

Calling All Changemakers: Big Ideas Turns 10

When the Big Ideas student innovation contest launched 10 years ago, it was a novel concept: give teams of students with potential breakthrough ideas small sums of money and a variety of supports and see what happens. Over the past decade, a lot has happened.

Big Ideas has gone on to seed scores of high impact projects—from the [Cellscope](#), which turns the camera of a mobile phone or tablet computer into a high-quality light microscope, to the [Cal Climate Action Partnership](#), a coalition of UC Berkeley students, staff, and faculty now pushing to achieve carbon neutrality on campus by 2025. The contest has jump-started successful companies like [Captricity](#), which sells data capture software to digitize hand-written forms, and [Back to the Roots](#), which creates sustainable food products from coffee grounds and other food waste. It has also given the first precious funds to nonprofits like [We Care Solar](#), which provides solar-powered suitcases for use in maternity hospitals and clinics, and [Acopio](#), a supply chain information platform for Latin American coffee farmers.

For many student innovators, Big Ideas served as the first step in turning a grand hunch into a viable proposal. Since 2006, the contest has provided support to student teams who have gone on to secure over \$55 million in additional funding for their for-profit, nonprofit, or hybrid ventures.

This year's contest launches September 8. It will provide up to \$300,000 in awards, and will build on a well-honed tradition of coaching teams through eight months of pre-proposals, mentorship, and final submissions. The tenth anniversary contest will also provide more competition categories to more students. Contestants will be able to submit their ideas to the newly introduced "Financial Inclusion" category and the newly extended "Energy & Resource Alternatives" category, sponsored by the University of California Carbon Neutrality Initiative.

Big Ideas is one of the biggest inter-campus efforts in the University of California and the nation. It brings together such entities as the [Blum Center for Developing Economies](#) at UC Berkeley, the [United States Agency for International Development](#), [USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network](#), the [Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society \(CITRIS\)](#), [All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development](#), the [UC Berkeley Food Institute](#), the [UC Global Food Initiative](#), the [UC Carbon Neutrality Initiative](#), [Michigan State University's Global Center for Food Systems Innovation](#), the [Associated Students of the University of California](#), and the [Berkeley Energy and Resources Collaborative](#)—as well as over 200 judges and 50 mentors.

As the contest enters its tenth year, its reach encompasses 18 universities, including the entire University of California system and the [USAID Higher Education Solutions Network](#), as well as 650,000 students—making the Big Ideas Contest one of the largest student innovation competitions in the world.

“When I first got involved as Big Ideas judge in 2006, the contest was a campus-based competition open to 30,000 UC Berkeley students,” said Phillip Denny, who manages the contest on behalf of the Blum Center for Developing Economies. “Now the contest is open to a population equivalent to a medium-sized U.S. city. The results in terms of the creativity of ideas and social impact really show.”

The contest’s first information sessions will take place at 6:30 pm on September 9 and September 29 in Blum Hall, B100. A live webcast will be also be available on the [Big Ideas website for students participating from other universities](#).

This year’s contest categories include:

- [Art & Social Change](#)
- [Energy & Resource Alternatives](#)
- [Financial Inclusion](#)
- [Food Systems](#)
- [Global Health](#)
- [Improving Student Life](#)
- [Information Technology for Society](#)
- [Mobiles for Reading](#)
- [Scaling Up Big Ideas](#) (for past winners only)

From September to March, when the final proposals are due, teams have the opportunity to attend information sessions, idea generation and networking events, writing workshops, editing blitzes, and office hours with Big Ideas advisors in person and online. In addition, finalist teams will be matched with mentors with expertise relevant to their project from a range of social enterprises, academic institutions, nonprofits, and businesses.

Unlike many business competitions, Big Ideas is multidisciplinary — attracting engineers, science majors, public health majors, as well as MBA students — and is focused on supporting a variety of social ventures including for-profit enterprises, non-profit organizations and community-based initiatives. The contest challenges students to step outside of their traditional university-based academic work, take a risk, and use their education, passion, and skills to work on problems important to them.

For more information about rules, categories, resources, funding, and contact information, please visit the Big Ideas website at <http://bigideas.berkeley.edu>

Also, check out Big Ideas’ 10-year celebratory timeline here: <http://bigideas.berkeley.edu/ten/>.