

The e-Fest Innovation Challenge - A Proven Model for Sparking Student Innovation

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Mixing students from different schools, disciplines, and backgrounds teaches them to work under pressure, iterate quickly, and build with new collaborators toward a shared vision.

Every April, the Top 25 Finalist Teams of undergraduate entrepreneurs from across North America converge at the University of St. Thomas for e-Fest, the ultimate capstone experience for student innovators. Over three days, these student teams pitch their ventures, attend workshops, network with peers and mentors, and gain exposure to opportunities that extend far beyond the competition itself.

On the evening of day two, all undergraduate team members take part in the e-Fest Innovation Challenge. This high-energy event reminds participants that while big prizes are on the table, their fellow competitors are also their future network. The relationships forged here may become the ones they call on for collaboration, advice, or inspiration for years to come.

In just three hours - and with teammates they've only just met - students are challenged to tackle a pressing problem, design a bold business idea, and develop a pitch for potential investors. By mixing students from different schools, disciplines, and backgrounds into new teams, the challenge highlights what makes e-Fest special: unexpected connections, bold ideas, and the creative spark of entrepreneurship at its best. It also mirrors the realities of entrepreneurship itself: working under pressure, iterating quickly, and building with new collaborators toward a shared vision.

This article, and the supplemental downloads above, show how other schools can bring this model to their own students.

Why the Innovation Challenge Works

Innovation challenges combine the best of entrepreneurship education research with the excitement of real-world collaboration:

- Research on design thinking (Carroll, 2010; Stanford d.school) shows that innovation challenges build creative confidence by giving students permission to test ideas quickly, adapt in real time, and embrace iteration.
- Scholars such as Neck and Greene (2011) highlight that structured problem solving enhances opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial self-efficacy.
- Fayolle and Gailly (2015) found that experiential entrepreneurship education strengthens collaboration, leadership, and communication skills - all essential for entrepreneurial success.

At e-Fest, the format is uniquely engaging because every team is accompanied by an academic advisor - a faculty or staff member who travels with them. While students dive into the challenge, advisors join a networking happy hour that connects educators and special guests who share a commitment to student entrepreneurship. Then, the advisors themselves become the judges.

In a round-robin, pitch-frenzy format, student teams have just three minutes to present their solutions to groups of judges. This approach not only showcases student creativity in an energizing environment but also strengthens faculty-student connections and fosters authentic relationships between advisors, mentors, and the broader entrepreneurial community.

What Makes the e-Fest Innovation Challenge Stand Out



- **Fresh Connections, New Ideas:** Teams are intentionally formed with students who don't know one another, mirroring the cross-disciplinary collaboration that drives real-world innovation.
- **Faculty and Guest Engagement:** Advisors and guests connect in a fun, professional setting while supporting their students, making the challenge as valuable for educators as it is for students.
- **Accessible and Fun:** The challenge creates a lively, memorable experience that benefits students, faculty, donors, and organizers alike.

Over the years, these qualities have made the Innovation Challenge not only a defining feature of e-Fest but also a replicable model for campuses everywhere.

Adapting the Model for Your Campus

To make it simple for other educators, program leaders, and competition organizers to bring this model to their own students, this article includes a free Innovation Challenge Teaching Module, which you can access through these downloadable documents above:

- How to Host an Innovation Challenge Guide
- Student handout for brainstorming, prototyping, and pitching
- Judge's handout with judging guidelines and coaching prompts
- Sample Challenge Topics
- Quick-Start Organizer Checklist

The module can be adapted for a single class, a weekend event, or a campus-wide competition - whether you're preparing undergraduates or graduate students to take the next step in their entrepreneurial journeys. It also creates a unique avenue for stakeholders and donors to engage with students in meaningful ways, deepening investment in your program while celebrating the power of student innovation.

Building an Ecosystem of Innovation

The Innovation Challenge is more than a competition - it's a catalyst that embodies the spirit of e-Fest®: students forging new connections, generating ideas that

matter, and engaging with a community of judges, mentors, faculty, and donors who are invested in their success.

In partnership with EIX and the Schulze School of Entrepreneurship at the University of St. Thomas, and with the generous support of the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, the Innovation Challenge is part of a larger event designed to equip students with the skills, confidence, and entrepreneurial mindset to innovate at every stage of their journey. Our hope is that this resource will empower you to bring the model to life on your campus, inspire innovation among your students, and contribute to a growing network of educators committed to advancing entrepreneurship together.

References

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