

# **GSE** **Collegiate Pitch**

## **2026** **Rules & Guidelines**

Updated 1/6/2026



Through its Collegiate Pitch competition, The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs (GSE) encourages innovation and entrepreneurship by engaging students from Kentucky's colleges and universities with an opportunity to develop and pursue their business ideas.

The competition rewards businesses judged by an independent panel looking for innovation and potential to create new jobs for Kentuckians. All university and college students throughout Kentucky are encouraged to compete.

The competition is organized and governed by the Governor's School for Entrepreneurs with support from the Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet and KY Innovation.

#### **Collegiate Pitch offers two tracks:**

An **Exploratory Track** for newly formed ideas, and a **Developed Track** for more advanced ventures and existing companies.

Collegiate Pitch has two rounds: (1) a Business Plan submission, (2) a pitch during the final event. Up to 16 teams will be chosen based on the judging results from the Business Plan submission, and only those teams advance to the second round of the Collegiate Pitch competition. Typically, there will be up to 8 teams for each Track, but this can vary based on the submissions. The final event culminates with an awards presentation where judges determine the winners of the following cash prizes.

#### **Final Competition Awards**

Competition prizes are scaled to provide larger prize packages for existing ventures, or those that are more developed and closer to commercialization. Smaller prize packages are awarded for Business Plans or ideas in earlier stages of development.

#### **Developed Business Track Prizes:**

1st Place: \$15,000 2nd Place: \$7,000 3rd Place: \$5,000

#### **Exploratory Business Track Prizes:**

1st Place: \$5,000 2nd Place: \$4,000 3rd Place: \$3,000

#### **The GSE Bonus Bump**

Any team that places 1st, 2nd, or 3rd will receive an extra \$1000 "bump up" in their award amount if they have an alum from the GSE Summer Startup program as a team member. The total Bonus Bump per team is \$1000 regardless of how many GSE alums are on the team.

## **2026 COMPETITION TIMELINE**

Dec 5, 2025, 11:00 PM ET: Intent to Compete Due

Feb 2, 2026, 11:00 PM ET: Business Plan Due

Feb 10, 2026, 1:00 PM ET: Final Teams Announced

Feb 23, 2026, 1:00 PM ET: Pitch Deck PowerPoint Due

Feb 28, 2026, The 2026 Collegiate Pitch Event at SparkHaus in Covington

## **INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS & ADVISORS**

Each participating team must select one faculty representative to act as the faculty advisor. To enter the competition, all students and teams must be approved by their faculty advisor(s).

Note: Because Collegiate Pitch is a collegiate student competition, students must take the lead in the submission and play the primary roles in developing the business. Collegiate Pitch is based on the work of students. Collegiate Pitch does not and will not award businesses not formed and managed by students attending Kentucky colleges and universities.

The faculty advisor will work to accomplish the following:

- Select student teams to participate in the competition.
- Determine which Track the student team should enter.
- Coach the student team(s) on their pitch and business.
- Serve as the liaison between the student team(s), the school, and the Collegiate Pitch staff.
- Travel with the student team(s) to the final competition if they qualify.

Only faculty advisors are authorized to approve a team entering the competition. The faculty advisor must confirm a team is compliant with all eligibility and competition guidelines. Advisors must complete a form certifying the eligibility of a team for the competition. The required form will be sent to advisors from Collegiate Pitch after a team's Intent to Compete has been received by Collegiate Pitch.

Each school may enter up to eight teams, in any Track combination. For example: 2 Exploratory, 6 Developed; 5 Exploratory, 3 Developed; etc. Each KCTCS campus is considered a separate school and may enter up to eight teams. All students and teams must be approved by their advisors.

## **ELIGIBILITY OF TEAMS & STUDENTS**

The competition is open to students who:

- Are enrolled in their school's current fall semester.
- Are student teams that won their individual school's most recent competition.
- Have been selected using another method as determined by their school and approved in advance by Collegiate Pitch.

