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1-22-2021

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Stella Connell

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### Recommended Citation

Connell, Stella, "UM Completes 17th Annual Speaker's Edge Competition" (2021). *University of Mississippi News*. 5536.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/5536>

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## UM Completes 17th Annual Speaker’s Edge Competition

More than 100 students show off public speaking skills in yearly contest

JANUARY 22, 2021 BY STELLA CONNELL

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The annual Speaker’s Edge competition is a partnership between the University of Mississippi’s School of Business Administration, Patterson School of Accountancy and Trent Lott Leadership Institute. Photo by Robert Jordan/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – COVID-19 protocols, mask wearing, Zoom etiquette, abuses of remote working and the effects of the global pandemic dominated the 17th annual UM Speaker’s Edge competition held remotely for the first time, Jan. 14-15 at the [University of Mississippi](#).

More than 100 graduate students in business, accountancy and law tackled issues ranging from disclosing co-workers’ exposure to the virus to employees being encouraged to work in the office for preference in performance reviews and promotion consideration, all during a global pandemic.

They were joined virtually by 86 judges and 19 coaches for this year’s speaking competition, a partnership between the university’s [School of Business Administration](#), [Patterson School of Accountancy](#) and [Trent Lott Leadership Institute](#).

The judges watched the videos, ranking and providing feedback on the presentations, from all over the world, including one in Europe and another in Asia. Students competed in two rounds in three different categories: Ethical Dilemmas, Marketplace Pitch and Team Pitch.

After two days of competition, Drew Johnson, an MBA candidate from Monroe, Louisiana, was declared the overall winner.

“Speaker’s Edge was a fantastic experience, and I am thankful to all of the coaches, mentors and professionals that made it possible, in spite of the enormous challenges that had to be navigated due to COVID-19,” said Johnson, who received his bachelor’s degree in management from Ole Miss in 2017. “The skills we learned from this competition will have immeasurable value as we go into our future careers.

“I will always remember the important advice and lessons I was given through this experience. I was surrounded by peers, who all put in so much hard work and did an amazing job. I am so grateful for this recognition.”

Johnson placed first in Ethical Dilemmas and third in Team Pitch.

“Speaker’s Edge is an outstanding opportunity for students to compete in a speaking competition to hone their presentation skills,” said Ken Cyree, dean of the School of Business Administration. “This is the first year we have held it virtually, due to the pandemic, and it was a huge success.

“We have prepared our students to communicate through the online environment that all of us have been

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#### Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children’s play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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### Thank You To Our Donors

#### Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

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### Ole Miss In the News

#### Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith’s Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school’s first African-American student.

using since March 2020, and this competition will help them in the future as we continue to innovate in our workplace design and communication platforms. Our staff, faculty, coaches and judges were amazing and helped our students grow in their communication opportunities.”



**Drew Johnson, of Monroe, Louisiana, is the winner of the 2021 Speaker's Edge Competition at the University of Mississippi. Johnson, a 2017 graduate of the School of Business Administration, is a candidate in the Master of Business Administration program. Submitted photo**

In the Ethical Dilemmas category, following Johnson was Graham Livina, an MBA candidate from Birmingham, Alabama, who received his bachelor's degree in entrepreneurship and family business from Auburn University in 2020, and Chanel Dagmar Thomas, an MBA candidate from Scottsdale, Arizona, who received her bachelor's degree in managerial finance from Ole Miss in 2020, in third.

In this category, participants presented their best solutions for workplace challenges, where issues of expense abuse, gender discrimination, oppressive governments as clients, use of forced labor and lying on resumes were addressed.

Johnson's dilemma posed a situation where an employee of a hospital had knowledge that the CFO received the COVID-19 vaccine ahead of frontline medical workers, who were to be the first to receive it, and whether this breach should be addressed.

In the Marketplace Pitch category, Hunt Coleman, an MBA candidate from Madison, took first place, followed by Thomas Wilson, an MBA candidate from Birmingham, Alabama, who received his undergraduate degree in marketing from Ole Miss in 2020. In the third spot was Ben Rush, an MBA candidate, also from Birmingham, who received his undergraduate degree in agricultural business and economics from Auburn in 2020.

"Participating in Speaker's Edge was a fantastic experience and the competitive environment of MBA, accounting and law graduate students made the experience all that more enriching," said Coleman, who received his bachelor's degree in sport and recreation administration from UM in 2020. "I am so happy I was able to represent the MBA program in the competition."

Coleman's pitch proposed an endorsement program for student athletes, given the eventual passing of the Fair Pay for Play Act that would contractually obligate student athletes to compete in post-season play and support the sponsor's advertising campaign for their bowl game, in return for financial compensation

The competition provides an exceptional vehicle for students to enhance their verbal communication skills, said Mark Wilder, UM accountancy dean.

"Thank you to JoAnn Edwards and the faculty, coaches, judges, staff and sponsors for a highly successful Speaker's Edge 2021," Wilder said. "I know that it was very challenging for all involved, due to the virtual format, but was an outstanding learning experience once again for our students."

"Having strong presentation abilities is a clear differentiator in the marketplace, and the Speaker's Edge program does an exceptional job in enhancing the verbal skills of our students."

In the Team Pitch category, participating students randomly selected companies and applied the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis to evaluate them. The team's goal was to determine and address points of vulnerability or opportunity and how best to present a solution or highlight a strength.

Tourist destinations, automobiles, vacation rentals, entertainment venues, cruise and airlines, food products, and hotel chains were examples of businesses in the Team Pitch area. The winning team's pitch represented the Walt Disney Corp. The second- and third-place teams represented Honda and AirBnB.

The winning pitch involved introducing virtual reality into Disneyland through implementation in three phases to bring people back into the parks, while also being innovative and looking toward the future.

Members of the winning team were Shadi Alhihi, an MBA candidate from Jordan, who received his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from UM in 2019; Anna Kate Joyce, an MBA candidate from Oxford, who received her bachelor's degree in integrated marketing communications from Ole Miss in 2019; Brian Joyner, a Master of Accountancy and Data Analytics candidate from Brandon who received his undergraduate degree in accounting from UM in 2020; Margaret Anne Montgomery, a Master of Accountancy candidate from Shreveport, Louisiana, who received her bachelor's degree in accountancy from Ole Miss in 2020; Kaden Ryan, an MBA candidate from Gulfport who received his undergraduate degree in accountancy from Ole Miss in 2020; and Isaac Tyer, an MBA candidate from Madison who received his bachelor's degree in risk management and insurance from UM in 2020.

The competition helps students gain an advantage as they prepare to launch their careers, said Walter Davis, MBA program faculty adviser.

"James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier," a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

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"Many students point to Speaker's Edge as a highlight of their experience in the MBA program," Davis said. "Students develop unique skills as individual speakers, but also as team presenters; skills that are becoming increasingly important in today's professional communities."

The competition was launched in 2004 by Ole Miss alumni. It brings together industry professionals, retirees, working alumni and students, requiring students to adapt their message to different audiences.

"Speaker's Edge has always had the amazing elements of collaboration and transformation," said Ashley McGee, director of the MBA program. "Now, with this year's virtual setting, we can add innovation to the list."

In preparation, participants spent a week-and-a-half working with volunteer communication coaches to discover strengths and weaknesses of their own personal presentation styles in front of multiple judges.

"The students, instructors, coaches all were simply exceptional," said JoAnn Edwards, speech instructor and director of forensics and special projects manager at the Lott Leadership Institute.

"Collectively they modeled resiliency for all of us. They displayed the power of the human spirit to form relationships, even in a virtual setting; the power of the spoken word to connect always."

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