Freeman team tops in national accounting competition

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Freeman students Sarah Lawhorne, Andrew Landsiedel, Michael Kreisman, Neil Barot and Sara Scott, left to right, beat out more than 450 teams from across the U.S. to win this year's PwC Challenge accounting case competition. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Neither snow nor rain nor Lundi Gras could stop a team of Tulane University students from winning first place in the 2015 PwC Challenge, a national accounting case competition sponsored by PricewaterhouseCoopers. The company posted a video announcing the winners of this year's competition on Friday (Feb. 12).

In winning this year's competition, team members Neil Barot, Michael Kreisman, Andrew Landsiedel, Sarah Lawhorne and Sara Scott beat out more than 450 teams

from 52 colleges and universities across the U.S. to take home the $10,000 grand prize.

“We put so much time and effort into making this happen, it was great to see that hard work pay off,” said Barot, a sophomore majoring in management and computer science. “I still can’t believe it actually happened.”

It almost didn’t happen. Less than 24 hours before the team was scheduled to fly to Washington D.C. to deliver its presentation to judges, PwC canceled the finals due to the threat of a severe winter storm bearing down on the East Coast. The final round was quickly reconceived as a virtual competition, but organizers unwittingly scheduled the team’s conference call with judges for Feb. 8—Lundi Gras, a university holiday and a day on which most Tulane students were celebrating carnival, not discussing the implications of corporate tax rates.

Despite the distractions (one team member who was traveling had to participate in the conference call via Skype), the students handled their questions like seasoned pros.

“One of the great things was their questions fit exactly into what we wanted to say,” Barot said. “They gave us a chance to show more of our knowledge and expand on things we weren’t necessarily able to focus on in the presentation.”

In addition to being impressed with their teamwork and presentation skills, Barot said the judges also liked their contrarian approach to the case. Rather than choosing one of two strategies proposed in the case, the students rejected both alternatives, opting instead to present new recommendations based on their own research.

“I think that was one of the things we did that really set us apart,” Barot said.

Christine Smith, professor of practice in accounting and faculty adviser to the team, said she knew immediately after the conference call that her students had likely won.

“They totally rocked,” said Smith. “The depth and breadth of their content was just remarkable, and the professionalism with which they delivered it was just fantastic. I was 99.99 percent sure we were going to win. They did that incredible a job.”

“To win a national competition is a great accomplishment, but to win a national competition sponsored by one of the largest, most prestigious professional services firms in the world is bigger by an order of magnitude,” added Freeman School Dean Ira Solomon. “I’m proud to have remarkable students like Neil, Michael, Andrew, Sarah and Sara represent Freeman, and I congratulate them on the outstanding results of their dedication and hard work.”