- Have a Kentucky-based business or idea, as defined in the Award Distribution section.

The competition is for student-created, student-managed, and student-owned business “ventures” (proposed businesses). In other words, students must:

- Have played a major role in conceiving the proposed venture
- Have key management roles in the proposed venture
- Own significant equity in the proposed venture

In general, a member of the student team should be the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), or President of the proposed venture, or members of the student team should occupy 50% or more of the functional area management positions that report directly to the CEO, COO, or President. Members of the team should also own 50% or more of the equity allocated to the management team and key advisors. A team with a proposed venture for which the students hold an equity position of less than 50% of the equity allocated to the management team and key advisors, and/or less than 20% of the total equity of the proposed venture, will require the students to show evidence that they were a major cause in the proposed venture’s creation.

There are no restrictions regarding other team members; however, we suggest building a balanced team with a strong combination of finance, marketing, engineering, and technology skills. Only eligible students may present at the competitions and answer questions from the competition judges.

The maximum number of students on a competition team is five. Each team member must work with their school advisor to submit student information via the submission portal in addition to the team’s written and video submissions. Each student may only be affiliated with one team/entry per track in the statewide competition per year.

Non-U.S. citizens may participate in the competition under the condition that any team with a non-U.S. citizen must also include at least one student who is a U.S. citizen or a Green Card holder.

### **Prior Activity Guidelines**

A proposed venture may compete only once per year in the competition.

Existing companies are permitted to compete but must be no more than 24 months old as of the final pitch event AND the cumulative revenue or venture backing for the company must not have exceeded \$100,000 prior to competition day.

**Note: We recognize that there may be special instances not outlined in the guidelines above.**

Rules and exceptions are up to the discretion of the Governor’s School for Entrepreneurs. Direct any questions about eligibility to the Governor’s School for Entrepreneurs at [info@kentuckygse.com](mailto:info@kentuckygse.com)

As long as the team and entry qualify for a different Track, an entry submitted in a past Collegiate Pitch Competition may be re-submitted in a different competition Track in later years only by the original team or by members of the original team.

Once an entry is submitted in a Track, it may not be resubmitted in that same Track at any future Collegiate Pitch competition. Schools are prohibited from entering teams whose businesses are based on, or significantly similar to, businesses by other teams in the current or previous competitions.

By entering the competition, each student team certifies that the submission they have entered represents original work. Licensing technologies from universities or research labs is permitted assuming the technologies have not been previously commercialized.

## THE COMPETITION PROCESS

### Round 1: Business Plan Submission

Round 1 is open to all students who meet eligibility requirements. To compete, teams must register online and submit their Business Plan PDF by the submission deadline (see timeline for date). Be prepared to list the team's primary contact name, phone number, email address, school, and advisor, as well as the names of other team members. There is no registration fee.

### Deadlines are strictly enforced.

The Intent to Compete is due on December 5th, 2025 at 11:00 PM ET. Teams must submit their Business Plan by February 2nd, 2026 at 11:00 PM ET.

### Business Plan Guidelines and Requirements

The Business Plan is a brief document that outlines the fundamental problem and solutions your business is addressing. The purpose of the document is to convince the reader that the business is viable and could operate in the real world. It includes the most interesting and important aspects of the business. The Business Plan should be no longer than 5 pages (not including the cover sheet). The document should have 1-inch margins and a 12-point font size. All pages, except the cover page, should be numbered. Failure to meet these guidelines may lead to disqualification.

***The cover page MUST include a one-sentence description of the business, no longer than 50 words, that follows this template:***

***<Insert Team Name> solves the problem of <describe problem> by <describe solution>.***

The Business Plan should briefly cover:

- Company overview: Include the most important points about your business idea — your history/story, product or service, mission statement and legal structure if applicable.
- Product or service: Describe product or service for sale, the problem you're solving, stage of development, market differentiation and intellectual property if applicable.
- Market: Describe the market where you aim to sell your product or service. Include target market, competitors in the market and an analysis of your competitive advantage.
- Sales strategy: Explain how you will go about selling your product or service while increasing profits. Include marketing strategy, distribution channels, key partners, and relationships.
- Revenue model: Describe how your business generates revenue. Include the cost to produce, cost to sell, customer acquisition strategy and market price for the product or service.

