OHIO FOUNDERS LEAGUE · SEASON I · 2026–27

Founder Guide

How MyVenture works, and why it works that way.

For student founders. Built from the same rules the platform runs on.

STAY. BUILD. WIN. · EST. 2026 · A CHAPTER OF THE FOUNDERS LEAGUE INSTITUTE

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IN THIS GUIDE

Founder Guide

This guide explains each part of the season the way the League designed it: what you do, how, and the reason behind it. Read it once before you register and again before your first Stage Final Challenge.

Every number in this guide comes from the League's scoring engine. If the platform and this document ever disagree, the platform is right and this document is out of date.

On the web, with the Score Sandbox and the narrated walkthrough: **ofl-platform.vercel.app/learn/founders**

The season, and why it is a season

You register once, then build in public for eight months. One State Champion is crowned on May 19, 2027.

WHY IT MATTERS

A pitch competition rewards one good afternoon. The League is built to reward what you actually did between September and May. That is why the season is long, why you report every week, and why the prize capital is non-dilutive: $500,000 for the Founders Cup and $25,000 for each of three Regional Champions, with no equity taken, ever. The League wants you to keep the company you built.

The three phases exist so the field narrows on evidence. The Campus Activation Phase gets every strong venture registered by the November 20 cutoff. The Playoff puts 36 of them through eight tracked sprint weeks with a mentor each, then three live Regional Championships. Selection Sunday names ten. Seven more weeks of building, scores freeze on May 5, and the State Championship is decided on stage.

HOW IT WORKS

1. Register before November 20, 2026. There is no second window.
2. Your campus lead nominates 10 to 15 ventures. Make sure they know you exist.
3. The 36 are announced December 4. Sprint weeks run January 15 to March 5.
4. Regional Championships March 9 to 11 in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland. Selection Sunday March 14. Blackout May 5. Championship May 19.

DATE	WHAT HAPPENS
September 29, 2026	Public announcement
November 20, 2026	Campus Activation Phase data cutoff
December 4, 2026	36 Playoff ventures announced, mentors assigned
January 15, 2027	PLAYOFF OFFICIALLY STARTS
March 9, 2027	Cincinnati Regional Championship (South Ohio) (12 ventures, 5 judges)
March 10, 2027	Columbus Regional Championship (Central Ohio)
March 11, 2027	Cleveland Regional Championship (North Ohio)
March 14, 2027	Selection Sunday (3 auto + 7 selected = 10)
May 5, 2027	Blackout
May 19, 2027	STATE CHAMPIONSHIP (State Champion crowned, $500,000 awarded)

Registration, and why you are told your stage

One flow, five steps, about ten minutes. The League tells you your stage and profile from what you have already done.

WHY IT MATTERS

Founders are bad at judging their own stage. Some undersell, most oversell, and a league where everyone picks their own starting line is not a fair race. So the discovery questions ask only about what exists today: a documented problem, a defined target customer, an entity, an MVP, users, revenue, funding. Team size never changes your stage, and neither does having an entity; a solo founder with a documented problem and a defined target customer is Stage 1. The stage those answers support is the stage you get, with the reasons written out. Everyone in your cohort earned their starting line the same way.

Your profile is different. It is not a ranking. It describes how ventures like yours grow, so the League can give you the right advice and hold you to the right scale threshold later. A services firm and a software marketplace should not be told to chase the same milestones.

Some challenges are pre-checked from your answers because you have already done them. Confirm them honestly. An official will check every one of them at your first Stage Final Challenge review.

If your answers place you above Stage 0, every stage below you is credited in full the moment you go live: 250 for a Stage 1 venture, 650 at Stage 2, 1150 at Stage 3, 1800 at Stage 4. That is not a head start. It is the same number a Stage 0 venture reaches by clearing those stages the long way, and your registration answers are the proof an official checks.

