



2026 COMMUNITY COLLEGE INNOVATION CHALLENGE



GUIDELINES

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The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is the primary advocacy organization for the nation's community colleges. The association represents more than 1,000 two-year, associate degree-granting institutions and nearly 12 million students.



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ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE INNOVATION CHALLENGE (CCIC)

The Community College Innovation Challenge (CCIC) is led by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in partnership with the National Science Foundation (NSF). It is a national competition where community college student teams, working with a supportive faculty or administrator mentor, use science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to innovate solutions to real-world problems; earn full travel support to attend an Innovation Boot Camp in Washington, D.C.; and compete for cash awards. The Innovation Boot Camp provides professional development, mentoring, and coaching designed to build strategic communication and entrepreneurial skills to help students advance their innovations in both the private and public sectors. Students participate in sessions on design thinking, commercializing ideas, developing a value proposition, communicating with stakeholders, refining a pitch, and more. The Innovation Boot Camp culminates in a poster session and engagement opportunity with STEM leaders and Congressional stakeholders, and a pitch presentation in front of a panel of esteemed industry and entrepreneurial professionals to determine the first, second, and third place winning teams.

The national CCIC is designed to enable community college students to discover and demonstrate their capacity to use STEM to make a difference in the world. It provides a venue to strengthen and further develop STEM thinking, apply it to solving real-world problems, and to build the skills necessary to carry invention from idea to society-benefitting innovation. Through the Innovation Boot Camp, finalist teams have the opportunity to interact with entrepreneurs, experts, and industry professionals in business planning, stakeholder engagement, communication, and marketplace dynamics; gain life-changing business acumen and strategic communication skills; and engage with other community college innovators to make significant connections and to share ideas. Finalist teams showcase their projects and colleges on a national stage through a poster session, as well as compete in a pitch presentation at the end of the Innovation Boot Camp. The Boot Camp provides a friendly and constructive environment to hone innovation while gaining entrepreneurial skills and competing for cash awards.

AWARDS & TRAVEL SUPPORT

AACC and NSF provide:

- A plaque for all finalist colleges;
- Recognition certificates from NSF and AACC for each finalist team member;
- Full travel support for all finalist team members to attend the Innovation Boot Camp in Washington, D.C.
- A \$500 cash honorarium for all finalist student team members and faculty/administrator mentors for attending the Boot Camp;
- Additional cash awards – awards are made to each first, second, and third place team member in the following amounts:

First place: **\$3,000**

Second place: **\$2,000**

Third place: **\$1,000**

CCIC COMPETITION PHASES

CCIC Phase I – Developing Ideas, Inventions, and Innovations

Assemble your Community College Team. Each team should consist of:

- A community college faculty or administrator mentor
 - 2–4 community college students
 - Interdisciplinary teams that include students in STEM, business, humanities, and other fields are encouraged.
2. **Develop breakthrough ideas using STEM.**
- For the CCIC, student teams are asked to develop a STEM solution to a real-world problem of local to global concern.
 - Your team **is required** to:
 - Identify a problem of local to global concern that you seek to address with your STEM innovation.
 - Assess your innovation’s potential impact on society (such as on the economy, national security, global competitiveness, the environment, quality of life, etc.).
 - Determine the scientific and market feasibility of the innovation, identifying any challenges and ways to potentially work through them.
 - Share ideas for how the innovation would be implemented in a real-world scenario. Start thinking of yourselves as entrepreneurs with a novel invention, creation, or product you want to bring to the marketplace.
 - Your team **is not required** to have already implemented your innovation.
3. **Apply to the CCIC with your STEM innovation by submitting a**
- Written entry; and a
 - 90-second video.
4. **Entries will be vetted by STEM innovation experts to select up to 12 finalist teams.**
5. **The finalist teams will receive full travel support and are expected to attend the Innovation Boot Camp in Washington, D.C. taking place June 8–11, 2026.**
6. **Finalist teams are also expected to prepare for the Innovation Boot Camp by participating in two orientation webinars and conducting 3–5 customer discovery interviews (as detailed in the orientation webinars) prior to participating in the event.**
- Welcome & Orientation to the Innovation Boot Camp
May 1 from 1:00–2:30 p.m. EDT
 - The Customer Discovery Journey in STEM Innovation
May 8 from 1:00–2:30 p.m. EDT
 - Customer Discovery Exploration for Finalist Teams
May 8–June 7, 2026 (on teams’ own time)

The finalist teams will compete at the Innovation Boot Camp through a poster session and a pitch presentation—with the first, second, and third place teams winning cash awards.

