

**White Paper: AppItUP Challenge**  
**A Blueprint for University-Led Innovation in**  
**Mobile Technologies and Beyond**

**Prepared by WorldUpstart Impacts**

**[www.WorldUpstartImpacts.org](http://www.WorldUpstartImpacts.org)**

## *Executive Summary*

From 2013 to 2017, the University of Pennsylvania launched a bold experiment in academic innovation: the AppItUP Challenge. This university-wide initiative sought to uncover entrepreneurial ideas for mobile applications from all corners of the Penn community—students, faculty, staff, and clinicians—and turn them into viable companies. With over 400 submissions annually leading to dozens of companies formed with follow-on funding, AppItUP represents a replicable model for universities around the world aiming to build structured innovation pipelines in emerging fields such as AI, sustainability, and healthcare.

This white paper outlines the structure, impact, and lessons learned from AppItUP, offering a guide for institutions interested in developing similar programs. It is particularly relevant for universities in the U.S. and internationally that wish to foster entrepreneurial ecosystems and engage their alumni in entrepreneurial activities. By sourcing ideas from within the university and connecting them to external partners like venture capitalists, IT firms, and seasoned entrepreneurs, AppItUP illustrates how higher education institutions can build bridges to the broader innovation economy. The model also offers a compelling way to re-engage alumni as founders, mentors, investors, and supporters.

## *Premise: Why AppItUP Was Created*

AppItUP was created to address a recurring gap in academic innovation: countless brilliant ideas exist within universities, but most never leave the campus walls due to a lack of pathways for commercialization. The goal was to make the innovation process more accessible by lowering the barriers to entry and creating a clear, repeatable structure that could transform simple ideas into scalable businesses. It also aimed to challenge the perception that only technologists or business students can generate commercially viable concepts—demonstrating that impactful innovation can come from any academic discipline.

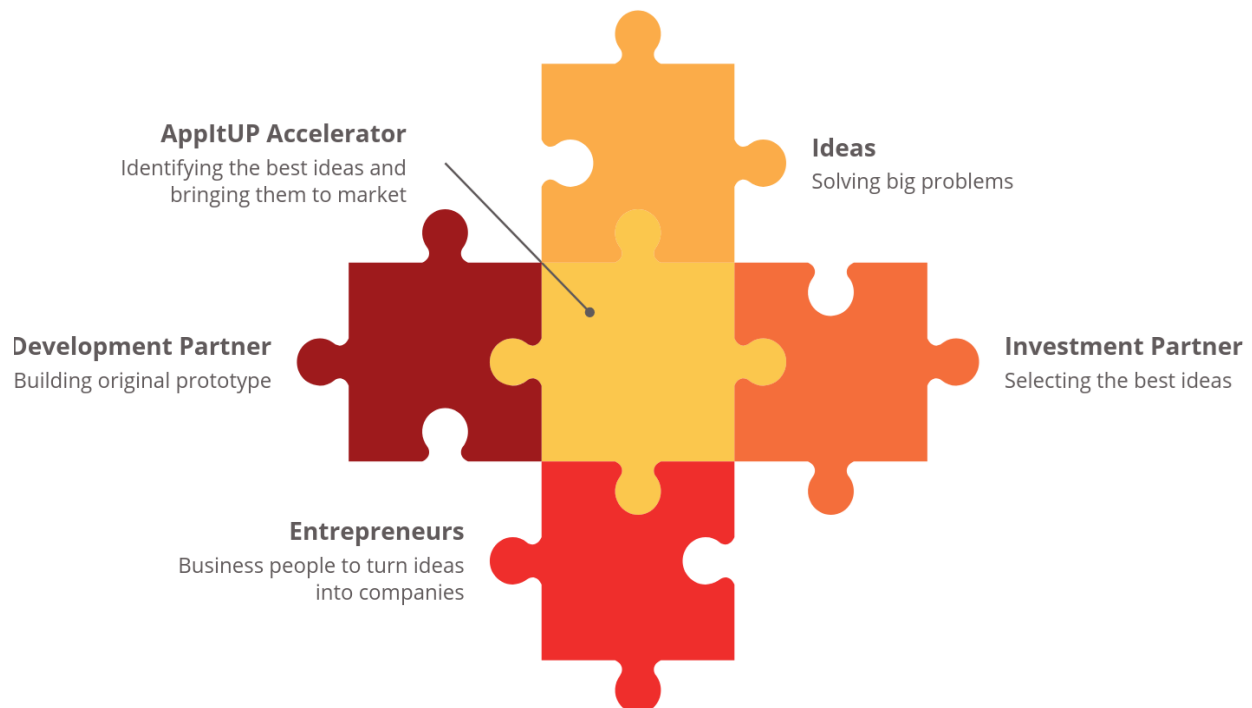
## *Program Overview: Turning Ideas Into Ventures*

