

e-Fest 2026 Crowns National Champion

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A student-founded biotech from Michigan State University captured the top award, as 25 undergraduate teams competed for \$250,000.

MINNEAPOLIS – After three days of pitching, mentorship, and high-stakes competition, e-Fest® 2026 has officially crowned its national champions.

In a milestone 10th anniversary year, the nation's top undergraduate entrepreneurs took the stage at the University of St. Thomas—bringing bold ideas, real traction, and a relentless drive to build something meaningful.

From an initial pool of nearly 170 student ventures representing more than 65 colleges and universities, 25 teams advanced to Minneapolis. Over the course of the weekend, those teams refined their stories, tested their business models, and engaged directly with experienced entrepreneurs, investors, and industry leaders.

The result: a group of founders who didn't just pitch ideas—but demonstrated the clarity, conviction, and market understanding required to build real companies.

A Weekend That Builds Founders

Throughout the weekend, teams participated in multiple rounds of competition, hands-on mentoring, and professional development sessions designed to push their thinking and sharpen their execution.

They were challenged to clearly define the problems they are solving, articulate why their solutions matter, and back up their vision with strong business fundamentals, hallmarks of the ventures that consistently stand out to judges and investors.

As e-Fest celebrates its 10-year anniversary, the 2026

competition awarded a record \$250,000 in cash prizes, recognizing ventures that combine innovation, strong market potential, and the ability to create meaningful impact.

But this milestone year is also about recognizing how e-Fest came to be.

The competition traces its roots back to EIX (Entrepreneur & Innovation Exchange), the platform where the idea for e-Fest first took shape. What began as a vision to make high-quality entrepreneurship education more accessible has grown into a national stage where student founders can test ideas, gain real feedback, and build momentum.

As part of this year's 10-year celebration, e-Fest recognized three individuals whose leadership helped turn that original vision into what it is today.

- **David Deeds, PhD** — Founder of e-Fest and Executive Editor of EIX; Professor, Schulze Endowed Chair in Entrepreneurship, and Director of the Morrison Center at the University of St. Thomas. Recognized for creating e-Fest and establishing it as a national platform for student entrepreneurs.
- **James Beal** — Co-Founder of e-Fest and former Managing Editor of EIX; Adjunct Faculty in Data Analytics at the University of St. Thomas. Recognized for helping launch and build the early foundation of both EIX and e-Fest.
- **Jessica Cooley** — Former Executive Director of the Schulze School of Entrepreneurship; Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Students at the University of St. Thomas. Recognized for her leadership in growing and scaling e-Fest and expanding its impact on students and the broader community.

Together, their work helped shape e-Fest into what it is



today—a national platform where student founders can test ideas, build skills, and connect with a broader entrepreneurial community.

The Championship Round

The weekend culminated in the Schulze Entrepreneurship Challenge Championship Round, where the top five teams took the stage to deliver final presentations and answer questions from this [distinguished panel of judges](https://efest.biz/judges-bios) (https://efest.biz/judges-bios) :

- Justin Hall, CEO, Augment
- Ryan Kruiuzenga, Partner, Arthur Ventures
- Nik Larsen, CEO, Oxbow Industries
- Tami Reller, Executive Chair, Duly health and Care
- Dr. Sanjay Singh, Chief Clinical Executive, Allina Health
- Vik Uppal, CEO, Mavik Capital Management (unable to attend)

After careful deliberation, the judges selected the winners of e-Fest 2026.

Schulze Entrepreneurship Challenge

Grand Champion | \$50,000:

BioMex | Michigan State University: Madhav Aggarwal and Tanvi Gadamsetti

BioMex is a material-tech healthcare company developing BioMesh X®, the world's first self-stabilizing surgical mesh engineered with proprietary polymer architecture to improve tissue integration, reduce complications, and enhance healing outcomes. Built on patented material science, BioMex is redefining how implants interact with the human body across surgical applications.

Adviser: Paul Jaques

Runner Up | \$30,000:

Bobica Bars | Rowan University: Justin Iannelli, and Harrison Nastasi

Bobica Bars is a health-forward snack company bringing the powerful benefits of smoothie bowl superfoods to consumers in a convenient, shelf-stable, first-to-market superfood–glazed granola bar.

Adviser: Greg Payton

Third Place | \$20,000:

GG Entertainment | Florida Gulf Coast University: Carl Cearc and Bella Logsdon

GG Entertainment aims to bring tabletop games to every table, every night, and everyone; with games that are designed around real social gatherings. Through our "simple but infinite" design philosophy, we are building an ecosystem of social experiences that are easy to start, impossible to outgrow, and built to last.

Adviser: Scott Kelly

Fourth Place | \$15,000:

Crystal-XG | Clemson University: David Floyd and Lukas Garcia

Crystal-XG is a predictive streamlining service that leverages machine learning trained on large-scale experimental data to guide faster, greener crystal synthesis.

