

Young Changemakers Take Center Stage

UNH hosts sustainability challenge for high school students

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UNH held its Community Changemaker Challenge on May 13 for New England high schools, hosting teams from five schools via Zoom in a showcase of creative ideas and solutions to a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues affecting communities worldwide.

The event is a sibling to UNH's [Social Venture Innovation Challenge \(SVIC\)](#), a college-level competition founded in 2013 that has become a signature event annually at the university.

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Queries from high school teachers and students about participating in the SVIC had multiplied over the years, inspiring the creation of a track specifically for high school entrants.

“It’s very exciting to see such a range of facilitators looking to give their students a chance to apply theory to practice,” says Fiona Wilson, deputy chief sustainability officer and director of the Sustainability Institute at UNH. “As a public land grant university, UNH has long been distinguished by its strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of the state, and a commitment to serving the public good. The Community Changemaker Challenge is a way to fulfill the university’s mission, allowing UNH to create an annual platform to engage with and inspire student entrepreneurs from across the state and region.”

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The program was led by Faina Bukher, program director of the [Changemaker Collaborative](#), and was supported by Sawyer Rogers, a graduating senior completing his degrees in political science and history, as well as Brent Powell, a visiting faculty fellow leading a multi-year research project focused on the learning that emerges from the Community Changemaker Challenge as part of his education doctorate program at Northeastern University.

Participating schools in the event included Exeter High School, Phillips Exeter Academy, Oyster River High School, Portsmouth High School and 2nd Nature Academy. Teams made presentations to a panel of 10 judges, a group that included seven UNH alumni and Matthew Oriente '23, co-founder of HydroPhos Solutions (which won the SVIC in 2020).

The students focused on creating solutions to a wide range of societal challenges, with projects touching on better ways to address poverty, encouraging the use of public transportation, improving access to clean drinking water, promoting the use of outdoor space and the creation of a sustainable, biomorphic tire.

“The takeaway for me is that social innovation can begin anywhere and come from anyone with passion to solve a problem,” says Charlie French '08G, one of the judges and department head of community and economic development at UNH Cooperative Extension.

Fellow judge Jono Anzalone, executive director of The Climate Initiative, adds “These emerging leaders are inspiring.”

The students were vying for first, second or third place in a pair of parallel tracks. Many of the participants said they were excited to work on projects around issues they are passionate about, and that the competition provided a creative outlet beyond classroom work and was a positive experience overall.

“It's incredible how much passion everyone has for the issues they are trying to solve,” says Oyster River High School student Dillon Labonte of 120 Minute Movement, the first-place winner in one of the tracks. “It certainly gives me hope for the future of our community.”

Others were inspired by the opportunity to create change and encouraged by the outcome of collaborative brainstorming.

Portsmouth High School students Calli Wright and Kyra Brummage of Girls Grow noted that “all it takes is one idea.”

“Anyone can make a big impact on a person's or community's life,” says Portsmouth High School student Cooper Roy of Early Learning Daycare.

Community Changemaker Challenge Winners (two parallel tracks):

1st place: 120 Minute Movement

Dillon Labonte of Oyster River High School (Promotes the use of outdoor spaces using the 120 minute threshold concept.)

1st place: Terra Tire

Sam Creelan, Duck Garschina, Nathan Khuu, Sachin Shetty of Phillips Exeter Academy (Sustainable and long-lasting biomorphic tire.)

2nd place: PotaBarrel

Maggie Chang, Jaansi Patel, Ariana Thornton, Riya Tyagi of Phillips Exeter Academy (A new and innovative water filtration system that seeks to mitigate the global water crisis in a cost-effective and eco-friendly manner.)

2nd place: Team Crypto

Ethan Jha, Sunghyun “Hannah” Park, Jack Farah of Phillips Exeter Academy (A mining computer that works to cut down on energy usage by using a system called Proof of Stake and running via renewable energy.)

3rd place: Charity Consortium

Dhruv Penumatsa of Exeter High School (A group of companies that donate products, items or services to people in poverty all around the world as opposed to monetary donations.)

3rd place: New England Bus Service (NEEBS)

Joey Hanlon, Ronan Gleeson, Shane Gleeson, Ryan Mahaney of 2nd Nature Academy (A privatized public transport bus that is fully electric to reduce carbon emissions. In order to entice people to actually use the bus, we offer incentives as well as making it more convenient for consumers.)

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