HOW IT WORKS

1. Your Venture: name, one line, university, team.
2. Discovery: yes or no on what exists, with follow-ups for each yes.
3. Your Profile: read your stage reasons and your profile. You do not pick either.
4. Challenges: confirm the pre-checked items. Uncheck anything you cannot prove.
5. Scorecard: your starting credit, what your stage is worth, and your road from Stage 0 to Stage 4 with the stages credited, the one you start in, and the ones ahead.

STAGE	WHAT IT MEANS	HOW YOU GET PLACED HERE
Stage 0 · Idea	Concept only: the problem or the customer is not yet written down. No product, no revenue.	Anything short of Stage 1: the problem is not yet documented, or the target customer is not yet defined. (Documented = no, or target customer persona = not ticked)
Stage 1 · Formed	Company exists. Founder or team committed. Building toward something.	The problem is documented and the target customer persona or segment is defined. An entity is not required, and one founder is enough. (Documented problem, solution, and customer = yes; Follow-up: target customer persona or segment defined = ticked)

STAGE	WHAT IT MEANS	HOW YOU GET PLACED HERE
Stage 2 · Validated	The market has given you a signal.	At least two market signals from: value milestones achieved, an MVP that real users have tested, customer LOIs. (Each validation signal you tick counts as one; MVP = yes and users tested = yes counts as one; Follow-up: customer LOIs = yes counts as one)
Stage 3 · Operating	Money coming in. Business model functioning.	Paying customers, at any revenue level. (Follow-up: paying customers = yes)
Stage 4 · Scaling	Past 'does this work'. Now it's 'how big can this get.'	Paying customers at $200K+ annual revenue, or $200K+ raised. (Follow-up: paying customers = yes, and revenue range = $200K+; or follow-up: raised $200K+ in venture funding = yes)

If your campus registered you, nothing counts until you open the verification link, review every step, and accept. Decline it if the profile is not yours.

The Traction Score, and why every stage is worth a fixed amount

Traction Score = the worth of every stage you have cleared + your progress in the current stage + money milestones. Stage 0 is worth 250, Stage 1 is 400, Stage 2 is 500, Stage 3 is 650, Stage 4 is 830. It is the number Scouts score you on.

WHY IT MATTERS

The score has to be something a founder controls completely and a judge can trust completely. So nothing external moves it. Scouts picking you do not move it. Your campus lead cannot touch it. A judge cannot edit it. It goes up when you report work, complete a challenge, cross a money milestone, or clear a Stage Final Challenge, and it goes down in exactly one case: an official audit finds something you claimed was not true.

Every stage is worth a fixed amount, made of three parts: its challenges, an action budget that your weekly reports fill, and its Final Challenge bonus. That is what makes the score a standing rather than a log of activity. Time in a stage cannot out-score clearing it. When an official verifies your Final Challenge, the whole stage is credited in full, whatever you had marked or reported, so a founder who reaches the gate early simply gets there faster. A venture placed at a higher stage at registration gets the same credit for the stages below it. The road and the shortcut arrive at the same number.

The nine weekly actions pay different rates at different stages on purpose. At Stage 0 the most valuable thing you can do is talk to customers, so a conversation is worth 5 points. By Stage 3 the most valuable things are deals and customers, at 5 points each, and conversations pay 2. Every action counts at every stage, so a Stage 0 founder who lands a customer is rewarded and prompted to advance. Each stage's action budget pays the first 60% at full rate, the next 40% at half rate, and anything past the cap at 10%: reporting never becomes pointless, but the way up is always the Final Challenge.

Speed is rewarded on top. Clear a stage's Final Challenge within 4 weeks of entering the stage and the bonus is multiplied by 1.5. A venture moving through stages that quickly is on a rocketship ascent, and the score should say so.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Report units, not feelings: one conversation of 10 minutes or more, ten messages, one piece of content, one event, one document, one signed deal, one customer, one meaningful release, one mentor meeting of 30 minutes or more. Revenue is reported separately, in dollars.

