Teacher-made software for grading 'revolution' wins inaugural Columbus CodeLaunch

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Constance Borro, holding belt, celebrates winning both judges' and audience choice awards for her edtech startup, Mastery Portfolio LLC, winner of the first Columbus event for the CodeLaunch hackathon and pitch competition, on Thursday at the Ohio Theatre.
Carrie Ghose | CBF

By Carrie Ghose - Staff reporter

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A startup making software for tracking student progress that judges called an educational revolution — appealing to their emotional side as parents — took both top prizes at the first Columbus CodeLaunch hackathon and pitch competition.

Mastery Portfolio LLC won two of the four judge votes and the top prize determined by a text-to-vote system from hundreds of spectators in the Ohio Theatre.

"We have an education crisis in this country and we need to start solving it," said judge Heather Mickman, CIO of retailer Gap Inc.

This is the second year the event has spread outside suburban Dallas, where it was started in 2013 by a software development firm Improving acquired in 2019. There's no entry fee and startups won't give up equity.

Dallas-based IT consulting firm Improving, parent and producer of the event, provides a team of coders to one of the startups and signed up four other Columbus development firms.

In its third year on market, Mastery Portfolio enables teachers to replace the "broken" percentage-scoring grade system in place for three centuries, Borro said, drawing cheers. The startup also provides consulting services on how to make the change.

"This is a shift in mindset," she said. "Superintendents are looking for a solution. ... There are enough folks out there finding us – they can help us evangelize."

Constance Borro reacts to an audience cheer while presenting her edtech startup, Mastery Portfolio LLC, at the first Columbus event for the CodeLaunch hackathon and pitch competition, on Aug. 25, 2022, at the Ohio Theatre.
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Simply assigning a numeric quarterly score for how many standards a child meets assumes that they can't improve, the company argues. Instead, standards-based grading treats each point on the checklist of curriculum requirements as a goal: Iterative feedback loops show students what skills need additional instruction and practice until mastery. Thus a low score in the fall can grow to an A as the year progresses.

The startup provides the first off-the-shelf software for teachers to track that style of grading, instead of a complex retrofit of A-B-C grade books. Founded in 2019, it raised $185,000 from individual investors but grew by revenue since, as I've reported. Now with 16 paying schools and districts across the country, monthly subscriptions have the company on track for $500,000 annualized revenue, Borro said in her presentation.

Higher education is a potential next market after K-12, she said in response to a judge's question – and any business could use the software to track how well employees grasp new training or are meeting performance standards.

How CodeLaunch works

The competition started with applications in June; more than two dozen teams were narrowed to the final five, each paired with a sponsoring software engineering team that provided coding services for free in a hackathon starting a week ago.

Enzee, itself a health IT startup in downtown Columbus, worked with Mastery Portfolio. The maker of software for tracking clinical quality at radiology and oncology practices (to start) is the DBA of ZapIT Holdings Inc.

Since the edtech already had working software on the market, the developers built an extended product Borro has long wanted to add: A web-based tool for students to upload and curate a portfolio of their work and skills profile, which they can use for college and internship applications.

A longtime teacher, Borro left her position at Columbus School for Girls in Bexley – her startup's first customer – in fall 2020 to go full-time as CEO. Her co-founder is CTO Ben Nockles, a developer and a former math teacher based in Washington, D.C.

Constance Borro founded edtech startup Mastery Portfolio.
Mastery Portfolio

The other finalists and their paired software teams are:

- ServUS, which matches college students with volunteer opportunities at nonprofits, paired with QStart Labs. The student-led startup earlier this month was among six to win $50,000 from Ohio State University's first President's Buckeye Accelerator.
- ParaWave, a custom drone with aerial image and thermal imaging, plus monitoring software, to help firefighters and first responders quickly scope out a disaster scene to assess safety and hunt for those needing rescue. It was paired with the Columbus office of Centric Consulting, international IT and management consulting firm. At first called FireFIght Aero, the startup founded by upcoming OSU seniors also was a winner in Buckeye Accelerator.
- Metatopia Network (the only Cleveland-based entrant), a simplified cloud-based platform for nonprofits and businesses to harness the emerging Web3 and Metaverse by building applications and creating their own NFTs, paired with Tech Elevator, a coding bootcamp.
- AlignAI, an engineer-built online employee training platform to help businesses adopt AI and actually use the analytics gained from it. Already profitable with customers including COTA and Worthington Industries, the startup was paired with Improving.

Improving announced Thursday that CodeLaunch will return to Ohio in 2024. More than 700 attendees registered for the event, moved at the last minute to the Ohio Theatre because of a power outage at the Riffe Center. The audience included Smart Columbus Director Jordan Davis, Beam Benefits CEO Alex Frommeyer and leaders from Loud Capital, an event sponsor, and Rev1 Ventures.

The presenting sponsor for this and four 2023 events in the U.S. and Mexico is Cyrannus, a Columbus startup consulting firm recently launched by serial entrepreneur Lee Mosbacker, who has moved back to Central Ohio after several years in Silicon Valley.

As a judge, Mosbacker told all five teams to set up appointments with Kobol Fund, his separate $5 million early-stage investment firm. And any that go through Cyrannus' year-long program connecting with business and tech experts can compete for a $100,000 equity investment.

Central Ohio's tech community hasn't had a huge networking event since the start of the pandemic, and no on-stage pitch competitions since the former 10X wound down.

"We haven't had an event like this in Columbus for a while," said Jacquie Bickel, vice president of Improving Ohio in the firm's Easton office. "Seeing familiar faces I haven't seen in a while felt good."