

‘Battle of the Brains’ computer competition tests students

By **JOHN REYNOLDS**

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Notebooks and crumpled paper covered tables at the University of Illinois at Springfield on Saturday as students from across the state gave it their all in a computer programming contest.

Sponsored by IBM and the Association for Computing Machinery, the 33rd annual ACM International Collegiate Programming Contest — also known as the Global “Battle of the Brains” Software Competition — set three member teams of university students against each other in a competition to solve computer programming problems.

The teams had five hours to finish eight problems, and in some instances, the problems were more than a page in length.

Laszlo Acs, past-president of the UIS Computer Science Club and one of the organizers of the competition, said that sometimes students have to read the questions two or three times to understand what exactly is being asked.

“It’s an extremely intense competition. It’s quite stressful on the actual contestants,” Acs said.

Saturday’s competition at UIS included 17 teams from colleges across Illinois. The field of competitors, however, was much larger.

Illinois is one of six states in the Midwest region, and simultaneous competitions were going on at other sites throughout the region Saturday. Combined, more than 140 teams were competing for the privilege of going on to the world competition, which will be hosted by KTH — the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm — next year.

Scoring went on throughout the day, and results from all of the sites were available online. Around 4:30 p.m., a U of I team from the Urbana-Champaign campus competing at the Springfield site was in first place out of about 140 teams.

At the end of the day, that team ended up in third place. As of Saturday, it had not been determined if that team would advance to the competition in Sweden.

The questions tackled by the teams were similar to problems that computer science students would face in the course of intermediate level programming.

Acs compared the questions to word problems that mathematics students might encounter. The competition questions, however, were computer oriented.

“The questions are challenging,” Acs said.

“The level of difficulty ranges from easy to extremely hard. There are usually one or two that are solved in the first 10 minutes of the competition, then there are one or two that are never solved.”

The teams competing at UIS were spread out among a handful of rooms on the second floor of University Hall.

Each team was given one computer, one monitor and one keyboard. That meant only one team member was able to enter data at a time.

Other team members sat near the monitors, and some worked through the problems in notebooks.

The rooms were very quiet.

While the questions didn’t deal with the type of problems programmers run into in everyday life, there were some real-world benefits of the competition.

“This does provide them with an experience of what it’s like to work in an extreme programming environment, because this is extreme in the highest order,” Acs said. “You have time pressure on you — you have to solve these things in a very short period of time, and you have to work together as a team to determine how you are going to do it. So, this is real-world experience you can put on your resume.”

John Reynolds can be reached at 788-1524.