The Acara Challenge and Acara Fellowship
As part of the Institute on the Environment (IonE), Acara’s mission is to facilitate the next generation of changemakers to design solutions to the world’s toughest environmental and social challenges. In order to effectively address the global challenges in the 21st Century, we must go beyond the traditional university boundaries and educational approaches.

The University of Minnesota Acara Challenge is a grand challenge entrepreneurship competition that recognizes and rewards students developing impact venture solutions to the world's most pressing social and environmental problems. Students can win an Acara Fellowship (funding up to $5000) to pilot their proposed solution.

The competition is open to full time and part time undergraduate, graduate and professional students enrolled at all campuses of the University of Minnesota. Applications may come from an individual or a team. There is no limit on the number of team members.

Award Details

The Acara Challenge aims to help student entrepreneurs develop and launch their impact venture ideas. Teams enter the competition at various stages of maturity. Innovation is a journey, not just a sudden inspiration. As such, the Acara Challenge is deliberately set up not to provide just one big prize, but many smaller awards to help the best teams test their ideas for ventures. Teams can win up to $5000 in fellowship funds, and can also compete at the Acara Challenge reception for a “People’s Choice Award” of $500 (an award selected by the audience).

Eligible uses for the Fellowship Award Funding

- Project related travel and associated expenses (either within the US or abroad)
- Prototype supplies or general supplies to pilot / launch your venture
- Creating and implementing surveys / gathering data
- Hiring staff or paying service providers
- Registering your business
- Other expenses involved starting up the venture, subject to prior approval.

The funding is available for up to 12 months after date of award letter dispersal. If after nine months, there is still part of the award remaining, the award will be reviewed for continued support. Dependent on progress, and if any funds remain unused, the unused portion must be returned to the fellowship pool. It will be made available to other future
fellowship recipients. Acara cannot give you tax advice, but typically, funds used for reimbursements are untaxed, whereas salary and scholarship funding (both of which would go into your personal bank account) are taxed as income. Please note the University will not provide reimbursement for certain items (e.g., equipment or other items that the University does not feel it can purchase) and in those cases, you would need to receive the award as income and/or scholarship.

Post-Selection Requirements & Disbursement

Selected Fellows must submit a plan for how the fellowship will be used, and then submit a regular (quarterly) update to Acara and the fellowship donor(s) for a minimum of 1 year. The fellowship plan will be reviewed and updated with the recipient quarterly. Other regular social media updates (blogs, Facebook, websites, etc.) are strongly encouraged. Selected teams will receive an award letter confirming the award amount and process of fund disbursement. Funding will be released over time for project expense reimbursements, and will not be disbursed in a lump sum at the time of award. Teams must identify one person who will interact with Acara for financial reimbursements.

Application Process and Timeline

There are two categories for the Acara Challenge: domestic (ventures focused inside the United States) and international (ventures focused outside the United States). For ventures that include domestic and international components, students should select their category based on the venture’s primary focus.

To apply, please submit the following items to acara@umn.edu:

- **Tuesday, January 31, 2017, 5pm:** Application [Due-Please hold Thursday, 2/9 from 6-8 pm for the orientation in case you are selected as a finalist.]
- **Friday, February 3, 2017:** Possible interview with Acara Staff (if deemed necessary)
- **Tuesday, February 7, 2017:** Finalists announced

If selected to compete in the Acara Challenge:

- **Thursday, February 9, 2017, 6-8pm:** Orientation to Acara Challenge
- **February 9-22, 2017:** Review draft plans with Acara staff (optional)
- **Tuesday, February 14, 2017, 5pm:** 25 word Description (for website and competition program), please include department and anticipated graduation date of each team member as of February 2017
  - Example: Erin Kaysar, BS Civil Engineering 2018
- **Tuesday, February 21, 2017, 5pm:** Final Written Plans and Slide for Poster (set up for 2 x 3 ft)
- **By February 24, 2017.** Required one on one practice session with Fred, Leo or Megan.
• **Monday February 27, 2017, noon**: Final 10-minute and 2-minute pitch decks.

