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Grand Valley State and Oklahoma State Take Home Top Honors at AAHOACON24's Inaugural Hotel Turnaround Collegiate Championship

ORLANDO, FL, Apr. 5 – Grand Valley State took home The People's Choice Award, and Oklahoma State received the Judges Championship Trophy at AAHOA's inaugural Hotel Turnaround Collegiate Championship, which debuted at AAHOACON24.

This industry-first competition format challenged university students from across the nation to compete in making the kind of operations and investment decisions all hotel owners must make to turn things around when performance is lagging. The competition is part of AAHOA's commitment to supporting the next generation of hospitality leaders.

"It can be a little intimidating because we come from an academic setting where we are just involved with professors," **Grant Gordon, a student at Kennesaw State University**, said of the experience of being around the nation's leading hotel owners. "Being able to come and speak to hoteliers, some of whom are really big, can be a little intimidating at first. But they're all hospitable. We're in the hospitality industry."

Eleven teams of two students, each representing seven universities from all around the country, came together to battle it out at AAHOACON24 for the championship. Nearly two dozen student contenders had to navigate a unique simulation program, HOTELsim, powered by Russell Partnership Technology, that enabled them to make decisions mirroring real-life challenges faced by all AAHOA Members. These included staffing, operations, marketing, and capital investment decisions. Each team of students "acquired" a hotel that was financially identical in terms of performing in the same market and having the same key performance indicators. Teams used HOTELsim to implement ownership strategies to improve hotel valuation and future profit potential.

The participating schools were:

1. FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, Miami, FL
2. Grand Valley State University, Allendale Charter Township, MI
3. Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA
4. Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Natchitoches, LA
5. Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK
6. University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC
7. Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Based on financial and balanced scorecard operational results, four teams – Grand Valley State, Kennesaw State, Oklahoma State, and Virginia Tech – advanced to the competition finals, where student teams presented their simulated hotels as investment or purchase opportunities to a “Shark-Tank style” panel of industry brokerage, acquisition, and investment leaders.

“We are thrilled to honor the skilled and innovative winners of AAHOA's inaugural Collegiate Championship: Hotel Turnaround Competition,” said **AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake**. “This groundbreaking event showcased the exceptional talents and creativity of students representing outstanding hospitality management programs as they tackled real-world challenges in hotel ownership. Witnessing their teamwork and problem-solving skills is truly inspiring. AAHOA is proud to lead the industry in providing unique opportunities to elevate and celebrate the next generation of hospitality leaders, and we thank everyone involved in bringing this vision to life.”

“Where was this challenge when I was entering the industry?” **AAHOA Immediate Past Chairman Bharat Patel asked**. “As a second-generation hotelier who started my career in hospitality at a young age, this is the type of program I would have loved to have taken part in. AAHOA's introduction of the Collegiate Championship: Hotel Turnaround Competition is just one more example of how AAHOA is placing emphasis on the contributions of the industry's young professionals and future leaders. AAHOA extends a hearty congratulations to Grand Valley State and Oklahoma State for taking home the top prizes and for their involvement in AAHOACON24.”

AAHOA is already receiving university requests for inclusion in the AAHOACON25 Collegiate Championship competition. For more information on how to get involved, please email edudept@aahoa.com.

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About AAHOA

AAHOA is the largest hotel owners association in the world, with Member-owned properties representing a significant part of the U.S. economy. AAHOA's 20,000 members own 60% of the hotels in the United States and are responsible for 1.7% of the nation's GDP. More than one million employees work at AAHOA Member-owned hotels, earning \$47 billion annually, and member-owned hotels support 4.2 million U.S. jobs across all sectors of the hospitality industry. AAHOA's mission is to advance and protect the business interests of hotel owners through advocacy, industry leadership, professional development, member benefits, and community engagement.