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At Colby business competition, farming pitches score major funding

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Staff Writer

WATERVILLE -- Instead of good grades, students at Colby College on Saturday were striving for money.

There were two winners at the liberal arts college's first-ever business competition for $15,000 in start-up funds. The money will be split, with $10,000 going to an e-commerce website for Maine farmers, and $5,000 to a nonprofit that will grow vegetables in gardens in Chicago.

Nine groups of students sought to prove to a panel of judges -- in five to seven minutes -- why theirs was the next best business or nonprofit. The competition was organized by the Colby Entrepreneurial Alliance, which is a member of the Kennebec Valley Entrepreneurial Network.

The network provides connections and resources for entrepreneurs and those aspiring to be entrepreneurs in Kennebec and Somerset counties. The largest prize went to a group of three sophomores who will start an online farmers' market for consumers to purchase produce directly from Maine farmers.

My Fresh Company LLC probably will launch this May and will be run by Marcus Josefsson, of Portsmouth, R.I.; Danny Garin, of Bethesda, Md.; and Noah VanValkenburg, of Detroit, Mich. People will be able to select locally grown produce on the website and have it shipped directly to their door.

ARE YOU A FARMER?

Call Colby College students Marcus, Danny or Noah at 370-2556 to add your farm to their website, www.myfreshmaine.com.
"It's confidence. That's really the best part," Garin said in Ostrove Auditorium after his group was announced as a winner. "They're putting their money into our ideas and ourselves."

Winning $5,000 was senior Benjamin Weinberger, of Cleveland, who plans to start a nonprofit called Homegrown. If he can raise $155,000 more, he can start a program in Chicago to involve high school students in planting gardens in the city.

At the beginning of his presentation, he displayed a photo of a green plant and asked the crowd of more than 50 people whether it was a potato, eggplant or spinach plant.

"This is a potato plant," he said. "For everyone who said eggplant or spinach, my homegrown collective might be for you."

Online ventures dominated the competition, which involved a total of 19 students -- 18 male, 1 female -- from across the United States, including two competitors from Waterville. Participants were sophomores, juniors and seniors majoring in an assortment of disciplines, including economics, government, biology, international studies and computer science.

Some of the other proposed endeavors included a website on which college students could buy and sell textbooks, a more interactive college website model, a website that pairs prospective students with colleges suited to their academic and social expectations, and a website that connects prospective renters with housing suited to their needs.

The students' involvement with the Colby Entrepreneurial Alliance this year was not to earn college credits; they attended entrepreneurial workshops and forums on top of taking four or five classes each.

"Regardless of major, you can be an entrepreneur. That bodes well for a liberal arts education," said Roger Woolsey, director of the Colby Career Center, a steering committee member for the Kennebec Valley Entrepreneurial Network and co-director of the Colby Entrepreneurial Alliance.

"They're applying what they've learned as a liberal arts student in all these classes to these practical learning experiences," he said.

After announcing Josefsson, Garin and VanValkenburg as winners, judge Mark Johnson, a senior director at the media company Condé Nast, said he wondered whether they could accomplish their goals.

"You should take that as a compliment. You should go out and prove everybody wrong," Johnson said. "It is unique. It is perfect for Maine and the way people are eating these days, so we're really proud to be giving this to you."

Another judge, Robert Ryan, deputy general counsel for Stallion Oilfield Services, based in Texas, said although some students didn't win, their ideas could still turn into successful ventures.

The "ideas were better in many ways than older adults put forth," he said.

The seed money was given by private donors, said Erica Humphrey, associate director of the career center, a steering committee member for the network and co-director of the alliance.
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