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Center for Entrepreneurship would benefit business community

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The University of West Florida has a plan to improve future business opportunities in the Pensacola Bay Area, and a group of area business leaders is interested in helping them succeed.

University officials, along with the Pensacola Bay Area Chamber of Commerce President Evon Emerson, invited several key businesspeople to a brainstorming session to discuss the possibilities of a Center for Entrepreneurship.

The meeting resulted in a collection of perspectives, interesting ideas and support to move many of these concepts forward.

Who would the Center serve? Graduates, aspiring entrepreneurs, midcareer professionals, former executives and possibly those affected by the BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure Commission) process.

John Cavanaugh, UWF president, is interested in getting input from those with experience.

"In envisioning the Center, we are very purposefully listening to the ideas of entrepreneurs -- many of whom have experienced great success and have also learned some difficult lessons along the way," he said.

"While the Center will offer courses and seminars, we also want the Center to provide an environment where entrepreneurs, students and faculty can interact and share ideas in a less-formal way.

"When creative, energetic people are provided a venue and some support, great things usually happen."

The ideas tossed around were exciting.

Imagine a place where businesspeople could find resources: legal information, venture capital and business planning assistance.

Or, a gathering place where entrepreneurs, faculty, students and others could hang out, share ideas and support one another.

Toss in mentoring programs, apprenticeships, internships and seminars, as well as educational outreach and research support, and you have the makings of a center of business opportunity and excellence.

"It is our expectation that, 10 years from now, a significant number of high-growth businesses will, to some degree, attribute their success to the Center, and that we will have a cadre of recent UWF graduates who themselves are successful entrepreneurs," Cavanaugh said.

"Entrepreneurial, high-growth business can be a significant part of our region's economic future. UWF is committed to help lead this effort."

Many business leaders share Cavanaugh's enthusiasm for the Center's potential.

"I expect the UWF Entrepreneurial Center to be a catalyst in the development of a diversified economy in the Northwest Florida Region," said Ron Jackson, president of CPA firm Saltmarsh, Cleaveland & Gund.

UWF professor and Pensacola Venture Forum organizer Richard Hawkins agreed. "With all of the area initiatives to enhance entrepreneurial ventures, I believe the time is right for a center," he said. It can coordinate the resources we have in place and develop new ideas."

Some of these ideas are already under way. For example, local entrepreneurs are serving as guest lecturers, and the High Growth Business Club and the Pensacola Venture Forum are peaking interest. But, to establish a full, working Center, the university should have the community's support.

If interested in learning more, contact Ed Ranelli, UWF dean of the College of Business, at 474-2348.