CCIC Phase II: Transforming Ideas to Impact

1. Finalist teams will come to Washington, D.C. to attend an Innovation Boot Camp to be held on June 8-11, 2026.
2. Teams will discover the process for transforming ideas into reality through learning strategies for entrepreneurship, customer discovery, lean start-up, business and product-developing methodology, strategic communications, and design-centered thinking.
3. Teams will gain practical communication skills through coaching and mentoring, and the opportunity to present their STEM innovations through a national poster session and stakeholder engagement opportunity.
4. Teams will conduct a pitch presentation of their innovation in front of a panel of esteemed judges to earn cash awards.
 - Each finalist team member will receive \$500 for participating in the Boot Camp.
 - Each first, second, and third place team member wins cash awards: (1st place team members win \$3000 each; 2nd place team members win \$2000 each; and 3rd place team members win \$1000 each).
4. Teams are judged by their interaction and poster display and on their formal pitch presentation at the Innovation Boot Camp.



The CCIC helped me think more creatively about problem-solving and working closely with others to bring ideas to life. It was a chance to grow as a leader, connect with inspiring people, and see how collaboration can turn big ideas into real impact.”

~ CCIC Student Finalist

ELIGIBILITY

- Each team must have 2–4 student members, and a faculty or administrator at their college who will function as a mentor to the team.
- All student team members must be seeking a two-year degree in the U.S. or its territories at the time of entry (e.g., the spring 2026 semester).
- All team members must be 18 years of age by March 30, 2026.
- Student and faculty/administrator mentor team members **must** be U.S. citizens, nationals, or permanent residents and will be required to check a box on the entry form verifying this status.
- Student team members must be in good standing with their academic institution, which is determined by the individual college.
- For teams selected as finalists, the mentor and students **must be available** to attend the Innovation Boot Camp to be held in Washington, D.C. from **June 8–11, 2026**.
 - Students and faculty/administrator mentors will receive full travel support to attend. Air fare and hotel costs will be direct billed to AACC. AACC will reimburse team members for food per diems, and other related travel expenses in accordance with AACC travel policies.
- Teams may not consist of members from multiple institutions.
- Teams may not have submitted their innovation to any other competition.
- Students who attended a past Innovation Boot Camp as a finalist/winning team may not enter the CCIC again.
- Eligible students who submitted an entry to a past CCIC, but did not progress to the final round, may submit an entry in the 2026 CCIC.
- Faculty/administrator mentors who have attended a past Innovation Boot Camp may lead another team in the 2026 cycle.
- Employees, contractors, officers, or judges of the sponsoring organizations are not eligible to enter the competition.



Coming from a rural college, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity the CCIC provided. It opened doors I never thought possible and fundamentally changed my life by allowing me to continue my education which is everything to me. Without this chance, advancing academically and personally would have been much harder. The experience gave me access to resources and confidence that reshaped my future.”

~ CCIC Student Finalist

TIMELINE

January 21, 2026	CCIC opens, accepting submissions
April 3, 2026	Submissions due by 11:59 p.m. PDT
April 4–21, 2026	Submission Review Period
Late April 2026	Up to 12 Finalist Teams notified and announced
Late April to June 2026	Finalist Teams prepare for Innovation Boot Camp
May 1, 2026	Welcome & Orientation to the Innovation Boot Camp Webinar at 1:00 p.m. EDT
May 8, 2026	The Customer Discovery Journey in STEM Innovation Webinar at 1:00 p.m. EDT
May 8–June 7, 2026	Customer Discovery for Finalist Teams
May 8, 2026	Deadline for Finalist Teams to Register for the Boot Camp
May 15, 2026	Poster Abstract Due
June 8–11, 2026	Innovation Boot Camp in Washington, D.C.
June 11, 2026	First, Second, and Third Place Winning Teams announced on site



My CCIC experience set me apart from many other applicants for scholarships, helped me successfully transfer to my current school, and gave me the confidence to pursue starting a company. Today, I am not only a student but also a researcher for my own startup. This growth was made possible because of CCIC's exposure and the outstanding support it provided."