2 Check the rate for your stage below and how much of your action budget is left. The dashboard shows both.

3 Use the Score Sandbox at the end of this guide to see how a stage, a week of numbers, and a verified Final Challenge turn into a score.

STAGE	CHALLENGES	ACTION BUDGET	STAGE FINAL CHA LLENGE	BONUS	STAGE WORTH	STARTING CREDIT IF PLACED HERE
0 Idea	5 × 10	100	First Believer	100	250	0
1 Formed	8 × 15	130	Public Launch	150	400	250
2 Validated	6 × 20	180	First Dollars	200	500	650
3 Operating	7 × 25	225	Proven Demand	250	650	1150
4 Scaling	9 × 30	260	Built to Last	300	830	1800

Weekly actions, and why they taper

Nine actions, each worth a set number of points at your stage, filling a per-stage budget.

WHY IT MATTERS

The weights push you toward the work that matters at your stage. The budget stops the score from rewarding time. A founder who reports thirty conversations a week for a semester has done something, but not more than a founder who cleared two stages in that time, and the score should not say otherwise.

The taper is gentler than a hard cap. You always see the rate you are earning at, on the report page and on the dashboard, so nothing about it is a surprise.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Weekly Report shows this stage's weights and your budget: how much is used, and whether you are at full rate, half rate, or past the cap.

2 When the budget is full, finish the challenges and submit your Final Challenge proof. The next stage opens a fresh budget at its own weights.

WEEKLY ACTION	UNIT	STAGE 0	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Customer conversations	1 per conversation (10+ min)	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts	1 pts
Outreach sent	1 per 10 messages	3 pts	3 pts	2 pts	1 pts	1 pts
Content published	1 per piece	3 pts	2 pts	2 pts	1 pts	1 pts
Events attended / pitched	1 per event	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts
Contracts / proposals sent	1 per document	1 pts	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	3 pts
Deals closed	1 per signed deal	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	5 pts
New customers acquired	1 per customer	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	5 pts
Product updates shipped	1 per meaningful release	2 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts	2 pts
Mentor meetings completed	1 per meeting (30+ min)	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts	2 pts
Action budget per stage	full rate to 60%, half rate to 100%, then 10%	100	130	180	225	260

Money milestones, and why revenue is not a weekly action

Revenue is reported in dollars and adds up across the season. Each band pays once, at any stage, from $100 to $1,000,000. All seven together are worth 590.

WHY IT MATTERS

A $1M deal at Stage 1 should not be worth two points, and at Stage 3 it should not be worth fifty thousand. Scoring revenue per dollar does both. Bands do neither: every dollar counts toward the next milestone, real money matters a lot, and one deal cannot decide the season. The seven bands together are worth about the same as clearing Stage 2.

A big win at a low stage is never wasted. Crossing $100 is automatically the proof for First Dollars, so the founder who lands a customer early submits that proof and moves up, and the stages they pass are credited in full. Money milestones are verified at your next Final Challenge review like everything else.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Enter dollars actually received this week in the revenue field of the Weekly Report. Not booked, not promised: received.

2 Watch the next milestone on the report page. Crossing one shows up in your result the moment you submit.

3 Keep the bank statement. The official will ask for it.

CUMULATIVE REVENUE	POINTS	RUNNING TOTAL
$100	+10	10 · Proof for the First Dollars Final Challenge
$1,000	+20	30
$10,000	+40	70
$50,000	+70	140
$100,000	+100	240 · Counts toward Built to Last evidence
$500,000	+150	390
$1,000,000	+200	590

The weekly report, and why it is weekly

Nine actions and your revenue, once a week, due Sunday at midnight. Revise until the week closes.

WHY IT MATTERS

Weekly is the shortest cadence a founder can sustain and the longest the League can wait. A month is long enough to hide a bad stretch. A week is not. Reporting every week turns the season into a record of what you did, and that record is what officials verify, what Scouts read, and what judges interpret as momentum.

