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Zahn Prize Competition Gives Undergraduates Opportunity, Mentoring to Launch Startups

Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla spoke during the event. Photos by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego Publications

It was standing room only at the grand opening of the Moxie Center for Undergraduate Entrepreneurship as 10 undergraduate student teams waited to see who among them would win one of three Zahn prizes, for a total of $10,000 in cash to help them bring their products to market. The room was filled with students, faculty, industry partners and investors as well as San Diego Mayor Bob Filner, University of California, San Diego Chancellor Pradeep Khosla, and Juan C. Lasheras, interim dean of the UC San Diego Jacobs School of Engineering.

A team of mechanical engineers won the grand prize of $6,000 with an idea to use solar umbrellas to provide electrical outlets at outdoor cafes. The team demonstrated a need after studying the campus patios and local coffee shops and finding that these outdoor spaces are underused, while indoor

seating is overcrowded, because there is no way to power mobile devices at patio tables. The team includes seniors Sara Taghizadeh, Austin Steussy and Faizan Masood. The team already has a prototype that it is preparing to test at the Price Center on campus.

The Moxie Center opened at the Jacobs School of Engineering in January with a gift from Irwin Zahn and his family through their Moxie Foundation. The Moxie Center includes two student workspaces – one in the Computer Science and Engineering building and one in the Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering building – designed for prototyping as well as meetings and brainstorming. The Moxie Center's focus on undergraduates complements the Jacobs School's von Liebig Entrepreneurism Center, which provides faculty and graduate students access to entrepreneurism education, proof-of-concept grants and business mentoring program. It is part of the Jacob School's mission to ensure graduates possess high-level technical skills as well as the business and entrepreneurism training to become tomorrow's technology leaders.

Zahn said the process of developing a technology and a business plan to sell it is what's essential about the Moxie Center. "They have to develop something. They have to put together a plan. They have to present it and defend it in response to questions," said Zahn. "So even if you lose you really win. The reason you win is because it's training, so the next time you'll do even better."

Zahn said he hopes news of the first annual Zahn Prize Competition will energize students from all academic disciplines on campus to participate in this unique opportunity. In fact, the third place winners of the Zahn Prize are not engineering students at all.

ngineering student Dylan Williams in one of two Moxie
kspaces.

Second place went to Uzair Mohammad of Saaf Engineering Solutions, who received $3,000 for his method of growing a biological filter for drinking water purification. Third prize was awarded to Kevin Liang and Eric Suen, of Aqua Design Innovations, who received $1,000 for their aquaponics business model. Liang and Suen's invention is a filter for aquariums that recycles fish waste to fertilize plants. Liang is a third-year biology major and Suen is a sophomore studying economics. Mohammed won the Triton Innovation Network Challenge in January for his cost-effective biofiltration technology. Mohammed is a freshman studying bioengineering at the UC San Diego Jacobs School of Engineering.

Earlier in the day, the teams presented their "Lean Model Business Plans" to an esteemed panel of entrepreneurs and investors who grilled them about their prototypes and market research to ferret out who had an idea that might actually sell. The judges were Zahn, Barbara Bry, a serial entrepreneur

who is currently chief operating officer of <u>Blackbird Ventures</u>, and David Titus, co-founder and managing partner of <u>Windward Ventures</u>.

Chancellor Khosla commented that UC San Diego is an ideal home for the Moxie Center because of its collaborative, entrepreneurial spirit and tradition of innovation.

To win, teams had to show that they understand the market or customer for their product; what value their product offers over what's currently available; how the business will generate revenue; and the "minimum viable product" that can be brought to market. Minimum viable product is essentially a product that solves a problem for an identified base of customers who would adopt the technology early even with kinks that must be worked out as the product develops further.

"The Moxie Center provides an opportunity that most of us could only dream about when we were back in school," said Jay Kunin, the center's director. Kunin said this opportunity complements students technical engineering education, which is based on the questions "what and how?" by teaching them to also ask "why and who cares?"

"We believe that all students participating in our incubator will enhance their technical education by gaining experience understanding why products are built, who will benefit and who will pay, the keys to successful innovation," said Kunin.

The grand prize winners with Solar Umbrella have taken this opportunity to heart, becoming accidental entrepreneurs simply by choosing to take a Moxie Center-sponsored class in product design. "We took the product design class with Nate Delson thinking we should give it a try," said Sara Taghizadeh. "It's amazing how it started as a class project, but now we're actually thinking of starting up our own company. It's a huge step for us as we're close to graduating. The future is really bright."

Solar Umbrella, the grand prize winners of the Zahn Prize, $6,000 to pursue their business plan for solar umbrellas t power mobile devices on outdoor patios. The team succe. pitched and defended their business plan to a panel of in judges.

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