

By Michelle Franklin

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Triton Entrepreneur Night: Pitch Perfect

Students pitch their start-ups to share \$50K in prizes

Sensors that tell you if Chinese food from last weekend is still safe to eat. An app to let your professor know you have no idea what he's talking about. A grocery store guide to find the exact aisle and shelf location of your favorite cereal. These aren't just crazy ideas — they're actual startups currently in development in The Basement, UC San Diego's two-year-old incubator and accelerator program managed by the UC San Diego Alumni Office.

Established in 2015, The Basement was founded by alumni and is fueled through their generous donations. Working closely with Research Affairs through its Office of Innovation and Commercialization, they offer programming that stimulates, encourages and serves the

entrepreneurial spirit of students.

“The mission of The Basement is not only to help prepare our students to meet the challenges of the disruption economy, but to give them the skills, experience and connections they’ll need to become the successful business leaders and entrepreneurs of the future,” said Paul Roben, Associate Vice Chancellor of Innovation and Commercialization.

This campus-wide resource is open to all university students, regardless of college or department affiliation. Any budding entrepreneur with a business idea or product concept can apply.

All Basement teams at the Incubator or Accelerator level have an opportunity to showcase their products and services at the annual Triton Entrepreneur Night, which took place on April 27 at the Great Hall. In his welcoming remarks, Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla stated, “Entrepreneurism isn’t a newfound tradition for UC San Diego. It’s in our DNA. Events like tonight are part of this campus’s dedicated efforts to create a fertile ecosystem for entrepreneurship.”



In addition to the showcase, six teams were selected to pitch in front of a panel of alumni entrepreneurs and investors, who then voted for the winners. This year’s top two teams were Sin Fronteras Tax and Waitz. Together they will split prizes valued at almost \$50,000, providing much-needed capital and access to resources. Returning for a second year, Nanome Inc. won the Audience Choice Award.

Sin Fronteras Tax was founded by international business majors Hashim Bejar, ’18 and Ashna Shroff, ’17, along with math-computer science major Orr Yakobi, ’18. They realized there was a huge unmet need among international workers who paid U.S. taxes but couldn’t easily collect their refunds. Sin Fronteras Tax acts as an intermediary, facilitating speedy tax refunds for international workers. The group said pitching in front of the judges was “nerve-wracking yet exhilarating” and expressed their gratitude to UC San Diego “for supporting us and giving us this entrepreneurial opportunity.”

The idea for Waitz came about when electrical engineering major Nicholas Halverson, ’17, came to UC San Diego from a small town. Geisel Library was a problem: he saw lines everywhere and could never find a place to sit. Wouldn’t it be great, he thought, if there was an app to show which floors of the library were the least busy? Partnering with international business major Max Topolsky, ’17, and structural engineering major Linus Grasel, ’18, they created Waitz. This app uses Bluetooth technology and crowdsourcing to determine how busy certain businesses are and then alerts potential visitors. They hope to have the app download-ready over the summer and launch in the fall at Price Center,

RIMAC and, of course, the library. Of the evening, Halverson said, “Presenting in front of that group of highly accomplished judges was an incredibly exciting opportunity, and I’m proud of the way our team performed.”



Nanome Inc. — a technology hit during the recent Campaign for UC San Diego celebration — returned to provide the audience with an update after taking first place last year (under the name NanoVR). They were also able to demo their VR model, which captivated everyone who stopped by, earning them their second Audience Choice Award. Over the past year, they've rebranded, added a board of advisors, and taken on a major pharmaceutical company as a client. Lead UI Developer Dennis Tsung-Chen Chiang ('17, electrical engineering) praised UC San Diego for the opportunities it gave his team: “Being in The Basement gave us a lot of freedom from worry. The environment also fostered some friendly competition! And winning last year allowed us to buy more hardware and find more talent to bring on board.”

Regardless of whether they went home with an award, all the teams received an extremely valuable parting gift: experience. Alexander Boone, '15, is co-founder of a portable tea and coffee brew system called Bruvida. Last year, his product (then called “BrewNGo”) was one of the winners in the Proof of Concept competition.

“Triton Entrepreneur Night was a great marketing opportunity — a place to refine our presentation and pitch,” Boone said. He also credits the event with creating “a great atmosphere of excitement, encouragement and honest feedback.”

More than a competition about winning prizes, Triton Entrepreneur Night is another example of UC San Diego’s strong commitment to nurturing student entrepreneurs and giving them the necessary skills to succeed once they graduate. According to panel judge Taner Halicioglu, ’96, “The right thing to do is encourage students and give them the mindset of not just solving a problem, but seeing if it can be made into a viable business.” Viability is where The Basement excels. To date, \$1.7 million has been raised by the startup teams; 56 jobs and internships have been created; and nine companies have been formed.

The Basement and Triton Entrepreneur Night have become successful thanks to the vision of three key UC San Diego’s alumni and founding members — Jeff Belk, managing director of ICT 168 Capital, LLC; Mark Suster, partner at UpFront Ventures; and Aryeh B. Bourkoff, chief executive officer of Lion Tree LLC — who continue to support their alma mater’s entrepreneurial initiatives. Belk, ’83, who served as emcee for the evening, stated, “It’s my strong belief that anyone involved in this process is going to have a much more successful career trajectory. There’s no downside.”



This process of entrepreneurship pervades campus. In addition to The Basement, UC San Diego offers students numerous spaces to explore, develop and otherwise tinker with their nascent startups, including [the von Liebig Entrepreneurism Center](#) at the Jacobs School of Engineering; [MystartupXX](#), focusing on female and other minority entrepreneurs; [Qualcomm Institute Prototyping Lab](#), which provides prototyping and engineering services; [StartR](#), an accelerator program for Rady students and alumni; and the [Entrepreneur Challenge](#) business plan competition, which takes place at the end of the month.

The chancellor summed up the spirit of the night perfectly when he said, “Entrepreneurship has always been a unique engine of change, as it lets us see the world — not for what it is, but what it can be. We look forward to seeing how these students will shape the world around us.”

Click the hyperlinks to learn more about [The Basement](#) and [Triton Entrepreneur Night](#).

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