



## Sustainability

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# UNH Student Entrepreneur Reflects on 2020 Social Venture Innovation Challenge Experience

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We caught up with Jason Plant, team

member of HydroPhos Solutions, [2020 Social Venture Innovation Challenge \(SVIC\) winner](#).



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*Your team project, HydroPhos Solutions, won the distinction of “Most Impact Potential” and was the first place Audience Choice. What was your experience with the [SVIC](#) and what has been its impact on growing your team’s idea?*

The SVIC is actually the reason why I came up with HydroPhos Solutions! Initially, I wanted to enter into the competition to gain entrepreneurial experience and apply the concepts of social entrepreneurship to a real idea. After I shared my vision for HydroPhos Solutions with my team of 5, we went through weeks of research on the idea, refining and reiterating the idea after each successive week. We enlisted the help of many coaches and mentors (which I strongly recommend to anyone that wants to grow their idea and succeed in the competition). Our biggest mentor was Ian Grant, the Executive Director of the E-Center. Ian is still a huge help to us in growing our idea into what could become an operational venture. Prior to the final round presentation, we got help from a presentation coach who perfectly supported us in creating our pitch for the final round. We practiced this pitch for hours on end so that we could perfectly deliver it, and we also did a ton of extra research and decision-making about the business to be able to answer what we anticipated the judges' questions would be. In this way, the SVIC also trained us to expect to work hard to succeed in the venture; the ability to work hard on an extracurricular pursuit like this is invaluable and has helped me personally in creating my publication, [Venture Time](#), and pursuing many other entrepreneurial competition opportunities with HydroPhos Solutions. The SVIC is, in my opinion, the perfect place to start if you want to become an entrepreneur during your time at UNH because it frames the ideation process in such a way that you must create an idea that not only can become profitable but can deliver real social/environmental value and solve a real pain point. The deliverables for the SVIC are well-gearred towards creating a social venture, as they address both the impact and profit components that are essential to sustainable, innovative, and strong business.

Since beginning the SVIC, HydroPhos Solutions has gone from a mere idea to a far more robust, tangible project that we can see becoming a true operational venture given the necessary additions to the team and capital. We went through many pivots during the process; initially, the idea was to siphon excess phosphorus from agricultural runoff in rivers

that feed into hydroelectric plants. However, through research, we discovered that 54% of eutrophication (the environmental problem we sought to address) was actually caused by wastewater treatment plant discharge. So, we fundamentally changed the business model to filter phosphorus instead from wastewater treatment plants, which turned out to be a bigger market with more established technology to apply to this task. The SVIC helped motivate us to put in the extra work to make this change; because the competition is set up to reward both more profitable and more impactful ideas, we saw it as a no-brainer to make the pivot even though it entailed a lot more time and energy put into research and into creating the deliverables. Now, this pivot and many others after it have immensely benefited our success in other competitions.

The SVIC was also great in providing us with an experience we could take into other entrepreneurship competitions; we are now finalists in Maurice Prize, semi-finalists in Smith College's Draper Competition, and we submitted our second round submission for the Holloway Competition – all thanks to the early experience we got in SVIC.

*From your experience with SVIC in combination with your Entrepreneurship and Finance focus in your Business Administration major, how would you describe the ways that sustainability can be integrated into business?*

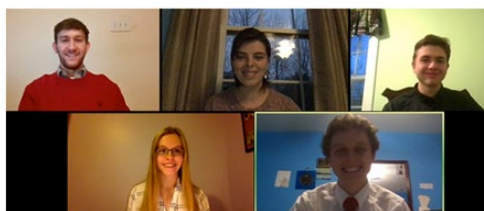
I think my education at UNH has perfectly exemplified how sustainability can be integrated into business. From day one in Paul College, we are taught that businesses exist to solve problems and that the more effective they are at solving problems, the more likely they are to succeed. With that perspective in mind, baking social/environmental benefits into the core of the business model is one of the best ways to build a business that will last in the long-term. The way I tend to think about it is that you want your company to have inseparable positive externalities. HydroPhos, for example, cannot exist without helping to eliminate eutrophication and combat the phosphorus shortage that threatens our food supply. If it's not doing those things, it's also failing to

