Tulane nurtures student entrepreneurs at Spark Hours

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Alex Leiman (second from left) and Jonah Bornstein (center), founders of a late-night breakfast-food delivery service for the Tulane campus, won the Spark Hours Pizza Pitch in February. They are pictured with alumna Laura Beauchamp (far left), Robert Lalka, executive director of the Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (second from right), and alumna Tsetsa Dankova Rosensteel. Both alumnae are members of the Tulane Association of Business Alumni, which supports the competition. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Tulane is nurturing tomorrow's entrepreneurs with an open-format program called Spark Hours, which will continue throughout the spring term online via videoconferencing and as regularly scheduled.

Spark Hours are open to any Tulane student who has an interest in entrepreneurship. During the three weekly sessions, students show up to meet other budding entrepreneurs, find colleagues in given specialties or get feedback on their projects. They might meet alumni mentors or have a roundtable discussion on entrepreneurship topics.

The core of the program is the dedicated time for student interaction and networking.

"It's intended to be a safe space," said Senior Program Coordinator Timekia Mallery. "They really do take advantage of the networking and sharing of ideas."

The Spark Hours incubator is housed at the [Albert LePage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation](#) at the A.B. Freeman School of Business. Mallery said some of the students who attend Spark Hours already have revenue-generating startups, while others are still forming or refining their ideas. Students need not have a fully formed idea at all; they can attend Spark Hours just to talk about entrepreneurship or to find a startup whose needs match their own skill sets.

"Spark Hours were my first step in the New Orleans entrepreneurship community," said senior Joel Hochman, founder of Mind, an app that helps users and healthcare providers track mental health patterns and share data. "The Lepage Center connected me with legal resources and some truly amazing mentors."

"Spark Hours is the place our team gets dedicated time and mentorship to scale our startup," said law student Kwasi Agyeman, founder of Pax Analytics, which helps global mission-based organizations manage data.

One of the highlights of Spark Hours is Pizza Pitch Fridays, in which students practice their presentation skills without the pressure of having perfected an idea or business plan. These pitches are accommodating to business beginners, unlike some pitch competitions that require participants to present a venture that is in an advanced stage of development.

Sponsored by Tulane Association of Business Alumni, the contest awards winners of the four preliminary rounds $750 each; they go on to compete for a $2,000 grand prize.

"It's a place for you to actually showcase your idea so you can get some feedback from the judges," Mallery said. "It motivates students at the idea phase to take their venture to the next level."

The Pizza Pitch finalists compete for the 2020 grand prize on April 17 by submitting videos online, but everyone walks away from Spark Hours a winner in that they find support from their peers and mentorship from other entrepreneurs.

"Spark Hours provided me with priceless feedback about engineering and design regarding a possible idea I had," added Christina Goldstein, a finance major who originally came to Spark Hours to work on the college tour app StuView. "This opportunity was extremely helpful and productive."

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Timekia Mallery

Jonah Bornstein and Alex Leiman, who founded Tulane SexyCakes, make their presentation on Pizza Pitch Friday, a program of the Lepage Center's Spark Hours. Bornstein and Leiman will go on to compete for the grand prize in April. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)