2025 Cortex's Square One Yearbook

Growing talent.
Building opportunity.
Strengthening our region.

Letters from the Team

This past year revealed two parallel truths about our region. The StartupSTL report showed that nearly half of St. Louis' entrepreneurship support system has changed or closed since 2020. Yet in that same period, the entrepreneurs themselves; especially women and founders of color, continue to show up, build, and carry our region forward.

Square One has become an anchor through that uncertainty. In 2025, our IGNITE program served 47 early-stage entrepreneurs, 74% women and nearly 80% founders of color. Bootcamp supported another 22 entrepreneurs across service, manufacturing, food, and technology — the very industries driving the region's job growth. And through 46 enrichment programs, we connected with 895 individuals, offering the skills and community entrepreneurs need to stay resilient.

At a moment when fragmentation feels easier than collaboration, Cortex is choosing the latter. In 2025, we doubled down on what the region needs most: capital access, AI-ready training, deeper sector pathways, and ecosystem navigation that meets people where they are. Entrepreneurship remains one of the most reliable pathways to economic mobility, and one of the most human.

Thank you for believing in this work and in the people who make our region vibrant, courageous, and alive with possibility.

With gratitude,
Gabriela Ramirez-Arellano
Vice President, Entrepreneurship

Every year, I get a front-row seat to the moment someone decides their idea deserves a real chance. And every year, I'm reminded that entrepreneurship isn't a straight line. It's a series of steps, taken with courage, community, and the right tools.

To every graduate, mentor, instructor, and partner: thank you for building this with us. It's an honor to walk alongside each of you and to continue expanding what's possible in 2025.

Adelante,
Ben Molina
Program Manager, Square One Programs

2025 Impact at a Glance

At Cortex's Square One, we fast-track early-stage entrepreneurs by helping them validate ideas and understand their markets, while building the foundational skills needed to launch and grow. This strengthens both the entrepreneur and the business.

964

Entrepreneurs served through one-time training and enrichment programs

47

Square One Ignite Participants

22

Square One Bootcamp Participants

Economic Impact of Cortex's 2020-2025 Square One Alumni

Venture Ready Missouri Cohort

Jobs Created

48

Still Operating their Business

81%

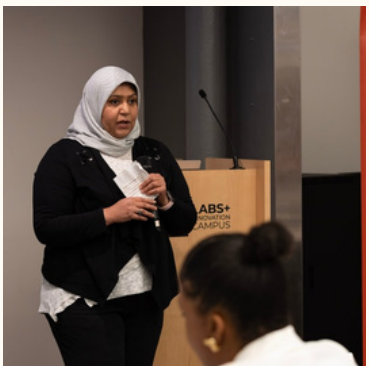
Cortex's Square One Programs

For more than two decades, Square One Ignite and Bootcamp have nurtured thousands of early-stage founders; people with ideas, courage, and a desire to build something of their own. These programs are more than classes; they are entry points into a community, where entrepreneurs gain the confidence, clarity, network, and core skills needed to thrive in an economy that rewards adaptability and creativity.

	Square One Ignite	Square One Bootcamp
Entrepreneurs Served	47	22
Women	74.5%	59.1%
People of Color	80.4%	77.3%

Industries

Service	48.9%	36.4%
IT	23.4%	13.6%
Food	14.9%	18.2%
Manufacturing	12.8%	31.8%



State of the St. Louis Ecosystem

A shifting landscape clarifies why Square One's work matters now more than ever

Key Findings from the StartupSTL Report
The StartupSTL study shows that St. Louis is experiencing both entrepreneurial momentum and ecosystem contraction. New business creation is rising, yet nearly half of the region's entrepreneurial support programs have changed or disappeared since 2020. With fewer accelerators, fewer funding pathways, and fewer navigation resources, these shifts create both urgency and opportunity for organizations like Cortex. We continue to serve as a stable backbone, providing clarity, continuity, and inclusive economic support when the region needs it most.

Regional Job Creation & Startup Activity
Startups continue to be the primary engine of new jobs in the St. Louis region. Even during economic uncertainty, early-stage businesses are driving job creation across sectors like healthcare, professional services, construction, and food. This reinforces why strong training pipelines like Square One are essential to regional resilience.

Capital Access Gaps
Entrepreneurs consistently identify access to early-stage capital as their biggest barrier, especially loans under $25,000. These gaps disproportionately impact women and founders of color. Square One's approach, including financial skill-building and the Matched Savings Program with St. Louis Community Credit Union, directly addresses these structural inequities.

AI Readiness & Workforce Transformation
More than 70% of businesses say AI is already reshaping their work, yet only 9% feel prepared or supported. This technological shift is not just about innovation, it's about workforce readiness. Small business owners need AI literacy to stay competitive, and Square One is uniquely positioned to help bridge that gap through training, coaching, and hands-on implementation support.