bring in the profits it needs to survive. Thus, the continuity of the company depends not only on its ability to generate profits but on its ability to create a positive impact, because these two goals are inseparable in our business model. My finance experience has helped me acknowledge the need for profitability in a company; a company does need to be profitable to survive. However, companies that meet a *real* dire need are going to be profitable for longer and have more sustained, organic growth than those that are short-term money-grabs. This is why, as an angel investor at the Rines Angel Fund at UNH, we love BioTech companies. What addresses a more real, dire need than the need for health and the fighting of diseases and ailments? Investors have recognized the value in BioTech by giving these companies enough capital to clear the average \$1 billion hurdle to obtain FDA approval. Think about how many social venture ideas could become a reality, and scale both their profits and their impact, once investors begin to realize the long-term return potential that social ventures in all industries have to offer. UNH's own endowment fund is proof enough that ESG investing is outperforming. Once investors as a wider community begin to work together with and support social entrepreneurs, there is no limit to the ways in which sustainability can be integrated into business.

*For students who might be interested in SVIC or other entrepreneurial opportunities, how would you describe your project trajectory? What was the idea process like for creating HydroPhos Solutions and how did you and your team collaborate to leverage it from an idea to a more robust project?*

Initially, the idea for HydroPhos Solutions stemmed from my brief introduction to the problem of eutrophication in an ecology class I took for the Discovery

Program. I knew I wanted to create an idea that addressed a real problem, and this was the first problem that I really got to thinking about solving. I knew eutrophication was caused by excess nutrients in the



water, so my first thought was that it would solve the problem to remove the nutrients. It seemed to become too systemic of a problem once eutrophication had already taken effect, to remove nutrients directly from the water. So, I looked at the root causes of eutrophication and saw that agricultural runoff was one of the biggest causes. So, the initial idea was to filter phosphorus out of rivers that carried the excess nutrients to stiller bodies of water like lakes, by leveraging hydroelectric plants that the water was already passing through. My team for the SVIC quickly grew from Daisy Burns and I, to a team of the maximum allowed size (5). After we added Derek Long, Katie Remeis, and Matt Oriente, we got to work researching how the idea could work. We came up with a long list of questions that we thought needed to be answered about the company, including market size, potential technologies we could use, etc. Each person answered 1-3 questions per week and we met at least once a week to go over the results of our research. Starting this way was a great way for us to gain a lot of knowledge about the market and industry we were getting into before making any major decisions about how our business would work. We went through several pivots in our idea as a result of this research, but the biggest was the switch to preventing eutrophication through wastewater treatment plant discharge, rather than through the aforementioned hydroelectric applications. We all agreed that this was the best way for our idea to go forward, but it did entail many more weeks of research to refine the different path we were taking. After we finished our research, we got to work on the deliverables. With the help of Ian Grant from the E-Center, we went through several iterations of our written deliverable until we felt it perfectly represented our concept and its potential impact and profitability. Finally, we spent a whole weekend together working on our video submission, going over all of the aspects of the idea critical to our success in the competition.

By the end of this process, I was incredibly grateful for having a big, extremely motivated team to share the workload with. Each of us contributed our own unique ideas to the project that made it successful and without each and every team member's insights and contributions,

we would not be where we are today. I highly recommend putting together a big team of motivated, collaboration-oriented students. It splits up the workload of the competition nicely, but most importantly, you get to build on more peoples' ideas to refine your business idea into its best representation. I also highly recommend doing a lot of upfront research before you start making the deliverables; if your idea is backed up by research, it is going to do a lot better because it has the validation of the scientific and/or business community. Then, judges don't just have to take your word that your idea will succeed; they can take the word of industry experts. The last thing we did that really helped us succeed was pivoting the idea. Many people view startup ideas as set in stone, but in reality, they change and adapt to new circumstances (like COVID) or in response to new findings (as we did when we found wastewater was a better application for our idea). Pivoting is a critical skill in building an idea, so if you find yourself thinking your idea would be better if you made a significant change to it, don't fret! This just means you're going through the process correctly. Virtually no startup evolves exactly as it was initially planned to, so don't be afraid to make big changes if you believe they will improve the idea or make it better in application.

