
1-22-2020

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Recommended Citation

Weinstein, Mark D., "Students Hit Home Run at “The Pitch”" (2020). *News Releases*. 1056.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/news_releases/1056

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 22, 2020

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Students Hit Home Run at “The Pitch”

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- A digital assistant platform that prioritizes user privacy was the first-place winner at Cedarville University’s “Second Pitch” event, hosted by the university’s [Beyond Startup Accelerator](#) program.

“The Second Pitch” was held Saturday, January 11, at Cedarville’s DeVries Theatre. Similar to ABC’s “Shark Tank,” eight students presented their entrepreneurial ideas to a panel of judges. The panelists included Joe Mulvaney, founder of Quotus, a qualitative research firm, and entrepreneur-in-residence with [Beyond Startup Accelerator](#); Johnny Campbell, business developer for Columbus-based Bend Active and certified agent for Major League Baseball; and Kristi Kennedy, co-founder/CEO of the Bee Friendly Network and Ph.D. candidate in medical research.

Four candidates won cash prizes and a chance to turn their ideas into a investment-ready operating business.

First prize was \$1,000, second \$500 and third and fourth split \$500.

Each contestant was given five minutes to present his or her business idea and how it will generate revenue, followed by five minutes of questions from the judges. Their presentations were accompanied by a pitch deck, a brief presentation used to provide an audience with a quick overview of a business plan, and a PowerPoint presentation designed to address the questions of potential investors.

First-place winner Colson Cissel, a senior computer science major from Woodbine, Maryland, pitched a privacy-focused digital assistant platform called Onyx. Because current smart speakers do not respect user privacy and most users have privacy concerns about smart speakers, Cissel created Onyx to protect users’ privacy. Consumers could download the Onyx Digital Assistant to their devices and hardware manufacturers could purchase licensing to voice-enable their own products with the Onyx Digital Assistant.

“The growing popularity of voice-based tech is exciting, but the lack of products that prioritize user privacy is disappointing,” said Cissel. “Ideally, a high-tech lifestyle should not have to be incompatible with a private one.”

David Sinkonis, a senior finance and marketing major from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and Luke Marquardt, a senior computer science major from Garden Plain, Kansas, created Takeyaup, a non-monetary wagering app. The betting app would allow users to create custom non-monetary bets they can send to friends or leave open for other users to accept.

“People love to prove that they’re right and want to be rewarded for being right,” said Sinkonis. “This is why the sports betting industry exists, and why it will explode after national legalization. However, the current nonmonetary options are repetitive and unrewarding.”

Cameron Roseman, a sophomore marketing major from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and Rufus Mathew, a sophomore computer science major from Bahrain, created Suitis, a marketing app that integrates micro influencers through the use of artificial intelligence. The online platform organizes passionate influencers, like college students, based on location and personal interests using custom-built artificial intelligence for product or event promotion.

“I have always believed that word-of-mouth advertising is the cheapest and most effective way to advertise for any product or event, and I noticed that there is no application that embraces this fact,” said Roseman. “With the increase in popularity of influencer marketing, I realized that businesses do not have a resource that allows them to find the best people to help market their products or events, so we decided to make an application to solve this problem.”

Caleb Stanton, a freshman worship major from Ypsilanti, Michigan, pitched ChairBox, a foldable, compact storage device designed for storing wheelchairs in the back of vehicles. Stanton, whose sister uses a wheelchair, based his idea on his family’s challenges traveling with a wheelchair and their unique invention to solve the issue.

“It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention,” said Staton. “If that weren’t true, ChairBox would not exist. We had a problem, and we solved it.”

The pitch event is part of the new [Beyond Startup Accelerator](#), a program that allows future entrepreneurs to learn skills and gain experience to launch independent startup companies or lead a startup function in existing companies by creating new products or pursuing new markets.

Audience members included venture capitalists, private equity leaders, angel investors and current business owners. Students business ideas were seen as possible investable business concepts by guest investors seated in the audience.

“I am very proud of our university and our student innovators who stepped into the unknown to provide solutions to societal challenges using a biblical worldview,” Dick Blanc, executive director of the [Entrepreneurship Accelerator Program](#). “The top four winning presenters are on a path to investable, scalable ventures, and we couldn’t be more proud of their boldness, creativity and passion to lead us forward!”

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,380 undergraduate, graduate and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings and high student engagement ranking. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.