~ CCIC Student Finalist

HOW TO ENTER

- 1 **Review this complete guidebook and confirm your eligibility.**
- 2 **Assemble a team of 2–4 students and a faculty or administrator mentor to develop a breakthrough idea that addresses a real-world problem.**
- 3 **Enter the competition online at www.aaccinnovationchallenge.com**
 - Click the “Enter Now” button on the homepage. This link takes you to the Competition Entry Platform, which is a separate website.
 - **Before you submit your entry, the whole team must register:**
 - **The team’s mentor must initially register their team and invite all team members to join.** All team members must then join and provide the required personal information and upload any required forms. Any team member can then submit the team’s entry by the due date.
- 4 **Develop a summary statement and a written entry that describes your innovation.**
 - **Summary Statement:** Provide a short 500-character summary of your idea/project. The summary should be clear, concise, and written without technical jargon so people are able to understand what the project is, why it matters, and what impact it will have.
 - **Written Entry:** Provide a written entry that addresses each of the three sections detailed below. Please note that each section has a specified character limit, including spaces. **The written entry should be not be written by the faculty mentor.**
 - **The Problem.** Clearly and succinctly define the problem of interest. Provide relevant background information and identify the context of the problem (i.e. who is affected, how long has the problem existed). Indicate why it is important that this problem be addressed. (1600 characters)
 - **The Solution.** Describe your team’s innovative solution. What science and/or technology inform your solution? How is your solution innovative and different from other products/services intended to solve the same problem? What challenges or barriers must be overcome to make your solution a reality? (2100 characters)
 - **The Impact and Benefits.** Describe how your team would measure the impact and benefits of your solution, if implemented. The societal impact of your innovation such as aiding national security, increasing U.S. global competitiveness, improving quality of life, expanding educational opportunities, etc., must be addressed. (1600 characters)

5 Prepare a 90-second video entry.

- The video entry should consist of a single, 90-second maximum video.
- The video should clearly articulate the problem, the team’s proposed solution to the problem, and how the team’s solution is innovative and unique in addressing the problem.
- The video entry should tell a compelling story and include methods and insights not provided in the written entry to create a novel presentation.
- The video entry should deliver clear and understandable messages using nontechnical language.
- Videos can be shot and edited by someone not on the team; **however, the subject(s) of the video and its content must be created by team members.**
- Videos do not have to include credits, but if they do, these need to be included in the 90-second time limit.
- If you use a phone to shoot a video, please be sure to shoot horizontally at all times.
- Recording a team Zoom call for the 90-second video and converting it to an MP4 is an option for video submission.
- When creating the video, a good best practice is to talk as if you are reiterating the question in your response. (Ex: “Our proposed solution to the problem is...” or “Our team’s solution is innovative and different because...”)
- Please see the challenge website at www.aaccinnovationchallenge.com for additional tips and guidance for developing successful videos.

6 Upload your video.

- The video file can be directly uploaded to the entry platform in any file type. Please maintain a maximum file size of 150 MB.
- Please keep the following tips in mind when uploading:
 - Keep file name under 30 characters.
 - Do not include special characters in file names.
 - Once uploaded, your video will take some time to be rendered depending on size. This can take from 30 seconds to a few minutes or longer.
 - You will see a progress bar in this spot while your video is processed.
 - Your video will need to be successfully uploaded into the platform before you can submit your application. Please allow enough time prior to the competition deadline to upload your submission video.

