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Perfecting the Pitch

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With proposals ranging from innovative apps to life-saving medical devices, entrepreneurs from across the university faced off at Columbia Engineering's **Fast Pitch** competition November 14. Contending for a $5000 prize pool, hopefuls had just 60 seconds to pitch their ideas, followed by up to two minutes to answer judges' questions.

Sponsored by **Columbia Engineering Entrepreneurship,** the annual event highlights budding interdisciplinary start-ups from graduate and undergraduate students at **Columbia Engineering, Columbia Business School,** the **College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia College,** and more. In addition to helping fund some of the most promising projects on campus, Fast Pitch also helps students network and join forces for the university-sponsored **Columbia Venture Competition** in the spring.

For some at Davis Auditorium, it was their very first time pitching before an audience.

"It's always a little nerve-wracking to get on stage, but it can be the only way to move projects forward," said **Sam Sia**, professor of **biomedical engineering** and faculty co-director of Columbia Engineering Entrepreneurship, kicking off the proceedings. "And win some cold hard cash."

Teams qualified for the competition by submitting video pitches for feedback from alumni judges. On the big night, 34 teams pitched live to a panel of seasoned entrepreneurs and investors, including Brian Pan BS'10, cofounder and CEO of BioHealthWays, Inc., and Phil Opamuratawongse MS'14, a chief of staff at Floodgate. Ideas spanned the spectrum of research and scholarship at Columbia, from a new yarn process to facilitate recycling and reformulating discarded clothing to a machine learning-based service helping restaurants better understand and predict customers' orders. Many teams proposed new apps, from helping people sleep to finding them cleaner energy providers, while several offered novel biotech for treating illnesses and supporting health.

Among undergraduates, MoLabs took home first place and $1200, along with the audience choice award for an extra $100. A project by Azraf Anwar '18, Amol Kapoor '18, Meghana Noonavath '18, Jason Patterson '18, McKenzie Sup '18, and Darnel Theagene '18, MoLabs is a translational research group developing drCAM, an at-home screening device for diabetics to monitor their retinal health. Winning $700 and second place was Vader Nanotechnologies (Trévon Gordon '18), which builds upon research from Professors Allie Obermeyer (SEAS) and Angela Christiano (CUMC) to develop nanocarriers that deliver drugs and other compounds selectively to hair follicles.

In the graduate category, HelmetStart came in first for $1500. A social enterprise startup aiming to eliminate preventable deaths by promoting helmets and safe driving among motorcyclists in India, HelmetStart (Malgosia Rejniak SIPA'18) offers sensor-equipped helmets with an associated app that allows companies to track employees' riding behaviors and helmet use. In second place for $1000 was VasAR (Gabrielle Loeb P&S'18, Shirin Sadri P&S'20, Alon Grinshpoon '17), which is developing an augmented reality guidance system for vascular interventions, while Recycle Up (Michael Kraslow BUS'18 and David Schreiber BUS'18) took third and $500 for their mobile app that gives users redeemable credit for recycling.

As the evening concluded, and groups shared some well-earned South Asian catering, competitors agreed that pitching and seeing others pitch had been a valuable experience—and that their next time presenting, they will be even better prepared to raise more money for their projects.

"This was my first time pitching in a business competition and it was an incredible, eye-opening experience," said MoLabs' Noonavath. "Our next steps with MoLabs are to develop multiple iterations of our drCAM prototype and conduct testing on different eye models. We're looking forward to competing at the Columbia Venture Competition in the spring."

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