

2020 Memphis Scipreneur Challenge: Participant's Experience

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COO of Second Place Team: **NeuroMed™** (Direct Cell Growth Using Aerogel Materials)



For the 4th Memphis Scipreneur Challenge, I just asked one thing of myself: go for it. "Stepping out of your comfort zone," I repeatedly said during my daily self-talk. "Stepping out of my comfort zone" is a concept that is easier said than done. I hesitated because this project was business-related--a field I was always unwilling to touch; I feared because my assigned journal club presentation date was right before the final pitch; I wondered what on earth this challenge/event was? It was such a blur to me even after the first meeting of the intro night. I allowed myself to sleep on it that night, and I heard my inner voice whispering to me: this back-to-back presentation would absolutely be a great challenge, but you will regret it if you miss it. Maybe this could be your motivation to stop procrastinating. Dr. Sabri's project presentation attracted me, so I signed up for the aerogel group. Though I have not much experience with neuroscience and physical materials, I assumed nothing would be more exciting than exploring the unknown as to fit the theme of this challenge.

Teaming up was a good start, but frustration came rapidly--only two of the four-team members showed up. We waited with hope only to learn that they had quit. Fueled with ambitions, we both agreed that once we decided to do it, we would do it well. I never thought we must win, but just that must make the most of it. So, we carried on. For the next seven weeks, Thursday became a special day for me. Each time attending a lecture

allowed me to visit a new place in this city that I've never been able to explore before. I never missed any of it. I enjoyed the fantastic lectures, the free meals (of course), and the guilty-free nights driving out of campus right after 5 pm instead of staying longer in the lab. I listened to the questions raised by others, sought help from our mentors, and exchanged thoughts with my teammate. To get a clear idea of what a pitch looks like, I watched a shark tank (Scrub Daddy), and all the ZeroTo510 pitch videos on YouTube, learning from their presentation style, slides, gestures, and tones.

Teamwork was also a challenge. Due to differences in understanding of the project, we couldn't agree on how to divide responsibility. Since no one other than us could negotiate this, we worked it out by preparing separately on materials and slides, then providing each other with feedback. After the pitch practice, we further divided our work by letting one member practice the pitch while the other prepares for the Q&A. Then it was just a lot of practice during the last two days and continuously revising the slides until the last minute. I was also lucky enough to be picked as the first to give the final pitch so that I could be the first one to feel the relief.

MSC is a chance for anything to happen. I mean, getting a second place as a team of two, what else could I ask for?

For anyone who may be interested in MSC, all I ask of you is Go FOR IT. Even if you didn't get a prize, you would still have another exciting story that you can share and say no regrets. Trust me; it is as good as it gets.

Special thanks to:

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Chidi Zacheaus (executive director, public speaking instructor)

Wei Su (teammate)

Dr. Firouzeh Sabri (Inventor and scientific mentor)

Josh Herwig (business mentor)

Wesley Hale (additional help)

**Wei Su (4th year graduate student in Neuroscience Program at the UTHSC)
CEO of Second Place Team: **NeuroMed™** (Direct Cell Growth Using Aerogel Materials)**

“All progress takes place outside the comfort zone,” this famous quote reminds me of success coming from the courage to step into a new field.

For a decade, I have been spending my time doing research and never tried something new outside scientific research. MSC, undoubtedly, offered me such a great opportunity. During each workshop and practical training sessions, the most valuable skill I learned was how to run a business project: integrate research achievements and transform it into a commercial product in reality. I gradually came to realize that life science research enables us to investigate and develop products that create social values and benefit human health after I completed MSC training. I believe it is a valuable treasure for me, and I highly recommend that individuals of all backgrounds seize the opportunity to gain experience in entrepreneurship.

MSC competition, I think, is quite a big defiance, and it is worthwhile to overcome. The biggest challenge in this process was establishing a convincing and compelling business model for our project in a minimal timeline. I and my teammate Rui barely had any background in business. We started from zero and spent much time in collecting and summarizing useful information. With help from both our business and scientific mentors, we finally proposed an optimal frame to fit into the project.

The key to our success, from my perspective, is a collaborative spirit with teammates, advisors. We all have different expertise and learned to hear each other viewpoints. We were able to adjust the business strategies we proposed when it was necessary. We worked as a team despite some small frictions in preparation. I have to say that the success we achieved belongs to our team. Miss Rui Wang is a hard-working and talented teammate to work with. Dr. Firouzeh Sabri, a professor from the University of Memphis, provided insightful advice in scientific guidance. Mr. Joshua Herwig, CTO and co-founder of SOMOVAC medical solutions, gave us constructive suggestions on running a business. Without their help, I would not have been able to upgrade myself substantially in entrepreneurship.

Last but not least, I would like to thank those behind the scene who made contributions to this program, Mr. Chidi Zacheaus, a motivated and passionate principal of the MSC program and other members who helped organize it. They were always there

to provide feedback on our project and find a solution when it came to a problem. I also really appreciated all series speakers from each module to impart knowledge to us. It was an incredible journey, and I will be delighted to share my experience with anyone and hoping more students and researchers will participate next time. Upon completion of the final pitch, I am more motivated to become an entrepreneur and have my start-up in the future, hoping that I can make a difference by providing better solutions to improve the health of our communities.