7 Complete additional entry requirements by providing the following information:

- College name and physical address.
- Entry title (please do not use acronyms).
- Suggested caption for video.
- Suggested credit for video.
- College X or Instagram account handle.
- College public information or media officer’s contact information (name, email, and phone number).
- Signed and uploaded “Certificate of Authenticity” form signed by the team’s mentor, which can be accessed on the entry platform.

ENTRY REVIEW CRITERIA

- All entries and team members will be screened for compliance with the competition rules and eligibility requirements.
- Each entry will be evaluated by a review panel of NSF, AACC, and community college experts based on the judging criteria that will equally weigh the following criteria when scoring Phase 1 entries:
 - **Innovation and Impact:** An assessment of the proposed solution’s use of STEM to address the problem; potential impact to be transformative in the areas of the economy, quality of life, global competitiveness, education, etc.; and how the proposed solution differs from existing efforts in its use of novel concepts, methods, and/or technology.
 - **Feasibility:** An assessment of the likelihood that the solution will work as presented and can be replicated; and an evaluation of the team’s recognition of potential barriers and suggestions for ways in which these barriers may be addressed.
 - **Clarity of Communication:** An assessment of the team’s compliance with all entry guidelines (written and video entries), including structure, organization of facts and data, and the inclusion of clear, consistent messaging.
- Up to 12 of the highest-scoring entries will be selected for the final round of the competition.
- Teams will be notified if they become a finalist in late April with detailed instructions on how to prepare for the Innovation Boot Camp and must participate in two webinars to cover all Boot Camp logistics and required preparation. Please plan to attend the following two webinars:
 - The first webinar, “Community College Innovation Challenge: Welcome & Orientation to the Innovation Boot Camp,” will be held on Friday, May 1 from 1:00–2:30 p.m. EDT. This webinar will highlight expectations and agenda items for Boot Camp participation, provide guidance on logistical support, discuss the poster session and pitch presentation, provide guidance on mentoring and coaching support, and offer the opportunity for attendees to ask questions of the CCIC organizers.
 - The second webinar, “The Customer Discovery Journey in STEM Innovation” will be held on Friday, May 8 from 1:00–2:30 p.m. EDT. This webinar will provide participants with an overview of the Customer Discovery process, which is a key element of the Innovation Boot Camp training. In addition, CCIC finalist teams will be tasked with a Customer Discovery assignment to complete in advance of attending the Boot Camp.

The faculty mentor and student team members are required to attend the live webinars and/or view the webinar recordings if they are unable to attend the live events. AACC and NSF strongly encourage all team members to take part in the live webinars and/or view the recorded versions to ensure that teams are oriented to the Boot Camp, understand expectations for both Boot Camp participation and activities that need to be completed prior to participating, and have an opportunity to ask questions.



I loved learning about business and communication; and it was so cool to meet so many amazing, successful, and passionate people.”

~ CCIC Student Finalist

HOW TO WIN THE CHALLENGE

- Become a finalist by coming up with a stand-out idea and Phase I submission.
- Prepare for the 2026 Innovation Boot Camp:
 - Begin focusing beyond the idea to explore its viability outside the lab, classroom, or workshop and understand how to make it desirable, available, and affordable in the real world.
 - Create a poster presentation that clearly conveys how the idea solves a societal problem and how society benefits.
- Attend the 2026 Innovation Boot Camp:
 - Learn to calibrate ideas to marketplace needs and opportunities.
 - Receive coaching and mentoring in:
 - Strategic communication,
 - Design-centered thinking, and
 - Identity and brand development.
- Showcase your project and college, on a national stage, through developing a poster and a pitch presentation.
- Interact effectively with STEM leaders and Congressional stakeholders at the poster session.
- Deliver a strong pitch presentation about the project before a distinguished panel of judges at the Boot Camp.



I was able to see my students develop and grow during the Boot Camp. They were pushed out of their comfort zone and excelled. They gained invaluable skills that they can use for a lifetime."

~ CCIC Team Mentor

PHASE II JUDGING CRITERIA

Performing proficiently during two activities will be essential to securing a spot in the winner's circle at the Innovation Boot Camp for finalists. One of these activities is a poster session; the other is a pitch presentation. The overall effectiveness that finalist teams demonstrate through the combination of these two activities will determine the ultimate winner of this year's challenge. In other words, a team must perform well at both activities to win.