**Competition:**

• **Tuesday, February 28, 8 am-4 pm**: International Team Presentations (Each team presents for 10 minutes and responds to 15 minutes of questions from the judges): Learning and Environmental Sciences Building, R380 in St. Paul

• **Wednesday, March 1, 2017, 8 am-4 pm**: Domestic Team Presentations (Each team presents their 10 minute presentations and responds to 15 minutes of questions from the judges): Learning and Environmental Sciences Building, R380 in St. Paul

• **Thursday March 2, 2017, 5:30-8:30**: Acara Challenge Public Reception (Poster Session and 2 minute Pitches) and Awards Ceremony at McNamara Alumni Center on the East Bank, UMN – Twin Cities

**Judging Criteria**

The specific criteria, and their weighting, for the competition are:

• **20% - What is the problem?**
  - The problem is clearly articulated and is a clear social or environmental challenge.
  - The customer/community need has been clearly identified and validated with field research.

• **20% - What is the social impact?**
  - The venture has the potential to make an impact on a significant challenge.
  - A clearly defined and understood social value proposition.
  - A clearly defined and understood theory of change.
  - Clearly defined metrics

• **15% - What is your plan for making this a financially viable venture?**
  - The economic value proposition is clear and well defined.
  - The solution is well connected to the problem and is shown by prototypes or similar examples.
  - The solution is realistic and the implementation plan is complete and doable.
  - Customer and customer segment clearly defined and confirmed through research.
  - Validated that customers are willing to buy the product/service (do they want it, can they afford it, do they value it).

• **25% What is the plan for piloting the venture?**
  - Realistic plan and commitment to taking the next step to bring the proposed solution to a reality.
Realistic proposed budget and plan for $5000 fellowship funds.

- **10% - How does it scale?**
  - High projections of goods/services penetration and of people affected by use of said goods/services.
  - High estimate of potential social or environmental impact.

- **10% - Who is the team?**
  - Team has experience and skills to launch this venture.

**Initial Application - Due January 31, 5pm**

The initial application entry consists of a Google form with the following questions (1000 characters per answer, unless otherwise noted):

- What is the problem you are addressing (be as specific as possible)?
- What is your solution? (2000 characters)
- What’s innovative about your solution?
- How are you making an impact on a social or environmental problem?
- How will do you make money to sustain your project?
- What is your plan to test out your idea (describe your pilot plan)?
- What experience does each team member bring to this project? Describe your team and its commitment to the idea?

**Written Plan - Due February 21, 5pm**

The application consists of three parts: (1) A title page, (2) the main plan (5 - 10 pages), (3) an optional appendix (up to 5 pages)

The text should be single-spaced, with 1” borders. If teams wish to, they may also include an appendix to supplement the main application. Links to further documentation, such as videos or web sites may be included in the application but should not be an integral part of the application. Judges may or may not review the appendices and the outside documentation.

The **title page** should include the following:

- The title of your team or project;
- A one or two sentence summary of your idea;
- Contact information (name and email address) for each team member;
- Department and status of each team member as of February 2017
- A list of advisors or mentors (if any) and their affiliations;

The **main plan** should include the following:
• **Executive summary.** Description of problem you are addressing, your solution idea and characteristics that are most important. What is the impact of your solution and how can it be achieved? (Target length: 100 – 150 words.)

• **Problem statement.** Description of the problem and/or challenge you are addressing. Include both larger scale challenges and a specific problem your solution is addressing. It is important to clearly describe how you have identified this problem. How big of a problem is it? Does it impact many people? Is it a major challenge or just a minor annoyance? The problem (and solution) description should be understandable by a broader audience, not just a specialist in your area. Remember judges may not know much about the problem! Your application should clearly state what it is and how you have determined this is a real problem.

