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Brown, Edwards, Matros, McCown and Studdard win 11th annual Ouachita Business Plan Competition

By Rachel Moreno

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark.—Ouachita Baptist University students Olivia Brown, Savannah Edwards, Brandon Matros, Sheldon McCown and Allison Studdard received first place and a \$4,000 cash prize for their business proposal, ImmunoSense, during the 11th annual OBU Business Plan Competition held Thursday, Dec. 5. The competition, hosted by the Hickingbotham School of Business, allows students from various disciplines to present their entrepreneurial ideas to a panel of business professionals for evaluation and cash prizes.

“We started this competition over ten years ago in hopes of infusing the campus with a spirit of entrepreneurship,” said Bryan McKinney, dean of the Hickingbotham School of Business. “The results of this year’s competition are satisfying because teams from across campus thrived.”

Brown is a senior biology major from North Little Rock, Ark.; Edwards is a senior biomedical sciences major from Searcy, Ark.; Matros is a senior finance major from Arkadelphia, Ark.; McCown is a senior biology major from Nacogdoches, Texas; and Studdard is a senior biomedical sciences major from Benton, Ark. The ImmunoSense team was advised by Dr. Blake Johnson, Ouachita assistant professor of biology.

According to McCown, ImmunoSense was the result of a class project. In his histology class, Dr. Johnson challenged students to create a test that would fill a current gap in the medical field.

“Type 1 Diabetes is a growing issue, and there is currently a lack of early detection tools, so we began looking for ways to create an early detection test,” McCown said. “Our test detects the auto-antibodies that cause a patient’s own immune system to attack the pancreas; these auto-antibodies are present in the body years before the disease reaches dangerous stages. Current tests detect the disease once the insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas have already been destroyed, but our test allows for detection of Type 1 Diabetes in its beginning stages, prior to pancreatic destruction.

"We are extremely excited to have won the competition," McCown continued. "We have all worked extremely hard in developing this business plan, and it's encouraging to have our work pay off."

"I always look forward to these Business Plan Competitions," McKinney said. "The academic theory students are learning in class integrates with real-world application, and it's a tremendous experience for all of us. ... And, I think the judges enjoy coming back to campus and sharing wisdom with our students."

TailGame earned second place in the competition. TailGame, which proposes saving tailgaters both the time and hassle of setting up and tearing down before and after a sporting event, was presented by Josh Lantzsch, a senior finance and business administration/entrepreneurship major from Rogers, Ark., and Spencer Sutterfield, a senior business administration/management major from Greenbrier, Ark. They were advised by Ouachita's Dr. Justin Keeler, assistant professor of business administration, and received a \$3,000 cash prize.

The OBU Business Competition is "one of the most memorable experiences I've had," said Lantzsch, who also competed and placed in the 2018 event. "It's a fun way to make money, but especially to gain experience talking to companies and getting their feedback on your idea.

"Winning second with TailGame was icing on the cake because, for me, it's more about the experience," he said.

Michael Neathery, a senior biology major from San Antonio, Texas; Beau Pennington, a junior biomedical sciences major from Bee Branch, Ark.; Tyler Riebock, a junior biology major from Rockwall, Texas; Catie Shirley, a senior biology major from Wylie, Texas; and Kyla Soden, a senior biology major from Cabot, Ark.; received third place for their business proposal, Kainos Diagnostics. They also were advised by Dr. Blake Johnson and received a \$2,000 cash prize.

Kainos Diagnostics develops inexpensive tests for early detection of neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, that revolutionizes treatment and improves the overall quality of life for those diagnosed.

"We are developing the miMEMORY test, a blood test for the early detection and diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease," Neathery said. "This test could be implemented in annual adult check-ups to help physicians diagnose Alzheimer's in their patients before symptoms of the disease set in. ... As we looked at peer-reviewed, published research on the detection of Alzheimer's, we found that early detection of Alzheimer's via a blood test is possible and would be extremely convenient and helpful in medicine today.

"Winning third place in the 2019 Business Plan Competition was a great feeling, not only because it validated how important our idea is and the value of a product like this in the current market, but because it gives us the chance to continue promoting and refining Kainos Diagnostics and the miMEMORY test," he continued.

These three teams will advance to compete against the winners of Henderson State University's competition during the OBU/HSU Business Plan Competition, which will take place in February 2020. Ouachita's Business Plan Competition is open to students from any discipline. Students are advised by faculty as they develop and practice the presentation of their business plan.

In recent years, Ouachita students also have competed and placed in the statewide Governor's Cup Business Competition, the same competition that Ouachita's is modeled after.

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