A distinguished panel of judges will adjudicate both activities using criteria that assess the finalist teams' abilities in skillfully representing their innovations during the poster session, and in convincingly conveying the merits, value, and potential of their ideas during the pitch presentation. These two events will be scored separately each accounting for half of the team's total combined score.

Poster Session and Reception

Student teams will prepare and bring posters to the CCIC Boot Camp as part of their participation in a national poster session and reception. The Student Poster session is traditionally held on Capitol Hill. The poster session location will be shared with the acceptance letters to the finalist teams.

Teams will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Does the team's poster identify a societal need; demonstrate how the innovation satisfies this need; communicate the innovation's novelty, feasibility, and viability; and substantiate the innovation's ability to produce measurable benefits?
- Does the team exhibit enthusiasm; knowledgeably represent the innovation; ask questions of visitors and actively listen to answers; and align their responses and interactions to the interests of the attendees?
- Do the team's interactions convincingly champion their innovation's value and significance; effectively explain the STEM behind, and the uniqueness of, their innovation; make clear how society benefits; express optimism and vision; reflect positively on their team and their institution; and convey a roadmap for moving the project forward?

Pitch Presentation

Student teams will be asked to create a 5-minute pitch presentation that demonstrates the team's concept, followed by a 5-minute question and answer period from the judges. Teams will be provided with coaching, mentoring, and time to prepare and refine their pitch presentations as part of the Innovation Boot Camp agenda. The pitch presentations will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Does the presentation clearly identify the societal problem, need, or opportunity that the innovation addresses; concisely explain how the idea solves this problem, and succinctly convey the benefits the idea can or will produce?
- Does the team tell a complete story that persuasively signals the idea's novelty, feasibility, and viability; reveal the idea's uniqueness, and differentiate it from other existing or possible approaches?
- Does the team provide a roadmap for where they would like to take their innovation, signal its value in the marketplace, and actively urge the listener to support its further development?

ADDITIONAL RULES & REQUIREMENTS

Deadline

- All eligible entries must be received during the competition submission window from January 21–April 3, 2026, by 11:59 p.m. PDT.

Original Work

- Each team entrant certifies, through submission to the competition, that the entry is their own original, creative work and does not violate or infringe the creative work of others, as protected under U.S. copyright law or patent law.
- Faculty/administrator mentors will be required to sign a certificate stating that the entry is original and has been independently developed by the **student members** of the team.

Boot Camp Preparation and Participation

- All finalist team members are required to attend the Innovation Boot Camp taking place on June 8–11, 2026 in Washington, D.C.
- In addition, all finalist team members are required to participate in two orientation webinars (by attending the live webinars or viewing the recorded versions) and conducting assignments in preparation for the Innovation Boot Camp.
 - Preparatory assignments include conducting 3–5 customer discovery interviews, developing a poster for the poster session, and reviewing Boot Camp materials. The first webinar will take place on May 1, 2026 and the second on May 8, 2026. Both webinars will be held from 1:00–2:30 p.m. EDT.
 - Detailed information on conducting interviews and preparing for the poster session will be shared with teams upon their selection as finalists and through the orientation webinars.

Copyright and Promotional Releases

- Entrants retain all intellectual property, copyright, and equivalent rights to their innovations. Entrants give AACC and NSF nonexclusive rights to use their names, likenesses, quotes, or any part of their submission for educational publicity and/or promotional purposes. This includes, but is not limited to, website display, social media promotion, and print materials.
- AACC and NSF will not be responsible for any claims or complaints from third parties about any disputes of ownership regarding the ideas, solutions, images, or video submissions.

Awards

- Winners are responsible for all taxes or other fees connected with the award received.
- Should AACC decide to bring winning contestants to Washington, D.C., or to any other location for promotional and other purposes, expenses paid by AACC will be within the limit set by AACC's travel policies and guidelines.