• **Solution description.** Be clear on how your solution works, how you have validated it, what's innovative about it, how it adds value, how it compares to other alternatives and why people will use it. Be sure to include the following:
  o Customer. Who is the customer for this solution and how have you validated what they want and need?
  o What is your solution and how does it work?
  o How is the problem solved now? What are competing solutions? Why is your solution better? Why will people (or companies or governments --- whomever your customer is) buy your solution? What is the value to them? Even if your solution isn’t a business per se, it has customers and they still have other choices. Be as specific as possible in your competitive analysis.
  o Innovative aspects of your solution. Don’t make judges hunt for this. Be clear about what the innovation is. It could be a technical breakthrough or a market or business model innovation. If your solution has Intellectual Property (IP) potential (patent, copyright or trademark), make sure you mention that fact in your document (but don’t disclose the IP itself).
  o Include more than just the technical aspects of your solution. What are the cultural, business, and economic issues and challenges around implementing your solution?
  o Solution validation. Have you developed and tested a prototype or pilot?
  o Overall market and technology trends supporting your idea.

• **Social or environmental impact.** How does what you are doing make a change?

• **Scaling business plan.**
  o Scale. That may not be global but it could be nationwide or statewide. The solution does not have to be for the United States. It could be anywhere in the world, but scale is important regardless of location. Clearly your first implementation or pilot is small scale but the potential should be there in your solution and plan to address a larger market.
  o Basic financial projections and objectives. Include underlying assumptions with profit and loss and break-even projections as appropriate.
● Market analysis. Competitive analysis, trends supporting your idea, what are current solutions, what are customers’ next best alternatives (including doing nothing), why hasn’t this solution been done before.
● Team description. A description of your team and why you are the right team to do this.
● Assumptions and risks. Every plan and solution has assumptions and risks inherent. Identify what are your biggest risks? How you will mitigate them? Also describe what are your assumptions? How you can validate them?
● Next steps for a pilot and further plans:

1. **Purpose of funds**: What would an Acara Fellowship enable you to do that you couldn't do now? Note: the intent of this award is to help make significant progress on your venture.
2. **Venture pilot plan**: How would you use the $5K award, specifically? Please outline the project objectives, key activities, timeline, intended milestones/outcomes, planned project expenses, and who incur the expenses. A table in the appendix outlining this information is acceptable. Additional research or documentation on specific costs (e.g., price quotes from vendors) may be appended beyond the two page limit.
3. **Outside funding**: What else are you doing to obtain funding? What other sources of funding have you secured to date or will you secure soon?
4. **Future plans**: How does working on your venture fit into your career plans?

Presentations

Finalists for the Acara Challenge will make two presentations: a 10 minute presentation on February 28 (International Division) or March 1 (Domestic Division) to a judging panel and a 2 minute presentation at the evening reception on March 2.

Finalists will do a 10 minute presentation to a panel of judges, followed by 15 minutes of Q&A. These presentations are open to the public and are also webcast. Details of what is expected in the presentation will be provided to finalists. The final awards will be based on the written plan, the presentation and the Q&A.

During the evening reception and award ceremony, each finalist team will also make a two minute presentation for the audience-who will choose one team from each Division to receive a $500 People’s Choice Award.

Eligibility

Applicants must be enrolled, degree-seeking students at the University of Minnesota.

Eligibility rules:
● At least one team member must be enrolled as a UMN student in Fall 2016 semester or Spring 2017 semester. This could be full or part time in graduate, undergraduate, or a professional school program. The application must clearly state the status of each team member.
● Students from a foreign university studying at the University of Minnesota under a formal exchange program are eligible to compete.
● Winning projects from previous years are not eligible. Individuals on a winning team may compete again, but only with a different project.
● There is no restriction on number of team members
● Advisors and mentors, and their affiliation, should be listed in the final written application. There is no restriction on their affiliation. They may be professors, industry mentors, fellow students or any other affiliation.
● If you are unsure of your status or have other questions regarding eligibility, contact Megan Voorhees (voorhees@umn.edu)

Questions

For more information contact Acara, or visit
http://environment.umn.edu/leadership/acara/competitions/acara-challenge/