- **Team:** Describe who is currently on your team, their role, education, and experience. Why are you the right team to start this business?

***Do not submit a 1-page Business Model Canvas as your Business Plan.***

The Business Plan will be submitted on the competition website [KentuckyGSE.com/Collegiate-Pitch](https://KentuckyGSE.com/Collegiate-Pitch). To be eligible for the competition, a PDF version of the Business Plan must be submitted online by the deadline specified in the timeline section.

### **Round 2: Collegiate Pitch Final Event**

Up to 16 teams will be invited to the final Collegiate Pitch event, where teams will present to a panel of judges and receive awards. Final judging will take place during the final event. The winners will be announced at the end of the event.

### **Final Presentation Guidelines & Requirements**

Teams will be asked to pitch and answer questions from a panel of judges regarding their presentation and Business Plan. Business formal dress is suggested. The final presentation will take place at the Collegiate Pitch Final Event (see timeline for date and times). Presentations must not exceed the allotted time. ***The submitted pitch deck for the presentation must be in PowerPoint.***

### **The Collegiate Pitch Finals**

Collegiate Pitch will host an all-day pitch event for finalists to present to judges. Collegiate Pitch will provide food and refreshments for competitors. We encourage competitors to invite friends and family to the final event. During the final competition, teams will be scored and evaluated on their pitch presentations.

### **TIME LIMITS WILL BE STRICTLY ENFORCED.**

- **Exploratory Track teams have 7 minutes for their pitch, plus 5 minutes for judge Q+A.**
- **Developed Track teams have 10 minutes for their pitch, plus 6 minutes for judge Q+A.**

Winners will be chosen based on pitch presentation scores.

**EACH TEAM MUST PARTICIPATE IN BOTH ROUNDS** (written submission and pitch presentation) to qualify for awards.

### **Judging**

The judging panel will consist of a wide range of successful and knowledgeable business leaders. Judges will not be affiliated with, or involved in the preparation or funding of, any participating team. The decision of the judging panel will be final and will not be subject to appeal. The overall selection of winners is based on the viability and likely success of the business.

## **The Judging Criteria**

The first round of judging is centered on the Business Plan and will be based on the general aspects of an effective Business Plan. Teams must be ready to answer questions on both their Business Plan and final presentation during the final round Q&A session.

During the Final event, the judges will look at the following criteria:

- The team's understanding of the problem/need they're addressing.
- How well the product/service is explained and developed.
- Financial presentation, revenue generation.
- Customer segment research and understanding.
- Sales, marketing, distribution.
- Identifying competitors and the team's unique advantages.
- Next steps needed to move forward.
- Viability.
- Team member composition and skills.

Separate judging groups will be used for the two rounds. Competition organizers reserve the right to alter all judging processes as necessary to accommodate the number of entries received.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY GUIDELINES**

The team members will retain all rights to the idea regarding its use prior to and following the competition, except as stated below. Due to the nature of the competition, judges, reviewers, staff, and anyone in the audience will not be asked to agree to or sign nondisclosure agreements with any participant. It is recommended that before disclosing or submitting any idea in the competition, that the individual(s) who originated the idea obtain protection on any intellectual property.

