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Startup winners take home nearly \$90,000 in The Proving Ground

After a three-month, three-round competition culminating with a live-pitch event, the winners of The Proving Ground – the University of South Carolina’s popular startup competition – were chosen Tuesday, Nov. 17.

With eight teams, five judges, four prize categories and one live audience, everything was on the line for teams to win nearly \$90,000 in prize money and startup support. Each team was given five minutes during the finale to present their innovative ideas to the judges and the live audience, with the judges having five minutes to ask questions.

Team “Vuepeer,” won the \$20,000 Maxient Innovation Prize which went to the team with the best business concept. “Vuepeer” is a tech company focused on providing consumers with the best deals on a variety of rental vehicles. Alex Smolen, a senior accounting major, and Jessica Hart, a senior marketing major, pitched the service.

“This has been an amazing process. I’ve learned so much from it and am very grateful for this opportunity,” Smolen said. “Now that we’ve won, we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

In second place was team “Crunchwall,” which won \$2,500. “Crunchwall” is a mobile platform where students can connect with organizations they’re involved with on campus to provide better communication and coordination.

Winning the \$20,000 Avenir Discovery Prize for best business concept was Brevino. Founded by Ian Mackintosh, a 2013 IMBA graduate, “Brevino” is a product that keeps large bottled drinks such as wine, sparkling water and beer chilled for hours.

Taking second place in the Avenir category was team “ASSET,” which was awarded \$2,500. “ASSET,” is a technology enhancement to existing security systems that allows intruders to be tracked in real-time on mobile devices.

Rounding out the major prizes was “Koios,” which won the \$17,500 Fluor Social Impact Prize. The Fluor award goes to the team that best addresses a social or environmental problem. “Koios,” founded by Trey Gordner, a 2013 international business graduate, is a browser extension that connects with local libraries to notify users when movies, music, audiobooks, ebooks and other resources become available in libraries.

“It feels really great to have won,” Gordner said. “I wasn’t able to do The Proving Ground as an undergraduate, so when I heard it was available for alumni, I was thrilled and immediately threw in my application. It’s been a wild ride and one thing has led to another and this is just one big milestone.”

Second place in the Fluor category went to “Carolina Community Farm and Garden,” which won \$2,500. The service consists of a hydroponics system that provides fresh, local and organically grown produce, including lettuce and basil, to UofSC’s dining services, local Columbia restaurants and the Columbia community.

The judges weren’t the only ones choosing winning startups. The audience chose between two startups for the SCRA Technology Ventures Fan Favorite Prize, awarding the \$4,000 prize to “thinkINK,” a greeting card system that allows customers to create customized printed cards with personalized greetings in their own handwriting that are mailed for them. The concept is the brainchild of Sarah Fissette, a PMBA student.

Runner up “Bonjuo” won \$2,500 for its language learning and social application that helps students who are studying abroad learn a foreign language.

All winners in the competition were awarded an affiliate membership in the USC/Columbia Technology Incubator.

These year’s judges were Aaron and Candice Hark, founders of Maxient and the competition’s longest standing sponsor; Kevin Culley, senior director of innovation at Under Armour; Greg Clark, vice president of emerging technologies at SCRA Technology Ventures, and Nancy Grden, principal of Avenir Consulting.

“In past years there’s usually been a clear cut winner but in all three categories this year, the judges went back and forth because the teams were all terrific,” said Dean Kress, associate director of the Faber Entrepreneurship Center at the Darla Moore School of Business, and director of The Proving Ground.

The Harks both noticed a difference in this year’s field of startups.

“The presentations have gotten better,” said Candice Hark. “The teams were more prepared and they’re more thorough.”

In its sixth year, The Proving Ground has come a long way. Since its launch, the total prize package has grown from \$3,000 to \$89,000. This year marked the first time that prizes were awarded to runner-ups.

“This year there’s a bigger crowd, more money and more refined ideas,” said Aaron Hark. “We see great ideas that’ll be the future companies of Carolina.”

Presenting sponsors this year include the Moore School’s Faber Entrepreneurship Center, EngenuitySC and the university’s Office of Economic Engagement.

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The Proving Ground finalists:

Maxient Innovation Prize

Crunchwall: Emmanuel Lewis, a junior international business and finance major from Alexandria, Va., and Raphael Tosti, a junior international business and marketing major from Greenville, S.C.

Vuepeer: Jessica Hart, a senior marketing major from Albany, N.Y., and Alex Smolen, an announcing major from North Potomac, Md.

Avenir Discovery Prize

ASSET: Benjamin Davis, a civil and environment engineering graduate student from Columbia, and Philip Conrad a computer science major from Columbia, S.C.

Brevino: Ian Mackintosh, a 2013 International MBA graduate from Columbia, S.C.

Fluor Social Impact Prize

Koios: Trey Gordner, a 2013 international business graduate from Fayetteville, N.C.

Carolina Community Farm and Garden: Erin Ryan, a sophomore accounting major in the S.C. Honors College from Poughkeepsie, N.Y.; Briana Matthews, a senior tourism and management major in the S.C. Honors College from Purcellville, Va.; and John Stewart, a chemical engineering student from Florence, S.C.

SCRA Technology Ventures Fan Favorite Prize

Bonjuo: Tony Klor, a senior entrepreneurial and human resource management and Spanish major from Stockton, Calif.; Zack Lublin, a senior accounting and finance major from New Brunswick, N.J.; Spencer Roe, a junior computer science major in the S.C. Honors college from Bel Air, Md. and Emilie Lawson, a senior economics and marketing and Spanish major for Pittsburg, Pa.

thinkINK: Sarah Fissette, a Professional MBA graduate from Greenwood, S.C.