The report is also where the League compares you to your cohort. Each sprint week, your score increase minus the cohort's average increase is your Sprint VAA, value added above average. Cumulative VAA across the Playoff sets your rank within the cohort, and that rank is the Traction slice of League Scoring. It means a Stage 0 venture that outbuilds its cohort can out-score a Stage 3 venture on traction. Raw score never decides the Playoff. Progress against your peers does.

Streaks exist because consistency is the best predictor the League has. Four straight weeks earns Consistent, eight earns Dedicated, a full season earns Iron Will. Missing a week never costs points, but it resets the streak and it shows.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Open Weekly Report. Enter units for each action and dollars for revenue. The panel beside the form adds up the points as you type, applies the stage taper, and shows any money milestone you would cross.

2 Submit. You see the points, your action budget, your stage progress, your Traction Score, your cohort rank, and any badge you earned.

3 Revise any time before Sunday midnight. Points update with the revision.

4 Only report what happened this week. Scouts and your campus lead can see the record.

Challenges, and why each one exists

A short list per stage on the Active Challenges page. Each pays once. Finish the list and you are ready for the stage's Final Challenge. Our Progress shows every stage on one timeline.

WHY IT MATTERS

The challenges are the work that gets a venture from one stage to the next, in the order that works. Stage 0 is about knowing what you are building and for whom. Stage 1 is about being findable and having something to sell. Stage 2 is about asking for money until someone says yes. Stage 3 is about proving people come back. Stage 4 is about building the machine. Each list is short because a short list you finish beats a long list you admire.

Every challenge shows what done looks like, because done has to mean the same thing for every venture in the cohort. A landing page with no call to action is not done. A deck you have never presented is not done. Mark a challenge done when you could show the evidence to an official, and keep the evidence.

Later and N/A exist so honesty is never punished. A Stage 1 challenge that is not the right move yet can wait. A challenge that does not fit your profile can be marked N/A and does not block the Stage Final Challenge.

HOW IT WORKS

1. Open Active Challenges. Each card says what done looks like and what it is worth.
2. Work the list. Mark done only what you can prove.
3. Use Later for timing and Not applicable for fit. Anything can be undone.
4. Open Our Progress to see every stage, what you have cleared, and what is still ahead.

STAGE	CHALLENGE	DONE LOOKS LIKE
0 Idea	Write down your problem, solution, and differentiation	A written one-pager you could hand to a stranger.
0 Idea	Identify your specific target customer	A one-sentence description of a real person you could go find today.
0 Idea	Research your competition	A short table of alternatives with what they do well and poorly.
0 Idea	Develop your elevator pitch	You can deliver it without notes and get a follow-up question.
0 Idea	Get feedback from real people	Notes from 5+ conversations with people you did not know before.
1 Formed	Build a basic website or landing page	A live URL with a call to action (waitlist, contact, buy).
1 Formed	Create a pitch deck	A deck you have presented at least once.
1 Formed	Build a fundraising pro forma	A spreadsheet with assumptions you can defend.
1 Formed	Define your launch offer	A written offer with a price that you could put on a landing page today.
1 Formed	Run a soft launch with 5 real users	Five strangers used it and you recorded what happened.
1 Formed	Set pricing and show it to prospects	A price list or page that prospects have reacted to.

