solution. Competitors must rely on skills of critical thinking, teamwork, networking, and a business acumen to craft a winning pitch.

This year's competition will include two tracks, with two divisions for each track, targeting different aspects of rural revitalization.

Contact Us

Questions about the Challenge	cie@mnsu.edu	507-389-1018
Questions about Registration	workforce@mnsu.edu	507-389-1094

2026 Timeline

Date	Task / Activity
Monday, November 3, 2025	Applications Open
December TBD	Virtual Informational Sessions
Friday, February 13, 2026 @ 5:00PM	Applications DUE
Monday, February 16, 2026	Information Packets Distributed
Friday, February 20, 2026	Deadline to withdraw
Friday, February 27, 2026 @ 5:00PM	Proposal & Virtual Pitch DUE
Monday, March 9, 2026	Finalists Notified
March 16 – 20, 2026	Individual Rehearsals with CIE Team
Monday, March 23, 2026 @ 5:00PM	Finalist Slide Decks DUE
Friday, March 27, 2026	Live Pitch Event

2026 Timeline 1

The Scenario

A rural community in southern Minnesota with 10,000 residents has lost two major employers in the past five years and is struggling to retain young professionals. The town has access to a shuttered manufacturing facility, a community college, and a regional transportation corridor. Historically, the local economy has been heavily reliant on agriculture.

The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development has launched two initiatives to diversify rural economies and create new opportunities that will attract and retain residents. Your team has been selected to propose groundbreaking business and innovation projects that address the challenges of rural economic diversification and technology advancement in agriculture for this community.

Choose to compete in one of the two following tracks:

Track #1: Business Focus: *Rural Renaissance: Business, Community and Supply Chain Innovation*

Value-added agriculture takes a raw agricultural product or byproduct and turns it into a product that appeals to a broader customer base or earns the farmer a greater portion of the total “farm-to-fork/fiber/fuel” revenue.

Your challenge is to develop a business plan and marketing plan for a new or innovative value-added agricultural product that uses an agricultural commodity or byproduct currently produced in southern Minnesota. Your proposal should aim to:

- Utilize local agricultural products in new and innovative ways
- Leverage the existing manufacturing facility or transportation corridor
- Create new jobs that attract young talent
- Demonstrate that the business is likely to be financially sustainable

Track #2: STEM Focus: *Smart Farming and Supply Chains*

Your challenge is to develop a project that applies STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) innovations to agriculture and its supply chain, and that includes a practical application of automation intelligence (AI), robotics, and/or the Internet of Things (IoT). Your proposal should aim to introduce cutting-edge solutions that:

- Enhance agricultural productivity and sustainability
- Enable data-driven decision-making
- Make agriculture more efficient, transparent and profitable for rural producers

Divisions

- **Intermediate Division:** Teams of undergraduate college students in their first and second years of study only.
- **Open Division:** Teams of undergraduate college students including students in their third year of study or more. Open Division teams may include first-year and second-year members, but any team with at least one member in their third year of study or more must compete in the Open Division.

Eligibility

- Participants must be current full or part-time undergraduate students located in Southern Minnesota or Northern Iowa.
- Open to any major. Teams are encouraged to have a mix of majors for optimal team performance; however, it is not required.
- Teams may include 3 to 5 people and may include students from multiple colleges/universities.
- Participants must follow rules and abide by all deadlines to remain eligible. At least one member of each team must attend the rehearsal.

Application & Registration Fee

Students must submit one application per team with the names and information of all team members along with the registration fee of \$50 by Friday, February 13, 2026 at 5:00PM.

Registration Link: [Apply for the FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge](#)

Applicants will receive FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge updates throughout the competition via email to the main point of contact. Be sure to provide an email address that you check daily.

All participants have the option to receive individual consulting from the Small Business Development Center, faculty and other mentors to assist with developing their idea, plan and pitch.

Round 1 – Proposal & Virtual Pitch

All teams that have completed the application process will receive information on the challenge including a business plan template and judging rubrics on Monday, February 16, 2026.

Teams will submit their proposal document(s) and pitch video to cie@mnsu.edu to be shared with our judging panel by the deadline – Friday, February 27, 2026 at 5:00pm.

The deadline for teams to withdraw from the competition and receive a refund of their \$50 application fee is Friday, February 20, 2026.

Round 2 - Pitch Presentation

The top two teams from each division within each track will advance to the final round—the pitch presentation—resulting in a total of eight finalist teams.

No more than one team from the same college or university may advance in any given track and division, unless no other schools are represented in that category.

For example, if the two highest-scoring teams in the Open Division STEM Track are from the same school, only the top-scoring team will advance, and the next highest-scoring team from another institution will take the second finalist spot. This limitation applies only within each track and division; teams from the same college may advance in multiple tracks or divisions.

Teams that don't advance onto the pitch presentation are required to attend the event and networking reception to receive the \$200 stipend.

For the event day, March 27, teams will pitch their ideas in front of the judges and live audience, the audience will vote for the People's Choice awards, one for each track, and the winners will be announced.

Following the live pitch event will be a Networking Reception that all teams are expected to attend.

Expectations

The FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge Team holds the right to disqualify a team at any given time due to unprofessionalism. To comply with our guidelines, we expect the following:

- Late applications, business plans, slide decks, etc. will not be accepted.
- Unless given timely notice, Teams are expected to be at all FutureSolvers Cultivation Challenge meetings and rehearsals.
- Other acts of unprofessionalism will be judged case-by-case.

Awards

Winners will be selected based on business plan and pitch scores (50% each).

Prizes will be awarded for each track (Business and STEM):

- 1st Place - \$4,000
- 2nd Place - \$2,000
- People's Choice - \$1,000

Bonus: Grand Champion Jury Award: \$1,000