

Student entrepreneurs compete at WCU

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CULLOWHEE – Nine student teams participating in Western Carolina University’s WISE Challenge have progressed to the final round of the competition and are busy re-imagining everyday products, developing services and inventing technologies in the name of entrepreneurship.

The WISE Challenge, or Western’s Innovative Student Enterprise Challenge, began in early September by inviting teams of undergraduate students to develop original ideas – along with business plans – for new products, technologies or services. Western’s Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Center for Rapid Product Realization, master of science program in science and entrepreneurship, and the Technology Transfer Office are among the contest’s sponsors, with Western faculty and staff serving as mentors to the participants. A panel of judges from Western North Carolina will announce a winner March 28.

The competition has been a “phenomenal opportunity” for Wes Smith and his three team members, said Smith, a 27-year-old junior from Charlotte double majoring in biology and entrepreneurship. The team’s entry, called Clubs-2-Go, is a new twist on golf equipment. (Out of concern for their intellectual property, teams are keeping quiet about their ideas.) Smith and other competitors hope to produce prototypes in Western’s Center for Rapid Product Realization in time for the finals.

“The contest is meant to be really fun and to get students excited about their ideas,” said Jonathan Snover, a chemistry professor and director of the master of science program in science and entrepreneurship. At the same time, said Snover, also a competition mentor, “Having a good idea is not enough. It has to translate into business.”

The judges will use criteria including innovation or uniqueness, relevance to the intended market and the team’s depth of knowledge to judge the entries. Competition rules require teamwork because that is a reality in the business world, Snover said.

Students participating in the contest come from across disciplines, with many studying entrepreneurship, business, engineering or the sciences. Each team has received \$400 to help pay for expenses such as producing a prototype, travel or hiring outside counsel. The top three finishers will share \$5,000 in prize money, with the winner perhaps securing the opportunity to pitch the idea to an investment firm.

Athlete’s Exchange, a team whose three members all play for Western’s women’s tennis team, has incorporated travel and athletics in the service it proposes. “Focus on the customer, that’s the

most important thing,” said Mariona Trilla, 22, an international business major who arrived at Western two years ago from her native Barcelona, Spain.

Students said the WISE Challenge has provided them with opportunities, leadership and networking options that would not otherwise be available. Many of the finalists, no matter the competition’s ultimate outcome, are contemplating taking their entries to market.

Patrick Garrett, a 20-year-old junior from Spring Hill, Fla., majoring in entrepreneurship, and his teammate have re-imagined traditional fishing equipment. “I’m using technology in a completely different way,” Garrett said. “After the contest, ideally I would manufacture it and sell it. That’s what I’d like to do.”

For more information about the WISE Challenge, contact Jonathan Snover at (828) 227-3683 or jsnover@wcu.edu.