STAGE	CHALLENGE	DONE LOOKS LIKE
1 Formed	Find an advisor who's built and shipped	A named advisor with a recurring check-in.
1 Formed	Build a lead list of 50 named prospects	A list of 50 named prospects, updated weekly.
2 Validated	Build fundraising pro forma with use-of-proceeds plan	A model plus a one-page use-of-proceeds.
2 Validated	Identify who gives money to businesses like yours	A list of 20+ named sources with why they fit.
2 Validated	Assemble evidence from Stages 0 and 1	A traction page or appendix in your deck.
2 Validated	Make the ask, repeatedly	A log of 10+ distinct asks with outcomes.
2 Validated	Pitch to a real check-writer	You were in the room, you pitched, and you have their questions written down.
2 Validated	Get signed commitments	At least one signed document promising money.
3 Operating	Track where every customer comes from	A dashboard or sheet with a source column filled in.
3 Operating	Build a referral mechanism	A live referral link, code, or program.
3 Operating	Measure your retention	A retention number you update monthly.
3 Operating	Launch targeted marketing channels	Channels with spend, output, and results tracked.
3 Operating	Run customer surveys	Survey results from 20+ customers.
3 Operating	Track sales cycle length	An average cycle length with a trend.
3 Operating	Increasing SEO coverage	Ranking pages for 5+ relevant terms.
4 Scaling	Land a channel or distribution partner	A signed partner with first orders flowing through them.
4 Scaling	Expand to a second market	First paying customers in the second market.
4 Scaling	Cross a scale threshold	The threshold crossed and documented.
4 Scaling	Launch a second offering or pricing tier	Existing customers are buying it.
4 Scaling	Win a flagship account	Signed, and you can name them.
4 Scaling	Prove your unit economics	CAC, margin, and payback documented across at least one cohort.
4 Scaling	Prepare for next round of fundraising	A round-ready data room.
4 Scaling	Build marketing automation	Automated campaigns with measured output.
4 Scaling	Build mature sales structure	A sales team or process hitting targets.

The Final Challenge, and why an official checks everything

Each stage ends with one Stage Final Challenge, named for what you prove. Submit the proof, an official reviews the whole stage, the stage is credited in full, and you advance with a bonus.

WHY IT MATTERS

A stage gate has to be defended or it is not a gate. So every Stage Final Challenge is a verification event. The official checks the proof you submitted, and then checks everything you claimed at that stage: every challenge marked done, every weekly number, and every dollar of revenue. If it holds, you get the ceremony, the bonus, a title, the stage credited at its full worth, and the next stage with its challenges and a fresh action budget. If it does not, the official writes the reason, the unprovable items are struck, and a penalty can follow. A previous stage advancement can be reversed, and its credit comes off with it.

Verified means credited in full. However many challenges you had marked and however much of the action budget you had used, verification tops the stage up to its worth. That is the same rule as starting credit, applied mid-season, and it is why finishing early is never penalized. Clear the stage within 4 weeks of entering it and the bonus is multiplied by 1.5.

Audits are public on your profile, and every Scout holding you is notified. That is deliberate. The whole League runs on self-reported numbers, and self-reported numbers only work when everyone knows they will be checked and everyone can see what happened when they were.

Each proof is chosen because it is the thing a founder at that stage most needs and most wants to avoid facing. First Believer: a stranger cares. Public Launch: the public can find you. First Dollars: a dollar actually moves. Proven Demand: customers come back without being asked. Built to Last: the business can survive eighteen months on its own.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Gather the proof first: a screenshot, a link, a statement, a recording.

2 Submit from the Final Challenge card on Active Challenges: describe the evidence, attach or link it. Proven Demand needs three of the five demand signals.

3 You can submit early if you already have the proof. The Final Challenge card shows exactly what verification would credit. A big win at a low stage is the proof for the next gate, so use it.

4 If it fails, read the reason, fix the record, and submit again when you have the evidence.

5 Our Progress shows the date each Final Challenge was verified and the title it earned.

STAGE FINAL CHALLENGE	ADVANCES YOU	PROOF REQUIRED
First Believer	Stage 0 to 1	A real stranger (not friend/family) engaged with your idea: waitlist signup, email reply, survey response, recorded conversation.

