The Idea: Changing the way college students connect

How it started: Classrooms are being flipped and the lecture is dying; education is less about information and more about application; somewhere along the way students became more connected online and higher education got too expensive. Michael Schneider, President of McPherson College, had an idea. He wanted to find a better way for faculty to help students learn. And he wanted to use technology to do it. After looking at several off-the-shelf platforms as well as some expensive custom build solutions, he wasn’t satisfied. So, he decided to do it himself. He assembled a team, built a platform and has BETA customers using it.

Problem: Classrooms are changing and students demand to learn by doing. Faculty do not have an easy way to incorporate meaningful experiential learning into their curriculum.

Solution: Create an online experiential learning platform that utilizes the creativity and energy of college students to explore business solutions and social challenges, connecting the classroom to real businesses.

Product: A community centered platform that integrates social networking, project management and data reporting functionality into a tool for faculty to use in their curriculum—a product that meets the expectations of Millennials.

How does it work? Students sign up; create a profile; participate in discussion threads by brainstorming ideas, commenting and voting; submit solutions, edit their solutions with feedback from the crowd, earn credibility in the crowd and create their own teams. Faculty sign up; create a profile; introduce real-time case studies into their curriculum by adopting challenges in CaseSpaces; create timely messages to encourage student engagement; track student progress using a dashboard to asses student work and collaborate with the broader higher-education community.

For Example: Dr. Gatewood is teaching Entrepreneurship 101 this semester. The class covers opportunity recognition and feasibility analysis. She registers on iCollegeCrowd.com and adopts a challenge which covers the same topics. Her students are added to her Entrepreneurship 101 CaseSpace.

Sara, one of Dr. Gatewood’s students, joins iCollegeCrowd where she is matched with the new challenge. Sara joins the discussion by brainstorming with students at other colleges. She submits an idea. Sara’s idea gets ‘votes’ and ‘comments’ from others in the discussion rising to the top of the Challenge Leader Board. Sara uploads files and images to the discussion as part of the idea deliverable assignment. She edits her first idea based on feedback from the crowd. The Challenge is closed. Sara’s idea bubbles to the top and she is declared the winner. Dr. Gatewood is able to track participation in the Challenge, provide feedback, make notes and assign grades within her class CaseSpace. In addition, Dr. Gatewood can modify existing challenges to meet the specific needs of her class or even create her own challenge. Sara’s challenge participation is automatically recorded in her portfolio.

Sara gets a prize, but more importantly she gets an internship experience, something new to add to her resume and the possibility of a job. She had fun, got a grade and made new connections during the challenge.

Dr. Gatewood gets to incorporate easy to use experiential learning technology into her curriculum and have access to real-life cases to enrich her course. Her students are motivated in a social environment and get more than a grade, which creates an ideal learning environment.

Fall 2012 BETA: iCollegeCrowd will beta this fall with 20 entrepreneurship professors across the country that will bring ~1000 student community members from their classes to solve 5 challenges. We are starting with the most innovative people in higher education, so we invited only the top faculty in the field of entrepreneurship education. Faculty from the following campuses are BETA partners: Babson College, Wake Forest University, University of Southern California, University of Arizona, Elon University, University of Denver, George Washington University, McPherson College, University of Cincinnati, St. Louis University, University of North Texas, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Metro Community College Omaha and Worcester Polytechnic Institute. You can walk through a quick illustration of our platform at: 
iCollegeCrowd

A faculty focused solution

Colleges and Universities are working to incorporate experiential learning and technology in their classrooms. The iCollegeCrowd platform combines both. iCollegeCrowd is built for faculty—no other competing product is developed around the 1,700,000 US college faculty.

iCollegeCrowd combines the right elements to create a place for experiential learning in the classroom. So why would faculty use our platform?

1. We understand Higher Education. A college president who has worked in higher education and business created this product for faculty. Our team knows the industry and the customer.
2. It is less expensive and more effective than traditional experiential learning. Case studies and labs become theoretical and stale. Consulting projects, guest lectures and off-campus projects can be cost prohibitive. iCollegeCrowd enhances the student experience by allowing students to collaborate and compete.
3. Easy to use and intuitive technology.
4. The platform is flexible so faculty can use it as a tool to pick a challenge, recruit a challenge, or create their own. Challenges they create or recruit can be open to all students on the platform, selective (open to selected classes from other schools) or closed just to their class. It is easy to use the tool to integrate a challenge into the curriculum as an assignment no matter the timing or topic.
5. Built with faculty in mind using an advisory board to develop the platform and sold by actual faculty.
6. Faculty are under great pressure to have good student reviews—a fun platform that supports student learning will get positive feedback from students.

Direct Competitors: IdeaRally—Challenge for money platform designed for college students—Still in Beta; BrainRack—Challenges for college students that result in internships; NoodleStorm and MoreMarbles—College Student consulting challenges; MindFire—Advertising challenges for college students; MindSumo—Resource for businesses to recruit students based on challenge participation; StudentDesigned—Platform for organizations to outsource work in the form of projects.

Growth Strategy: iCollegeCrowd will grow by saturating key disciplines. BETA (Fall 2012) is focused on the Entrepreneurship Education discipline. Fall 2013 will include Business Management, Natural Sciences, Education and Politics. The 3-year goal is 5,000 faculty and 250,000 students with students paying $25 per challenge.

Sales Model: The sales model will be built around paid faculty Champions in each area. Champions will recruit other faculty to use the platform and students will pay per challenge. We recruited our BETA Entrepreneurship Education by working with Dr. Betsy Gatewood from Wake Forest University to recruit her colleagues to use the platform.

Current Progress: iCollegeCrowd faculty and students completed their first challenge on October 5 with students submitting ideas on, “How to create a better business plan competition.” The challenge was sponsored by the US Department of Commerce and the winner was a student from the University of North Texas. Most faculty that adopted the challenge used it as a supplementary assignment. Our second challenge is underway and we have made several changes to the platform based on faculty and student feedback. We are in the process of raising our initial seed funding—$750,000.