

Student entrepreneurs' new app keeps politicians in touch with voters' views

November 4 2014, by Lauren Jones



Tara Raj & Garrett Allen, third-year students at U.Va., have created an app that helps voters and politicians connect.

This could be the last Election Day that any of us have to hear candidates outline a platform without knowledge of where their voters really stand on the issues, if University of Virginia students Tara Raj and Garrett Allen have anything to say about it.

They are the creators of "VotersChoice," a new mobile app that makes it easy for political representatives – and potentially candidates – to survey their constituents' opinions on current public issues, from city planning and spending appropriations to new bills, and everything in between.

Scheduled for release this winter, the app allows any representatives in the local, state and national government to send opinion polls to their constituents and then receive real-time, aggregated feedback and analytics on the public's views.

If county representatives wanted to know what voters thought about raising taxes to funnel more dollars toward the school system, for example, they could receive hundreds of emails and letters from a variety of constituents, or they could hear from the estimated 80 percent of the population who have smart phones – and who, with a click of a button, can have their opinion sent directly to their representative.

"This is the first smart phone app that allows for two-way communication between representatives and their constituents," said Raj, a third-year computer science major. "The value we're bringing to the table here is that representatives supply the questions, so when voters are providing their opinions, there's someone on the other end listening. And that's going to ultimately give voters a greater voice in government."

She and Allen, a third-year commerce student, met through the Alpha Kappa Psi business fraternity and conceived the idea during their second year. With a mutual passion for politics, they zeroed in on a problem – it's often a challenge for voters to communicate with their representatives – and they brainstormed a way that modern technology could create an easier communication channel.

With Raj's programming skills paired with Allen's business knowledge, the duo formulated a business plan and came up with a prototype to enter in the University's Entrepreneurship Cup last fall, where they placed third in the semifinals. They later went on to win the Darden Business Plan Competition and received more seed funding after competing against graduate students in the McIntire School of Commerce's Galant Challenge, a \$250,000 "live fire" venture pitch

competition. Competing students have 60 seconds to convince angel investors and venture capitalists to back their idea.

After receiving offers from investors, Raj and Allen took another step forward and filed to make VotersChoice a limited liability corporation in Virginia, and officially became business owners.

"I knew nothing about entrepreneurship before coming to U.Va., let alone nine months ago," Raj said. "There's been a lot of learning on the job. As we've been going through this process, we've learned everything from 'What is a [business plan](#)?' to 'How do you get an investment?' Those have been some incredible lessons – but personally, a lot of it for me has been 'How do you ask for help?' It really helps to talk to someone who's been through the process."

She cited professor David Touve, an assistant professor in the Commerce School, and competition mentor Doug Muir, a local entrepreneur and adjunct professor of engineering business in the School of Engineering and Applied Science, who pushed their thinking and challenged them to cover all their bases in every step of the business creation and execution process.

"The ability to start something from nothing and see it grow, and to see all the different aspects – everything I've learned from McIntire, finance, business strategy, marketing comes in – when you're able to pull everything together that you've learned and create this project, it's really cool," Allen said.

They plan to have a small launch of the app this winter. Jane Dittmar, who chairs the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors, has agreed to help pilot the app along with a test group of students and community members.

"Spending time with two very intelligent and creative U.Va. students was so much fun for me," Dittmar said. "Garrett had some background in the political arena, and Tara brought software design skills to their partnership. We've talked for a good while about the [app](#)'s usefulness for already engaged citizens, to engage citizens and to help elected officials learn about or even proactively seek 'crowd thinking.'"

After ironing out the kinks, Raj said, it will be all about marketing. "Because we have this two-way market, we have to market to both voters and the representatives, and we have a couple strategies planned out in how we're going to do that. But mitigating both sides of those markets is going to be challenging."

Not only have they learned what goes in to making a business, they've been able to use their experiences to help their classmates at McIntire. They've participated in workshops that gear up students for this year's Entrepreneurship Cup competition, and have been invited to entrepreneurship classes to talk about their experiences.

"U.Va. is an incubator in some ways," Raj said. "You have this community of people who are working on interesting ventures, anywhere from apps to other kinds of consumer goods, and the companies are so different that we're able to help and will be able to help each other later on."

After this year's test launch, Raj and Allen are hoping to solidify a professionally developed application by January 2016, in time for the national election season.

"I think something that's unique to doing entrepreneurship as a student is that most of the time, you're dealing with people a lot older than you are," Raj said. "So we've learned that it's about showing people that even though we're students, we're people to take seriously."

Provided by University of Virginia

Citation: Student entrepreneurs' new app keeps politicians in touch with voters' views (2014, November 4) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-student-entrepreneurs-app-politicians-voters.html>

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