*Along with your SVIC accolades, you have also been a [Changemaker Fellow](#). How has this program intersected with your studies and other co-curricular pursuits to enhance your understanding of sustainable innovation?*

The Changemaker Fellowship has been an invaluable addition to my portfolio of experiences at UNH. Firstly, being in the first cohort of the program has given me some entrepreneurial experience in that we as the first cohort are helping build out the program and define what each year in the program will look like for those that follow us. We have had opportunities to brainstorm ideas and try some of them out ourselves, with extensive feedback being the cornerstone of how we improve the program over time and iterate based on the first cohort's experiences. Secondly, the Changemaker Fellowship has improved my knowledge of

sustainability concepts. While my curriculum at Paul College has been a great introduction to sustainability and has given me a depth of knowledge of business's part in furthering sustainability, the science and non-business addressal of sustainability issues is something the Changemaker Fellowship has given me without having to take extra classes or add another major or minor. In particular, the first-year content gives students an excellent understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and all of the different ways businesses, NGOs, and governments are working towards achieving these goals. The Changemaker Fellowship has also been a great way to meet other students in pursuit of applying sustainability to their respective fields. Again, this has furthered my understanding of sustainability and in particular, has helped give me experience working in a multidisciplinary fashion to address issues. This coalescence of our various knowledge bases, skills, and experiences has led to incredibly fruitful learning opportunities and new ideas for how to collaborate to apply sustainable innovation in a variety of ways. The multidisciplinary exposure that the Changemaker Fellowship gives us is a perfect simulation of how these problems need to be addressed in the real world, so that aspect of the program has been particularly rewarding to experience.

*With the combination of all of your interests and activities, it seems like you've engaged in a lot of collaborative work. How have these pursuits helped you build a community at UNH? Can you describe your experience with community building and your interactions with other like-minded students in this way so far?*

I think that pursuing a wide variety of opportunities involving collaboration has allowed me to build a community for myself at UNH. I got a great start at UNH through the Paul Scholars Program; this is where I met most of my now-best friends at UNH and almost everyone on my HydroPhos team. The program immediately immersed us students into feeling comfortable engaging with other like-minded students and applying different individuals' strengths towards a

common goal. The Paul Scholars Program also offers mentorship opportunities and in taking advantage of this, I have developed an incredible relationship with my Paul Scholar mentee. I serve as a resource to him as he pursues many opportunities that I have already taken advantage of, but I have also learned so much from him on a variety of topics. The program also gave me great relationships with faculty and staff early on in my college career, which helped me to be comfortable asking for help with projects and comfortable talking to experienced professionals about things I am working on. Starting college off with such a well-developed support system was incredibly helpful in building out my community at UNH. As I mentioned earlier, the Changemaker Fellowship was another great opportunity for me to meet other like-minded students. Many of these students, I never would have met without the fellowship because our majors and fields are so different that we may never have crossed paths. The Changemaker Fellowship, like the Paul Scholars Program, has an incredibly supportive atmosphere in which I feel like I could reach out to anyone – no matter how well I know them – and they would be happy to help me with something I am working on. As HydroPhos Solutions grows, this multidisciplinary community will become increasingly important in sourcing new team members and learning about diverse topics that may be relevant to our project. Lastly, I have had the pleasure of being an Associate at the Rines Angel Fund for the past year. The Rines Fund is another group of incredibly intelligent and motivated students, with a fun and supportive culture. At the Fund, I have met many of Paul College's most prominent leaders and learned an incredible amount about what drives value in companies as well as the many ways in which companies mitigate risk and execute on their business models. From each of these groups, I have listened to others with an open mind and have learned an incredible amount from each person I have had the pleasure of getting to know. By pursuing a wide variety of collaboration-centric experiences at UNH, I now have a wide range of people I can draw on when building teams, asking for advice on projects, or pursuing new opportunities. I particularly love to cross threads; for example, I have served as a resource to Changemaker



Fellows interested in joining the Rines Fund. I have also composed teams of people who did not know each other, but knew me through the various groups I am a part of. Connecting these dots and seeing new people working together excellently has been a great experience, and by continuing to do this, I am building a community of motivated people that can draw on each other's experiences, expand on each other's ideas, and work together towards shared ideals.

Interested in entering the 2021 SVIC? Learn more [here](#).

Submissions due November 8, 2021

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