STAGE FINAL CHALLENGE	ADVANCES YOU	PROOF REQUIRED
Public Launch	Stage 1 to 2	Publicly launch your business or MVP: live website, app in store, product on shelves, bookable service. The public can find and try you.
First Dollars	Stage 2 to 3	Money moved into your account: customer payment, investor check, grant award, client retainer, pre-order. Documented.
Proven Demand	Stage 3 to 4	Accumulate 3 of 5 demand signals: (1) customer repeat purchase, (2) customer referral, (3) customer found you organically, (4) revenue/customers grew 2+ consecutive months, (5) customer said they'd be disappointed without you.
Built to Last	Stage 4 to Final	18+ months of financial sustainability through revenue, funding, or a combination. Documented with cash position, burn rate, revenue trajectory, and committed funding.

The five demand signals: a customer made a repeat purchase; a customer referred another customer; a customer found you organically (no outreach); revenue or customers grew 2+ consecutive months; a customer said they'd be disappointed without you.

Keep an evidence folder from week one. Stage Final Challenges are easy when the folder is already full.

Cohorts, Scouts, and League Scoring

You are ranked against ventures that started where you did. Scouts put you in their portfolio. Judges decide the rest.

WHY IT MATTERS

Cohorts exist because a fair race needs a fair starting line. Your cohort is every venture that started at your stage, and every comparison the League makes, from the dashboard to the Playoff, is within it.

Scouts exist because a venture with people behind it is a stronger venture. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni get a portfolio with 5 slots and pick the ventures they believe in. No money is involved at any point. A Scout's points are the Traction Score points their ventures earn after the pick, and a Scout can name one captain that counts 2x, so the only way their pick pays is if you build. They are told every time you earn points and every time an audit takes points away. The number of portfolios you are in is your Scout share of League Scoring. Recruit them.

Scouts are also people who can help. Every Scout can publish a profile: who they are, what they know, and how they want to help, from feedback to customer introductions to mentoring. The Scouts page in MyVenture searches those profiles. Ask for an intro, and if the Scout accepts you can message each other on the platform. Scouts can also leave comments on your venture page and introduce themselves to you from the Market.

League Scoring decides the Regional Championships and the State Championship: Judges 60, Traction 30, Scouts 10. Five judges score six criteria from 1 to 5, and the composite normalizes to 60. Traction is your cohort rank on cumulative VAA. The split is deliberate: judges project what you could become, traction proves what you did, Scouts show who believes it.

HOW IT WORKS

1 Check your cohort rank every week on the dashboard and the Leaderboard.

2 Open Scouts in MyVenture. Each card shows who the Scout is, how they help, what they know, and how to reach them. Filter by the help you need, by expertise, or by campus. Scouts who already back you are marked.

3 Request an intro with a short note. When it is accepted, Messages opens between you and you both see each other's email.

4 Reply to comments on your dashboard. A Scout who asks a question is a Scout deciding whether to pick you.

5 Build your pitch to the six criteria below. You get the rubric in advance. There are no prescribed slides.

CRITERION	1	3	5
Problem & Market Opportunity	Assumed, not validated. Market undefined.	Validated by real customers. Market meaningful. Entry point defined.	Undeniable problem, extensive validation. Massive, well-timed market.
Solution & Differentiation	Vague, no differentiation.	Clearly solves the problem with identifiable differentiation.	Defensible moat. Demonstrated product-market pull.

CRITERION	1	3	5
Team & Execution Capability	Lacks critical skills. No execution evidence.	Core skills present. Consistent execution. Learns from mistakes.	Exceptional expertise. Coachable, resilient, hungry.
Business Model & Economics	No clear revenue model.	Defined and partially tested. Path to revenue articulated.	Proven model with strong economics.
Growth Potential & Scalability	Limited, lifestyle scale.	Credible ambition. Can articulate the 10× version.	Sees what most don't. Plan to reshape the market.
Momentum	Stagnant. No forward motion.	Steady progress. Positive trend.	Clear inflection point. Accelerating across dimensions.

All five judges count equally. No trimming. Strong convictions are signal.
Average per criterion (1.0–5.0), then sum the six averages for a composite (6.0–30.0).
Normalize: (composite ÷ 30) × 60 = Judge Points (0–60).
Scorecards are submitted digitally immediately after each pitch, before the next venture begins.