Reception

- The poster session and reception for CCIC finalists may be held in a federal building. Accordingly, there may be the possibility that a federal government-initiated background check will be required in advance of the event for entry into the building. This requirement would apply to all finalists and their mentors in order to attend the reception and would be communicated with the notifications to the finalist teams.

Code of Conduct

- The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) seeks to foster a welcoming and intellectually stimulating experience for all participants at the Innovation Boot Camp. AACC expects respect for all from all CCIC participants, presenters, judges, employees and staff. In furtherance of this purpose, any behavior, whether personal or professional, that is unwelcome, offensive, or shows disrespect or aggression will not be tolerated. Persons determined by AACC to have engaged in unacceptable behavior may be required to depart the venue and/or be further disqualified from the competition.

Legal and Administrative

- By entering the competition, the entrants agree to hold harmless, NSF and AACC for all legal and administrative claims to include associated expenses that may arise from any claims related to their submission or its use.
- All contestants agree that they, their heirs and estates shall hold harmless the United States, the employees of the federal government, the employees of NSF and AACC for any and all injuries and/or claims arising from participation in this contest, to include that which may occur while traveling to or participating in contest activities.
- A competition entry constitutes an agreement to adhere to the rules and stipulations set forth by the competition sponsors.
- Any entrants or entry found in violation of any rule will be disqualified.
- All judges' decisions are final and may not be appealed.
- AACC reserves the right for any reason, including but not limited to an insufficient number of qualified entries, to modify or cancel the CCIC at any time during the duration of the competition.
- AACC has the final say on any point not outlined in the entry rules.



I hope to continue expanding on the research that I started in this competition...and lead this into an engaging career for myself. This experience has given me a major boost in confidence and made me a better public speaker, so I feel more capable and interested in taking up leadership positions on campus and furthering myself as a person.”

~ CCIC Student Finalist

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Below are some common questions. If your question is not addressed here, please email CCIC@aacc.nche.edu and a CCIC staff member will respond to your inquiry.

- 1. Is the Innovation Boot Camp a science and engineering workshop?** No. Your team will not receive customized science coaching on your project at the Innovation Boot Camp. The Innovation Boot Camp is a professional development workshop aimed at building communication and entrepreneurial skills relevant to supporting innovation in both the private and public sectors. Sessions will include information applicable to commercializing ideas, using technology for social applications, communicating with stakeholders, refining a pitch, and more. There will be customized sessions for mentors led by NSF and AACC leadership that will offer information on NSF funding opportunities for community colleges.
- 2. Can entrants be from any community college anywhere in the U.S.? What about students pursuing two-year degrees at colleges offering four-year degrees as well?** All student participants must be pursuing a two-year degree at a college in the U.S. or its territories at the time of entry. Two-year degree-pursuing students at colleges offering both two-year and four-year degrees are eligible to participate as long as they are pursuing a two-year degree at the time of entry. Teams may not consist of students from multiple institutions.
- 3. What is meant by “team” for the purpose of the content?** Teams must consist of 2 to 4 student team members and a faculty or administrator who can serve as a team mentor. NSF and AACC encourage multidisciplinary teams (comprised of engineers, STEM technicians, marketing and business students, humanities students, and more).
- 4. Can multiple teams from the same college apply?** Yes. Up to three teams from a single community college can apply. However, no more than one team from an individual college would be selected to advance to the finalist round to attend the Innovation Boot Camp.
- 5. Can a student be on multiple teams?** No. Each student can only be on one team.
- 6. Can a faculty or administrator mentor serve on multiple teams?** No. Each faculty or administrator can only mentor one team.
- 7. Is there a specific grade point average that qualifies a student to be “in good standing” at their institution?** No. We rely on the educational institution to determine if a student is in good standing.
- 8. Must the mentor teach a STEM discipline?** No. Mentors can be full-time, part-time faculty or administrators that specialize in and/or oversee in any discipline at their college.
- 9. Once an entrant submits a video, can they revise or replace it with another video prior to the April 3 deadline?** No. Once you submit a video to the competition, it is considered a final submission and cannot be revised or replaced. However, you can save your entry on the challenge platform and edit it many times before officially submitting.
- 10. How will finalists be notified?** All registered team members will be notified via email by late April if they have progressed to the finalist round.