Employer Demand for Skilled Talent
The StartupSTL report also highlights employers' growing need for workers with communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership skills; the same competencies strengthened across all SQ1 programming. Even alumni who are not yet running their businesses full time report that their SQ1 experience significantly improves their workplace performance.

StartupSTL (2024). State of St. Louis Tech Workforce & Startup Ecosystem Report. TechSTL. Available at: https://techstl.com/reports

Responding to Regional Needs

A people-centered approach to inclusive economic growth.

Entrepreneurship strengthens St. Louis when people have the skills, networks, and support to thrive. SQ1 builds that foundation.

We Listen to Entrepreneurs

Our enrichment programs evolve from what founders tell us they need; clearer support pathways, capital access, AI tools, marketing support, and community. Listening shapes everything we build.

We Align With STL's Growth Sectors

Our tracks support industries driving regional opportunity; service, food, IT, and manufacturing. We are preparing entrepreneurs to meet St. Louis' growing consumer demands.

We Prioritize Inclusive Entrepreneurship

Our cohorts reflect St. Louis; women, BIPOC founders, immigrants, and multilingual communities across 52 zip codes who fuel creative, resilient, community-rooted businesses.

We Build Workforce Skills Through Entrepreneurship

Our curriculum strengthen 14 core skills to serve both entrepreneurs and the regional workforce. These include communication, strategic thinking, collaboration, financial literacy, resilience and network building.

SQ1 Ignite, Summer Cohort

Cortex's Square One Ignite

Square One Ignite is where early-stage entrepreneurs take their first big step from idea to action.

SQ1 Ignite helps founders rapidly validate their business concepts, identify customers, and build the foundational skills needed to move forward with confidence. The program removes barriers to entry and opens the door to St. Louis' entrepreneurial ecosystem with support, community, and clarity.
At its core, SQ1 Ignite is designed to meet people where they are, whether they're refining a concept, exploring feasibility, or preparing for Bootcamp-level development.

> **IGNITE didn't just help me understand my business idea it also helped me understand myself as a leader. The community I built in the classroom keeps me moving forward.**
>
> **-SQ1 Ignite Alum**

Spring Cohort

23

Entrepreneurs

Summer Cohort

24

Entrepreneurs

SQ1 Ignite... Turning ideas to reality.

Cortex's Square One Bootcamp

Square One Bootcamp is a 10-week immersive experience designed to strengthen both the entrepreneur and the business. It goes beyond traditional training by layering business essentials with leadership development, industry-specific mentorship, and a cohort-driven community that supports founders long after the program ends.

Through 100 hours of instruction and support per participant, SQ1 Bootcamp builds the core competencies entrepreneurs need to stabilize and grow their businesses; making it a critical driver of workforce development and inclusive economic growth in St. Louis.

22 Graduates

A dynamic blend of first-time founders, second-career entrepreneurs, and small business owners ready to strengthen their operations and growth strategies. Their businesses spanned community-based services, innovative consumer products, food ventures, and tech solutions; the same sectors driving job creation in the region.

The SQ1 Bootcamp Experience

SQ1 Bootcamp blends business training, personal development, mentorship and ecosystem integration

Business Fundamentals

During SQ1 Bootcamp, entrepreneurs dive deep into essential business fundamentals, including financial projections, pricing, budgeting, marketing, customer discovery, operations, accounting, pitching, and more. Each topic is designed to help them build a stronger, more sustainable business model and make informed decisions as they grow.

The 14 Core Skills

Alongside business fundamentals, the SQ1 Bootcamp curriculum builds the core skills needed to thrive in today's workforce. Participants strengthen communication, strategic thinking, collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving, leadership, confidence building, accountability, and more—skills that support them not only as entrepreneurs, but as leaders in any professional setting.

Sector-Specific Support

SQ1 Bootcamp provides mentorship, technical guidance, and real-world insight tailored to each entrepreneur's industry. Participants work with mentors who bring both entrepreneurial experience and deep expertise as leaders in their sectors, helping them navigate industry-specific challenges, refine their business models, and connect with relevant opportunities and networks.

Network Building

SQ1 Bootcamp strengthens peer-to-peer relationships, connections with track mentors, partnerships with presenters, and access to broader ecosystem resources—many entrepreneurs describe their cohort as the community that keeps them moving forward.

