

Education • EDITORIAL / OPINION

Op-ed: Innovation challenges put young smarts on tough problems



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Gus Harris, left, is executive director at Moody's Analytics and serves on the board of the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE). J.D. LaRock is president of NFTE and a member of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education.

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In his speech inaugurating Earth Day in 1970, U.S. Sen. [Gaylord Nelson](#) noted, “Ecology is a big science, a big concept, not a narrow one. It is concerned with all the ramifications of all the relationships, of all the living creatures, to each other and their environment.”

Taking Nelson's words to heart, it's impossible to think about the future of our planet on Earth Day's 50th anniversary just a few short weeks ago without considering the long-term effects of Covid-19. The well-being of our planet depends on the well-being of the people who inhabit it. The increasingly urgent need to address the world's interrelated problems is galvanizing today's youth. Maturing in a time of crisis, they have the potential to be social entrepreneurs who can deliver real change. We've seen this firsthand with the [World Series of Innovation](#) (WSI), a global online competition that invites young people to propose creative solutions to some of humanity's most seemingly intractable problems.

Four years ago, the Moody's Foundation began working with NFTE, the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, to align the innovation challenges with the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). When the United Nations created the Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 and codified its 17 SDGs, they, too, seemed to adhere to Nelson's philosophy, including objectives like "peace" and "climate action."

What's surprising and heartening is that even though Covid-19 was not on anyone's radar when this year's WSI competition launched last September, many of the winning ideas, chosen from thousands of entries submitted by young people from 63 countries, offer solutions applicable to the current global health crisis.

Take [ReThink](#), for example, a cyberbullying solution from a team in Cambridge that works across email, texting, and social-media apps by detecting offensive messages before they're posted. With millions of children across the U.S. spending more time online, both for school and socially, the risk of cyberbullying is higher than ever. Or Biofood, which pairs restaurants with local power companies to turn food waste into biofuels that can generate clean energy. With restaurants and farms unable to use the supplies they have in stock, the option of repurposing food as an energy source means it won't go to waste. ATD is an automated teller drone that brings access to financial services to people in remote rural areas. The need has never been more obvious than at a time when large swaths of the population can't leave their homes and not everyone can handle their banking needs online.

Of course, there were great ideas around the sustainability concepts more commonly associated with Earth Day. BondFlow, the winner of the Moody's Climate Action Challenge, verifies how "green" the impact of a bond investment is by applying extensive due diligence and using real-time asset tracking. The team recognized that while individual actions are important, supporting companies that are making sustainable business decisions is an important way to bring about substantive change.

The ability of young people today to mobilize around issues they care about is unprecedented, and their drive to do good is matched by a drive to innovate. The next [Greta Thunberg](#) may or may not be an entrepreneur, but he or she is almost certain to exhibit, as Thunberg does, key elements of the entrepreneurial mindset, such as communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, opportunity recognition, and future orientation. This last one is especially critical as we find ourselves faced with problems that the founders of Earth Day never imagined.

As Nelson observed, all aspects of sustainability are interdependent. On this Earth Day, as we continue to grapple with everything we're living through right now, we can take a measure of reassurance knowing that the future is in the hands of these innovative young entrepreneurs.

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