- 11. Will information on the Innovation Boot Camp be sent directly to finalists?** Yes. Finalists will be contacted in late April and provided with detailed information pertaining to attending the Innovation Boot Camp, participating in two preparatory webinars, and conducting assignments to prepare for the Innovation Boot Camp including detailed guidelines on developing posters for the poster session.
- 12. What if a team member is unable to attend the Innovation Boot Camp?** All finalist team members, including the mentor, are required to attend the Innovation Boot Camp. However, on a case-by-case basis, AACC will consider issues that may arise that prevent team members from attending.
- 13. What about health and safety measures?** AACC will follow federal, state, and local guidance when assessing any potential health and safety concerns for the 2026 CCIC Boot Camp. If necessary, detailed information about any potential health and safety protocols will be shared in the acceptance letters for the finalist teams.
- 14. How will the first, second, and third place team winners be notified and awarded?** Winning teams will be announced at the end of the Innovation Boot Camp. Each member of the first, second, and third place winning teams will be mailed a check upon completion of necessary tax forms, a few weeks following the Boot Camp. The winners will be announced via an AACC and NSF news release and well as displayed online on the challenge website.
- 15. Can more than one faculty/administrator mentor a team?** Each team can only have one mentor accompany them to the Boot Camp.
- 16. Can additional faculty/administrators from a college attend the Boot Camp if they pay their own way?** No. As much as we would like to accommodate additional participants, the Boot Camp sessions are only open to the immediate student team members and their faculty/administrator mentor to build community and to maximize time for technical assistance, coaching, and networking. While additional faculty members/administrators from a college cannot attend the Boot Camp sessions, they are welcome to attend the Student Poster Session and Reception taking place on the evening of Tuesday, June 9 on Capitol Hill. Invitations for this public facing event of the CCIC will be forthcoming.
- 17. Are international students eligible to apply as part of a CCIC team?** The Community College Innovation Challenge is sponsored and funded by the National Science Foundation, which is a U.S. federal government agency. As a matter of federal grant compliance, all student and faculty/administrator mentor team members are required to be U.S. citizens, nationals, or permanent residents to be eligible to compete in the competition. While AACC greatly appreciates the interest of international students in participating in the CCIC; federal grant compliance regulations stipulate these guidelines.
- 18. What about intellectual property? Does the CCIC retain any right to a team's innovation?** All CCIC entries and finalist team members retain all intellectual property, copyright, and equivalent rights over their own design and ideas. The CCIC shares information about the competition to highlight and promote community colleges and student innovation broadly on a national level; but retains no rights whatsoever over the students' ideas or innovations.

The CCIC is about building ideas into opportunities. The main purpose of the Boot Camp is to provide teams with the communication and business skills to help them pursue developing and putting their designs into practice. If any student teams are at a stage where they would like to pursue a patent, we strongly encourage them to do so—and we will share resources regarding patents as part of the Boot Camp. Please note that during the Boot Camp, you will be communicating with others about your idea and sharing information through the Student Poster Session and final pitch competition. However, it is not at all necessary to explain exactly how you do something that might share any “secrets,”—rather we ask you to focus on the overall scope and potential impact of your innovation.

CCIC AT-A-GLANCE

Who?

Teams of 2 to 4 community college students with an interest in STEM innovation, entrepreneurship, and in making a difference; a faculty or administrator team mentor.

When?

Submit from January 21–April 3, 2026.

Required attendance at an Innovation Boot Camp for student finalists and team mentors to be held June 8–11, 2026.

Where?

www.aaccinnovationchallenge.com

Why?

To foster the development of crucial innovation, communication, and entrepreneurial skills to initiate real-world change; network with national student teams, STEM leaders, industry representatives, and entrepreneurs; and compete for cash awards for your STEM innovation!

Questions?

Contact the CCIC team at CCIC@aacc.nche.edu

Follow the Challenge: #CCICChallenge2026