

SIUE student, budding entrepreneur perfects skills through pitch competitions

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville School of Engineering senior Eli Ball is strengthening his entrepreneurial skills and making important professional connections through his involvement in local business pitch competitions.

In April, Ball earned second place in SIUE's "TheOther40" Business Plan Competition, earning \$3,000. That same month, he competed in Saint Louis University's Pitch & Catch Investor Pitch Deck Competition held at Busch Stadium.

"I am always on the hunt for opportunities to help me grow as a person and expand my business," Ball said.

The Rockford native is a computer science major and budding entrepreneur whose company Midway Spark creates interactive digital agents. His company seeks to "push the limits of human-machine interaction."

"Right now, we are working on a virtual tour guide for zoos," he explained. "The virtual tour guide will interact completely through voice and answer any question a guest has about the zoo. Zoos have trouble educating guests, because signs aren't very effective. Our product is both educational and engaging."

The business plan competitions challenged Ball and other participants to pitch their ideas to successful entrepreneurs and senior business leaders with the potential for gaining investment interest.

"What is great about SIUE's "TheOther40" and SLU's Pitch & Catch competition is they force you to distill your ideas into a short presentation," Ball explained. "It's not the easiest task, and I'm still not the best at it, but I definitely improved by competing. "TheOther40" also requires participants to write a business plan, which makes you consider not only whether your idea is exciting, but also if it is viable as a business."

Ball is slated to complete his degree in summer 2018. Upon graduation, he plans to expand Midway Spark into a full-fledged business and continue his studies in artificial intelligence and machine learning.

"Computer science is a unique field in which you get to take ideas and quickly turn them into products that people interface with every day," he said. "Software development is about people. We try to save people time and, hopefully, make them smile. I like being a part of that."

"Midway Spark is starting with the zoo product, but there are many more applications for the technology in various industries," he added.

Ball emphasizes that innovation is not just for engineers or computer scientists. He encourages everyone to take a moment and see if they can come up with a solution the next time they are faced with a problem.

“I would love to see more people innovating,” Ball said. “We all see problems every day. Some are big and we have no idea how to tackle them, but most are small quirks that get on our nerves. If you see something that could be better, there is no reason you can’t come up with a solution.”

The [SIUE School of Engineering](#) offers one of the most comprehensive and affordable engineering programs in the St. Louis region with eight undergraduate degrees, five master’s degrees and two cooperative doctoral programs, all housed in a state-of-the-art facility. Students learn from expert faculty, perform cutting-edge research, and participate in intercollegiate design competitions. Companies in the metropolitan St. Louis area provide students challenging internships and co-op opportunities, which often turn into permanent employment. All undergraduate programs are accredited by their respective accreditation agencies.