All portions of the competition, including but not limited to the Business Plan submission, oral presentations, and question/answer sessions, are open to the public at large and to the media. Any and all of these public sessions may be recorded and broadcast to the general public and specific persons or groups through various media, which may include radio, television, and the Internet. Any data or information discussed or divulged in public sessions by entrants should be considered information that will likely enter the public realm, and entrants should not assume any right of confidentiality for any data or information discussed, divulged, or presented in these sessions.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky, the Education and Labor Cabinet, KY Innovation, and Governor's School for Entrepreneurs may make printed copies, photocopies, photographs, video and/or audio recordings of the presentations, including the entries and other documents, charts or material prepared for use in presentations at the competition. Students retain all proprietary rights. The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs may use the entry materials and recordings in any print, electronic, video, or other medium that it may choose. The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs reserves non-exclusive, world-wide rights in all languages, and in all media, to use or to publish the materials in any print, electronic, video, or other medium, and to use the materials in future editions thereof and in derivative products.

## **JUDGING CRITERIA**

The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs reserves the right to approve or supersede decisions and recommendations by the competition judges. All Governor's School for Entrepreneurs decisions regarding team and entry qualifications and rule interpretations are final. The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs and judges may consult independent experts in determining the feasibility, commercial potential, and high-tech nature of a Business Plan and/or its related product, service, or intellectual property.

## AWARD DISTRIBUTION

Awards are distributed according to the following:

Exploratory Track and Developed Track winners will receive the corresponding prize packages. Collection of all components of prize packages awarded to a winning team will be distributed by Governor's School for Entrepreneurs and will be contingent upon the team being in full compliance with Governor's School for Entrepreneurs' Funding Agreement, **which requires reimbursement of funds spent by the teams, not up-front cost funding**. Collection of the prize package is contingent upon the team continuing to work on their winning Business Plan.

The prize is contingent upon the team involved submitting reports to Governor's School for Entrepreneurs for approval, within the timeframe designated in the Collegiate Pitch Funding Agreement. The required reports may include, but will not be limited to, a budget report, information chronicling deliverables and achievements such as progress towards goals, business creation, commercialization, and other identified issues.

The team shall provide the Governor's School for Entrepreneurs other documentation, instruments, or information, as reasonably requested. Changes in Deliverables are strictly subject to the Governor's School for Entrepreneurs' prior written approval.

**Kentucky-Based Requirements:** In order to qualify for and retain the prize funds, the business described in the entry must be formed in Kentucky and for a period of no less than three (3) years remain "Kentucky-based," which is defined as "a business with its principal place of business in Kentucky and no less than fifty-one percent (51%) each of its property and payroll, as defined below, located in Kentucky." If, within the three-year period, the business fails to maintain its Kentucky-based status for any reason or is acquired by another firm that is not Kentucky-based, all implementation prize funds received by the original business must be immediately repaid to the Governor's School for Entrepreneurs.

The following definitions of Kentucky-based payroll and property include remote and/or online businesses:

Payroll – The number of full-time employees working directly for the project, fifty-one percent (51%) or more of whom must be bona fide Kentucky residents; AND the gross payroll of the business, fifty-one percent (51%) or more of which must be paid to bona fide Kentucky residents.

Property – Includes real property and other business and personal property that are subject to depreciation under the Federal Tax Code and any amendments thereto.

The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs may, at its discretion, decide to disqualify an entry or entries and not offer specific awards or stipends if the entry or entries are considered insufficient in terms of completeness, originality or quality, or if the entering team members' actions and/or behavior violate school rules and/or state laws and/or the spirit and intent of the competition.

The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs reserves the right to change and modify the competition Rules and Guidelines without notice. Collegiate Pitch is a program of The Governor's School for Entrepreneurs, which is run by the Kentucky Entrepreneurship Education Network, Inc., a 501c3 non-profit organization.

The competition Rules and Guidelines posted at [KentuckyGSE.com/Collegiate-Pitch/](http://KentuckyGSE.com/Collegiate-Pitch/) should be considered the most current and supersede all previous versions.

Thank you for your interest in GSE's Collegiate Pitch Competition!

Contact: [info@kentuckygse.com](mailto:info@kentuckygse.com)  
502-592-0520