Meet the SQ1 Bootcamp Mentors

Mark Bowers

Manufacturing Track

Michael Kehoe

I.T. Track

Porscha Anderson

Service Track

Chef Jass Brooks

Food Track

> Bootcamp is not just a program. It is a powerful contributor to St. Louis' economic and workforce vitality.
>
> - Gabriela Ramirez-Arellano, VP, Entrepreneurship, Cortex

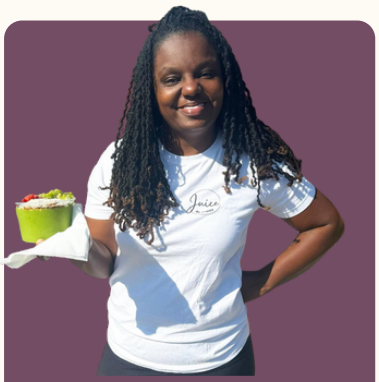
SQ1 Bootcamp | Manufacturing Track Graduates

Bill Parmentier

Inventory Quest

Charissa Martin

Gluten Free Hustle



Lueta Stratton

Juice Be Happy

Matthew De Venecia

OKMed Innovations

Matthew Factor

Factor Medical Devices

Rita Wright-Jones

nacho Average Lemonade

Steve Bentrup

Water Dial

> The ten weeks of exposure to high energy industry business leaders from the entrepreneurial ecosystem still empowers me today. The intense focus on key business topics provided a solid foundation for developing a business strategy along with areas of growth. Worth repeating SQ1 Bootcamp again and would recommend it to anyone committed to building a business brand.
>
> - SQ1 Bootcamp Alum

I.T. Track Graduates

Aniya Betts

NYROBEONKA

Aree Riley

Earth Solutions Environmental Services

Christopher Martinez

– The Book of Gilgamesh

Food Track Graduates

Ana Berrios

Ebtihal Al-Alwi

Luis Del Castillo

Curichi's Cream

Yaneth Arias

Angel's Fruits & Food

> One of the most valuable takeaways for me was networking and understanding what to prioritize in order to scale. Having a board of directors to bounce ideas off of weekly was very helpful in this stage of business planning. Field trips were amazing and so full of real life experiences!
>
> - SQ1 Bootcamp Alum

Service Track Graduates

Benny Calloway

I.T. Health Center

Cassandra McCottrell

Channel Design

Danielle Fogg

CharLees Body Butter

Hamdullah Hamdard

Owlsion Pictures

Jaime Thames

Kluddie Unlimited

Juanika Givens

Nail Doctor Unblemished

Sade Albea

Harmony Serenity Homes

Yasmin Jackson

Holistic Blooms

> This experience gave me the confidence and introductory skills to pursue a passion project and turn it into something operational.
>
> - SQ1 Bootcamp Alum

SQ1 Bootcamp Graduation

SQ1 Bootcamp graduation is a day filled with joy, pride, and reflection on 10 weeks of dedication, learning, and hard work. Family, friends and coworkers celebrate the determination, growth, and creativity of each entrepreneur, celebrating all they've accomplished to move their businesses forward and the community they've built along the way.

The SQ1 Bootcamp Graduation reflects the deeper impact Bootcamp has on St. Louis' economic and workforce vitality by strengthening business stability, job creation capacity, founder confidence, leadership, and workforce readiness. Bootcamp expands access to networks, mentors, and resources, and broadens regional inclusion by training entrepreneurs historically excluded from opportunity.

Enrichment Programs

Square One's enrichment programs form the connective tissue of St. Louis' entrepreneurial ecosystem. Delivered year-round and intentionally open to the broader community, these sessions meet entrepreneurs exactly where they are and provide timely skills, trusted navigation, and meaningful connections to partners across the region.

In 2025, enrichment engaged founders in financial literacy, legal readiness, customer discovery, brand development, vendor preparation, cultural connection, and weekly pitch practice. These offerings respond directly to what entrepreneurs say they need most: clarity, confidence, practical tools, and community.

Most importantly, enrichment embodies our collaborative model. Nearly 20 partners across the region contributed expertise including WEPOWER, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, BioSTL, Women's Business Center, Riff Business, BMO, TechArtista Foundation, Frizzy by Nature, St. Louis Mosaic, City of St. Louis, Latinx Arts Network, and dozens of festival and market partners.

Enrichment Programs

Together, these collaborations:

Strengthen the region's entrepreneurial backbone
Reduce isolation for small business owners
Expand access to culturally relevant programming
Build financial, legal, and operational capacity
Prepare entrepreneurs for festivals, markets, and real-world selling
Reinforce the 14 core skills essential for workforce development

As the regional ecosystem contracts, SQ1 enrichment remains a consistent, trusted gathering place and a hub for learning, connection, and inclusive economic growth.

SQ1 builds more than businesses; we build leaders.

2020–2024 Alumni Impact

Square One graduates don't just launch businesses, they sustain them, grow them, and strengthen St. Louis.