Adviser: Carlos Garcia

Fifth Place | \$10,000

GuLP | California State University, Sacramento: Ben Duong, Brayon Mejia Nunez, and Umang Vadhar

GuLP is an AI-powered communication app built for nonspeaking and partially speaking autistic children who process language in phrases rather than traditional word-by-word systems, making communication more authentic and easier to access.

Adviser: Cameron Law

Special Recognition Awards

Social Impact Award

The Social Impact Award (\$10,000) honors ventures creating meaningful change through global reach or social impact. Teams are judged on their potential to compete internationally and address critical social challenges.

LowCostomy | Duke University: Jessica Alvarez and John Claude Shaffer

LowCostomy provides a medical-grade, locally-

manufactured alternative to expensive imported ostomy bags, addressing a critical health gap for 60,000 annual patients in Sub-Saharan Africa. By utilizing a Duke-validated bio-adhesive and reusable design, we reduce costs by 95% to restore patient dignity and enable immediate workforce re-entry.

Advisers: Jeffrey Glass and Ibrahim Mohedas

Ready for Market Award

The Ready for Market Award (10,000) showcases teams' ability to connect with a wider audience by crafting a compelling 45-second video that highlights their venture, the problem they're solving, and how they're reaching their market.

Fuller Radiance | Buena Vista University: Cody Fuller, Puritie Smith, and Alyssa Jordan

Fuller Radiance utilizes 3D printing to create custom lamps for the memorial market where personalized products have not modernized with the recent technological improvements.

Advisor: Katherine Cota

Brand Builder Award

The Brand Builder Award (\$5,000 – First Place | \$2,500 – Second Place) showcases teams' ability to connect with a wider audience by crafting a compelling 60-second video that highlights their venture, the problem they're solving, and how they're reaching their market.

First Place: TOZ Hair Care | Drexel University: Isabella Passero and Ireoluwa Otegbade

TOZ Hair Care is redefining textured haircare through natural formulations, measurable performance, and engineered simplicity. By replacing routine overload with validated moisture-retention systems, we deliver consistent, science-backed results built for long-term trust and multi-generational use.

Advisor: Scott Quitel

Second Place: SYP | University of South Florida: Ethan Baker, Marco Tamburini, Fedor Vuksanovic, and Mathis Haugen

SYP is the wearable for your water bottle. The first system to integrate hydration intelligence into elite

sports.

Advisor: Tim Ernest

Pitch Slam!

The Finalist Teams arrived at The University of St. Thomas on Thursday April 24th and kicked off the weekend with the Pitch Slam! No slides, no props, no videos, just a microphone and 90-seconds to pitch their business ventures. Dick Schulze was in attendance and able to hear the business pitches and help decide the winners.

1st Place - \$10,000: Cognition IQ, University of St. Thomas: Olivia Keller, Sam Mahannah, Ilham Mohamud, and Breanna Ranglall

CognitionIQ is a portable VR-based system that uses eye tracking and a NASA-developed algorithm to objectively measure brain function in minutes. It replaces subjective concussion testing with fast, accurate cognitive assessments that trainers and clinicians can use in real time.

Advisor: Jay Ebben

2nd Place - \$5,000: BounceBack Pickle, Florida Gulf Coast University: Dillon Rosenthal and William Zhao

BounceBack Pickle is the world's first closed-loop recycling service for pickleball. We are on a mission to eliminate the ever-growing 770,000 lbs of broken pickleball waste sent to landfills every year by turning it into the world's first 100% recycled pickleballs.

Advisor: Scott Kelly

3rd Place - \$2,500: Crack'd Up, University of Wisconsin, Madison: Nik Gandhi and Aiden Silverstein

Crack'd Up is the first line of flavored liquid eggs. By mixing whole liquid eggs with all-natural spices and seasonings, we have 4 tasty flavors: Buttermilk Pancake, French Toast, Spicy Chipotle, and Garlic Parmesan.

Advisor: Jon Eckhardt

More Than a Competition

e-Fest is designed to do more than identify winners, it's

built to develop founders.

Across the weekend, students connected with mentors, built relationships with peers from across the country, and gained insight from people who have built and funded ventures themselves.

They also learned what it takes to stand out: clear storytelling, deep customer understanding, and the ability to communicate both vision and viability, skills that extend far beyond the competition stage.

Relive the Weekend

From first pitches to final awards, e-Fest 2026 brought together energy, creativity, and high-stakes competition across three days in Minneapolis.

Watch the highlights from the weekend and experience the moments that defined this year's competition:

Watch the e-Fest 2026 Highlight Reel:

[Link to video](#)

Looking Ahead

As the 10th anniversary of e-Fest comes to a close, one thing is clear: the future of entrepreneurship is already being built by the students who took the stage this weekend.

And for many of them, this is just the beginning.

To celebrate a decade of student founders, mentors, and builders who have shaped e-Fest, we've captured the journey in a special 10-year anniversary video—highlighting the people, moments, and impact that continue to define this community.

[Watch Our 10-Year Anniversary Video Here](#)

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwjA_XmZj-k)