AppItUP was a cross-campus challenge designed to democratize innovation. By providing a simple entry point—just an idea submission form—it empowered idea-holders with no technical background to participate.

### **Key Features:**

- **Open Submission:** Any Penn community member could submit an idea.

- **Track-Based:** Submissions sorted by tracks (e.g., mobile health, enterprise, social impacts, etc.).
- **Blind Evaluation:** 24 VC and Angel investors evaluated ideas in a blind format
- **Prototyping Partnership:** Five development IT firms participated to build ideas into prototypes at no cost.
- **Company Formation:** Finalists were supported through Penn’s UPstart programs (for faculty/staff) or UPAdvisors (for students).



### *Evaluation Process: Leveling the Playing Field*

A defining feature of the AppItUP Challenge was its **blind evaluation process**, which eliminated bias and ensured that ideas were judged solely on their merit—not on the submitter’s academic status, school affiliation, or professional background. This was crucial in leveling the playing field, giving equal opportunity to Wharton MBAs and nurses at university hospitals alike.

Each submission was evaluated by over 24 venture capital and angel investors who reviewed anonymous applications. The application was deliberately short and straightforward, designed for rapid review by busy investors. Participants were asked to answer four questions, each with a 250-character limit:

1. Describe your idea
2. What problem does it solve?
3. Who is the user?
4. Who is going to pay for it?

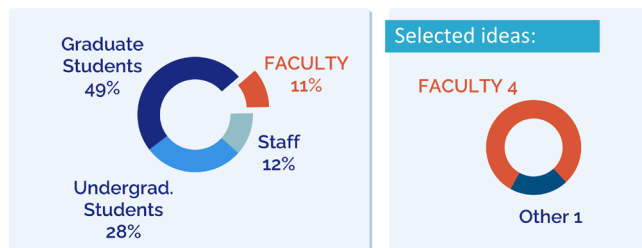
Investors rated each idea on a scale of 1 to 9 and answered three key questions:

- Is this a business?
- Is it fundable?
- Is it scalable?

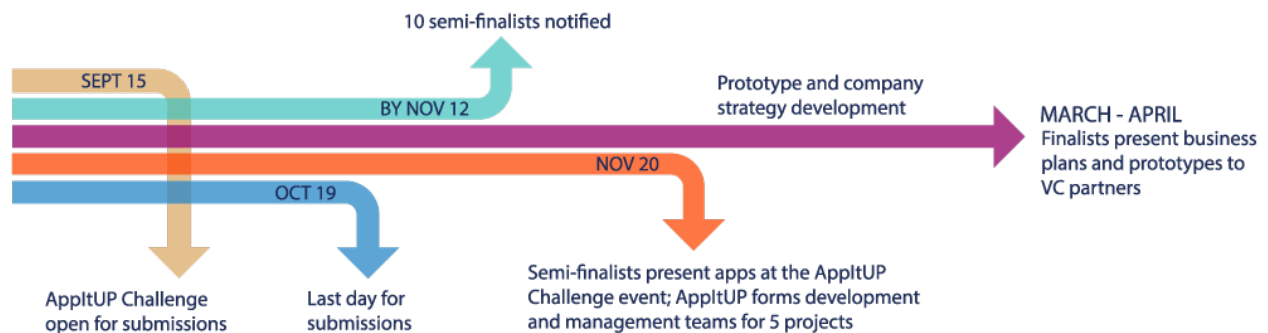
This approach revealed an important insight: while only about **11% of applicants were faculty or researchers**, **4 out of 5 winning ideas** selected annually for prototyping and company formation came from this group. These participants, often working at the frontlines of complex, real-world challenges, brought forward ideas with significant commercial and societal impact.

