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Students traveling to Texas for college coding contest

Programmers will compete in IBM timed problem-solving competition

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A team of UCF computer programmers will head to San Antonio Saturday for the 30th annual Association for Computing Machinery International Collegiate Programming Contest sponsored by IBM.

The ACM-ICPC world final will be held at the Hilton Palacio del Rio on April 12 at 8 a.m. The programming contest pits teams from universities around the world against each other in a timed competition. Teams have up to five hours to complete as many problems as they can. Each team receives the same set of problems.

"The teams compete simultaneously to solve very complex problems," Doug Heintzman said. Heintzman is a director of strategy at IBM as well as the sponsorship executive of the ICPC. "There are different colored balloons that correspond to each problem, and, when a team finishes one problem, they receive the balloon with the color that corresponds with the difficulty of the problem they finished."

The UCF team is one of the 83 world finalists from a field of over 5,600 teams from 84 different countries. Teams compete in regional qualifying competitions to determine who advances to the finals.

The UCF team comprises three students: Adam Campbell, Walter Mundt and Casey Thurston.

Campbell, a graduate student in computer science, and Thurston, a senior double-majoring in computer science and micro- and molecular biology, have each competed in the world finals before: Campbell in last year's final in Shanghai, China, and Thurston in Prague, Czech Republic, two years ago. It will be the first appearance in the world finals for Mundt, a senior majoring in computer science.

"I have been looking forward to it for years," Mundt said. "It will be nice to finally get to go to the world finals."

This will be the last competition for both Campbell and Thurston because of a rule that imposes a two-appearance limit on the amount the times a student can participate in the world finals.

"We are going [to the tournament] to do well," Campbell said, "as opposed to last year, where we were just happy to be there."

"I am a little more nervous this year," Thurston said. "We didn't perform to expectations last year."

The team finished second in its region this year and has always finished in the top three since it started competing 24 years ago.

"I am very proud of our consistency," said Ali Orooji, the team's adviser. He has taught at UCF for 21 years and has been the team's adviser for the past 17. "When it comes to computer programming competitions, there is no comparison to other schools in our region."

In the world finals, a UCF team has finished in the top 30 in eight of the past 15 years but has not done better than

honorable mention since 2002, when it finished 27th. The highest placing it ever received was in 1987, when it finished second.

The team holds seven-hour practices 25 Saturdays a year, starting in the beginning of the fall semester when it holds a series of competitions to determine who will be the team members.

"At the regional competitions, the fact that we practice for seven hours once a week makes us one of the most prepared team there," Mundt said. "But in the international competition, there are schools that, once they know they are going to finals, they stop going to class and do nothing but program to get ready for the tournament."

"We are dealing with the cream of the crop, the geniuses of the world." Orooji said. "It makes it very difficult."

Orooji said the team receives funding for its expenses from IBM and ACM, and, this year, Google offered support as well. Any expenses left are covered by the School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

IBM has sponsored the event since 1997. Heintzman said that competition also allows students to socialize with research leaders from around the world and promotes opportunities within IBM.

Prizes for the top teams include scholarships and IBM merchandise. The final standings are determined by the number of problems solved, and, if multiple teams solve the same amount of problems, the amount of time taken to solve them is used for determination.

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