Long-Term Success, Real Economic Impact

Square One alumni are proof that when entrepreneurs receive the right training, networks, and support, they build businesses — and futures — that last. Our multi-year survey of Bootcamp graduates shows strong business survival, job creation, workforce development, and increased economic stability. These outcomes validate SQ1 as a powerful driver of inclusive economic growth in St. Louis.

Entrepreneurs Who Stay in Business

81% of SQ1 alumni are still running the businesses they launched in the program. Most continue operating in St. Louis, contributing directly to neighborhood vitality and local economic stability.

SQ1 Alumni Create Jobs

Alumni businesses have created 48 jobs across 13 companies, strengthening the regional workforce and expanding opportunity. These are main street jobs, creative jobs, tech jobs — the businesses that give St. Louis its character and economic resilience.

Entrepreneurship Is Workforce Development

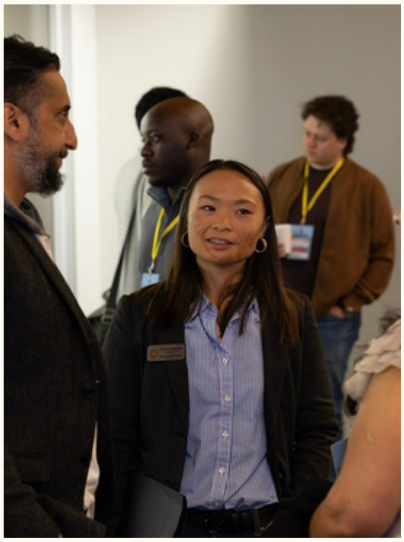
Nearly 80% of alumni working in traditional jobs say the skills gained in SQ1 like communication, pitching, collaboration, financial literacy, and strategic thinking have directly improved their workplace performance and career pathways.

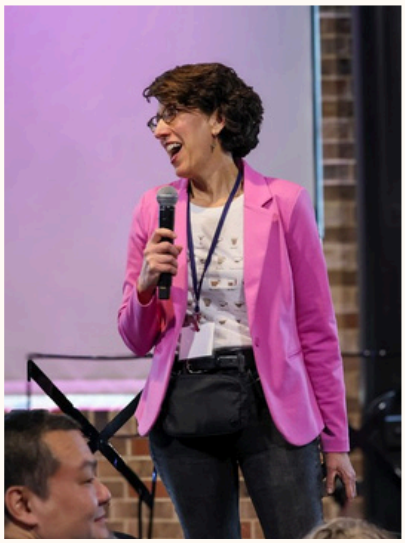
2020–2024 Alumni Impact

SQ1 Ignite & Bootcamp alumni consistently highlight the networks they built as one of the most valuable parts of SQ1. Peer relationships, track mentors, presenters, and ecosystem connections form a long-term support system — reducing isolation and increasing resilience.

Alumni also report improved economic stability, stronger confidence, and clearer direction in their business journey. Their success is our region's success — and a testament to why inclusive, people-centered entrepreneurship training matters.

ALUMNI





Building the support entrepreneurs ask for.

2026 Priorities

As the St. Louis entrepreneurial ecosystem continues to contract, Square One continues to expand its role as a stabilizing force by building the supports entrepreneurs consistently ask for and partnering across the region to ensure no founder navigates the journey alone. This is how we strengthen the ecosystem backbone: one partnership, one program, one connection at a time.

Supporting vendors for Festival of Nations and local farmers markets through hands-on business training delivered in collaboration with community partners.

What Entrepreneurs Tell Us They Need

Capital Access
Affordable microloans, matched savings, and guidance on financial systems.

AI Readiness & Digital Skills
Training that helps founders adopt AI in marketing, operations, and product development.

Trusted Navigation
Support to find the right programs, partners, and funding during a time when 46% of regional resources have changed or disappeared.

Community & Collaboration
Safe, inclusive spaces to learn, connect, and access the networks that reduce founder isolation.

How We Strengthen the Ecosystem

Creating Welcoming Spaces
Through ongoing and bilingual training, SQ1 creates spaces for founders to gather, learn, and collaborate.

Partner-Led Enrichment
2025 programming engaged more than 30 regional partners.

Bridging Gaps in a Shifting Ecosystem
As community resources, facilities, and education programs close or change structure, SQ1 acts as a connector that helps entrepreneurs navigate what remains and convening partners to align efforts rather than duplicate them.

What We Are Building Next - 2026

Capital & Financial Empowerment
Expanding the Matched Savings Program, and financial skill-building.

AI Training
Hands-on sessions and staff upskilling to meet founders where they are.

Alumni Pipeline & Ongoing Support
More mentorship, advanced workshops, bilingual support, pitch refreshers, and collaborative events to keep founders connected beyond graduation.

Ecosystem Alignment
Continue to convene partners, share insights, and build a unified approach to inclusive entrepreneurship.

thank you

SQUARE ONE
Cortex's Entrepreneur Training