This outcome underscores the value of involving professionals, both inside and outside the university, who are deeply familiar with industry problems. The AppItUP model presents a unique opportunity to engage alumni working in various sectors who may have promising ideas but lack the support structure to commercialize them. AppItUP provides the missing link: a bridge from concept to company.

## DISTRIBUTION OF IDEAS



## *Program Process and Timeline: From Ideation to Demo Day on Academic Schedule*



1. **Call for Ideas** – Launched in fall with campus-wide outreach
2. **Submission Period** – Open for one month; minimal entry barriers
3. **Evaluation** – 3-week blind review by investors
4. **Semi-Finalist Selection** – Top 10 ideas selected, protected, and pitched to IT firms
5. **Prototype Development** – 5 finalists selected by IT firms
6. **Demo Day** – Finalists pitched their MVPs and business plans to investors
7. **Company Formation** – Legal and business support provided

Each year, from over 400 submitted ideas, the 10 highest-rated were presented to AppItUP's development partners. These firms selected five ideas to transform into working prototypes, resulting in five new startups annually.

### **Hot tip:**

Get Development Partners to sign a contract with the University that has a blanket CDA clause and IP rights assigned.

Get diverse group of investors if you want to see diverse ideas coming from many different schools and groups on campus.

## *Implementation Blueprint for Universities*

Institutions interested in replicating the AppItUP model should consider the following foundational steps:

1. **Establish Clear Ownership** – Identify a university office or innovation unit to lead the effort
2. **Leverage Existing Infrastructure** – Tap into tech transfer, IP offices, and startup formation programs
3. **Design a Simple Submission Interface** – Use Google Forms, Airtable, or a basic custom platform
4. **Recruit External Reviewers** – Build a diverse pool of VC, angel, and domain-expert reviewers
5. **Align with Academic Calendar** – Structure the program to match semester cycles
6. **Secure Pro Bono Development Partners** – Partner with app development firms for prototype support
7. **Prepare for Company Formation** – Ensure support is in place for incorporation, legal, and IP guidance
8. **Engage Alumni** – Add alumni as reviewers, mentors, funders, and even idea submitters

The simplicity of the format, combined with strategic partnerships, allows this model to be adapted to many verticals and regions.

## *Lessons Learned*

- **Simplify the Front End** – Minimal barriers to entry attract more diverse ideas
- **Blind Reviews Work** – They increase fairness and uncover uncommon contributors
- **Faculty Often Hold the Best Ideas** – Despite low submission rates, their ideas win frequently
- **Alumni Are an Untapped Asset** – Future versions should formally integrate alumni engagement
- **Support Systems Matter** – Legal, IP, and entrepreneurial advising are crucial to success
- **Marketing Drives Participation** – Outreach must extend across departments and roles

### ***Other Applications of the AppItUP Model***

The AppItUP structure is highly adaptable to fields beyond mobile technology and can focus on AI implementation in various verticals. For example:

#### **Climate Tech & Sustainability**

Engage students and faculty on solutions for carbon tracking, water efficiency, and circular economy models.

#### **Mental Health & Wellness**

Deploy university research into mental health tools and digital therapeutics.

#### **Space and Remote Sensing**

Incorporate satellite data and geospatial innovation for public and private sector needs.

#### **EdTech & Learning Innovation**

Empower the academic community to develop tools that improve learning outcomes and accessibility.

### ***Conclusion: A Replicable Model***

AppItUP proves that with the right structure, a university can convert raw ideas into real companies—regardless of the submitter’s background or technical skill. This model is adaptable to AI, green tech, social impact, and other verticals.

AppItUP is not only applicable in the U.S. but can be a transformative program for institutions around the world looking to build inclusive innovation ecosystems. By integrating external stakeholders—VCs, IT firms, entrepreneurs—into a university’s innovation framework, it amplifies the impact of academic creativity.

WorldUpstart Impacts is available to help institutions adapt this model to their unique mission and community.

***For collaboration inquiries, contact us at:***

[www.WorldUpstartImpacts.org](http://www.WorldUpstartImpacts.org)