

Leatherby Center's Mentor Program Thrives as More Community Entrepreneurs Seek Guidance to Grow Their Businesses

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-- Since opening its doors to the wider community in late 2023, [Chapman University's Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics](#) has seen exponential growth in its [Mentor Program](#) – a no-cost initiative that pairs aspiring entrepreneurs and small-business owners with experienced entrepreneurs and business professionals.

This community expansion was made possible through a \$1 million grant from the [California Office of the Small Business Advocate](#) (CalOSBA), awarded to Chapman University's Leatherby

Center in late 2023 as part of the Accelerate California Inclusive Innovation Hubs Program. CalOSBA designates only one Innovation Hub per county across the state, and the Leatherby Center proudly serves as Orange County's official Accelerate California Hub. This statewide

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Darryl Schoen, Entrepreneur in Residence



Joshua Lee Mentor at the Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics

investment allows the Center to open its doors to the broader community – providing no cost mentorship, startup guidance, and access to entrepreneurial resources that were previously available only to Chapman students.

What began as a student-focused offering has evolved rapidly into one of Orange County's most active mentorship networks for startups and small businesses. Over the past year, the Center has doubled the number of Entrepreneurs in Residence (EIRs), expanded its mentor roster to more than 140 experts, and facilitated over 1,300

one-on-one mentoring sessions with founders from across Southern California.

Now, as participation continues to climb, the Leatherby Center is calling on new mentees from the community – from early-stage founders and freelancers to small-business owners and nonprofit leaders – to take advantage of the program’s no-cost resources and personalized guidance.

“We have been fortunate that so many experienced entrepreneurs have stepped forward to donate their time to the next generation of entrepreneurs. Whether it is a Chapman alumnus who wants to give back to the Panther Community, or an Orange County entrepreneur, we are grateful to all of our mentors,” said Dr. Cynthia West, Assistant Dean of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Programs at Chapman University.



**Argyros College of
Business and Economics**
Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship
and Business Ethics

The Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship is a part of the Argyros College of Business and Economics, at Chapman University



Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics Exterior

A No-Cost, Personalized Approach to Mentorship

Unlike traditional accelerator or networking programs, the Mentor Program takes a deeply personalized, relationship-driven approach. Participants are matched with two to three mentors – each offering unique perspectives across finance, marketing, technology, operations, or legal strategy – so mentees can benefit from a comprehensive blend of expertise.

Currently, more than 140 mentors are active within the Leatherby Center’s network, including ten (10) Entrepreneurs in Residence (EIRs) who host weekly open office hours. These professionals donate their time to meet with mentees, provide feedback on business models and investor pitches, and help founders overcome the everyday challenges of entrepreneurship.

“As a mentor at the Leatherby Entrepreneurship Center, I am able to pay it forward with a group

of bright, driven, budding entrepreneurs,” said Darryl Schoen, Founder and President of Manufacturers Financing Services, and EIR specializing in Coaching, Entrepreneurship, and Pitch Deck Creation.

Mentorship sessions have zero cost and are open to anyone – not just Chapman students. Meetings can be held on campus at the Leatherby Center in Orange, or virtually, offering flexible access for entrepreneurs throughout Southern California.

Turning Ideas Into Impact

Since the program’s community expansion, dozens of local entrepreneurs have credited their mentors with helping them gain clarity, confidence, and traction in their ventures. One of those participants is LaShonda Smith, founder of PreQualy – an AI-powered platform that helps make affordable homeownership more attainable by connecting qualified buyers with down payment assistance and funding opportunities they might otherwise overlook.

LaShonda joined the Leatherby Center as a community entrepreneur, seeking guidance on how to structure her business model and refine her vision. Through the Mentor Program, she was paired with multiple mentors who offered different perspectives – from technical development to investor readiness – and helped her focus on next steps for growth.

“The mentors at the Leatherby Center helped me turn an idea into something tangible,” Smith said. “They didn’t just advise; they challenged me to think strategically, expand my network, and strengthen my belief in what I’m creating. For a community founder coming from outside Chapman, that kind of access and encouragement is truly game-changing.”

Stories like LaShonda Smith’s are becoming more common as the Mentor Program continues to expand its reach, connecting an increasingly diverse mix of founders, small-business owners, and innovators from across Orange County.

Community Relations Manager Sarah Solorio, who oversees the Mentor Program, said demand has grown quickly – and so has the sense of connection.

“What’s happening here is truly special,” said Solorio. “The program started as a way to connect entrepreneurs with advice, but it’s become a thriving community where people collaborate, network, and cheer each other on. And there’s still plenty of space for new mentees to join.”

More Than Mentorship: A Full Ecosystem of Support

Mentees also gain access to the Leatherby Center’s broader ecosystem of entrepreneurial resources, including its Incubator and Accelerator Programs, professional podcast studio, and

The Portal, a student-run media venture offering affordable content creation for startups.

This spring, the Center will host its annual Panther Cage Pitch Competition on Friday, March 13, 2026, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Leatherby Center in Orange. The “Shark Tank”-style event invites all aspiring entrepreneurs – both Chapman students and community members – to pitch their business ideas before a panel of experienced judges, angel investors, and venture capitalists. Two winners (one student and one non-student entrepreneur) will each take home \$1,500 in cash.

Those interested in competing can learn more or sign up to pitch their business idea at <https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/leatherby-center/panther-cage-match.aspx>.

For details on additional upcoming workshops, pitch showcases, and networking events hosted by the Leatherby Center, visit <https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/leatherby-center/events.aspx>.

How to Get Involved

Entrepreneurs interested in receiving mentorship can visit the Leatherby Center Mentor Program page by clicking here, or, they can apply directly at https://22561610.hs-sites-na2.com/request_a_mentor. Those interested in volunteering as mentors are also encouraged to apply year-round.

“Our goal is to make entrepreneurship accessible to everyone,” said Solorio. “If you’ve ever dreamed of building something of your own, this is where you’ll find the mentors, tools, and encouragement to make it happen.”

About the Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics

The vision of the Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship is to inspire, educate, and empower the next generation of talent to have an entrepreneurial mindset. To teach students how to innovate and take risks, whether they are starting their own venture, or working inside a corporation. Through our curriculum and our incubator, we provide hands-on experience to the next generation of talent, teaching them how to develop, scale, and launch their own ventures as future global citizens in the world economy. Ralph W. Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics | Chapman University.

About Chapman University

Founded in 1861, Chapman University is a nationally ranked private university in Orange,

California, about 30 miles south of Los Angeles. Chapman serves nearly 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with a 12:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Students can choose from over 100 areas of study within 11 colleges for a personalized education. Chapman is categorized by the Carnegie Classification as an R2 "high research activity" institution. Students at Chapman learn directly from distinguished world-class faculty including Nobel Prize winners, MacArthur fellows, published authors and Academy Award winners. The campus has produced a Rhodes Scholar, been named a top producer of Fulbright Scholars, and hosts a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's oldest and most prestigious honor society. Chapman also includes the Harry and Diane Rinker Health Science Campus in Irvine. The university features the No. 4 film school and No. 66 business school in the U.S. Learn more about Chapman University: <http://www.chapman.edu/>.

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