Exactics wins grand prize in 2026 Tulane Business Model Competition

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Madeline Murray (SSE '26), chief operating officer of Exactics, delivers the company's pitch to judges at the 2026 Tulane Business Model Competition, which took place at the Freeman School of Business on March 10. The biotech startup co-founded by Tulane and University of Chicago students won first place and the grand prize of $75,000.

Exactics, a biotech startup that's developing rapid at-home tests for a range of infectious diseases, won first place and the grand prize of $75,000 in the 2026 Tulane Business Model Competition.

The final round of competition, an annual presentation of the Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, took place March 10 in the Goldring/Woldenberg Business Complex on Tulane’s uptown campus.

This year's winner is no stranger to the competition. The company was co-founded by Tulane student Madeline Murray (SSE ’26) and won second place last year with its pitch for TiCK Test, a fast, affordable at-home screening test for Lyme disease. With that product set to launch this summer, the company is now developing a new product that tests for multiple diseases.

AVA, the company’s prototype, is a modular, reusable diagnostic tool that will enable users to conduct rapid at-home tests for a variety of infectious diseases, including sexually transmitted infections, COVID-19, flu, strep throat and mononucleosis. Unlike TiCK Test, AVA requires users to purchase a base device and single-use cartridges for each test.

“It felt like a logical progression to capture a broader market with more people,” founder and CEO Julian Kage said of AVA. “Ultimately, our goal is to help as many people as possible.”

The pivot to a multi-disease diagnostic tool impressed competition judges, who praised the company’s strategy to expand its market.

“I think they did a great job saying here’s the competition, here’s our competitive advantage, and here are the secondary and tertiary markets we can approach,” said competition judge Trivia Frazier (SSE ’08, M ’12, MBA ’18), president and CEO of Obatala Sciences. “And it all leverages the core scientific techniques that they’re using, so it’s not diffused in focus.”

Exactics raised $1.5 million in its pre-seed round last year, including an investment of $250,000 by Tulane Ventures, the Tulane Innovation Institute’s $10 million seed-stage investment fund. While that round funded the launch of TiCK Test, Murray said the $75,000 prize will go directly into the development of AVA.

“It’s going to go to patent filings, it’s going to go to FDA consultants, and we want to hire a grant writer,” she said. “When we raised the $1.5 million, we hadn’t even invented AVA, so this prize means we don’t have to stop developing and wait for the next raise. We can stick to our timeline and get this technology out into the world as soon as possible.”

Rob Lalka, Albert Lepage Professor in Business and executive director of the Lepage Center, said the company’s approach to diagnostic testing is a perfect match for the preferences of today’s consumers.

“People want to be able to take a test at home without having to go into a doctor’s office,” he said. “Even if they capture just a small part of the broader market they’re seeking, it’ll be a great company.”

BRCĒ, a Michigan State University-based materials-technology startup with advanced polymer-composite materials that improve stability, durability and injury prevention across athletic, industrial and medical-adjacent applications, earned second place in the competition and a prize of $30,000. NerView Surgical, a medical technology startup from McMaster University with an imaging platform that allows surgeons to see nerve tissue in real time during surgery, won third place and a prize of $20,000.

In a national startup landscape increasingly dominated by AI, each of this year's finalists pitched products and technologies that address needs related to health care, a trend that resonated with competition judge Margaret Molloy.

“We’re living in a world where AI is taking all the oxygen out of the air, and yet for these three companies, that wasn’t central,” said Molloy, founder of Molloy Marketing Advisory and former global chief marketing officer of Siegel+Gale. “I found that refreshing.”

“There’s a need for core technologies that impact the world and address major challenges, and all three of these businesses have the opportunity to do that in a very powerful way,” added Frazier. “I was very impressed with this year’s participants.”