Competing Blind

The Fed Challenge Team Scores Big Despite Going Last

The Rutgers – Newark Fed Challenge Team makes applying macroeconomic theory seem like simple math, but team member Sharissa Barrows knows firsthand that hard work, and lots of it, really pays off. The team took second place in the national finals of the sixth annual College Fed Challenge held at the Federal Reserve in Washington, D.C. They brought home a $15,000 prize from the Moody’s Foundation, a glass plaque and lots of glory for their remarkable performance and made all of Rutgers University proud.

The Fed Challenge is an academic competition designed to bring real world economics to the classroom. Teams act as the Federal Reserve’s Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), which sets the nation’s monetary policy. They are challenged to review economic and financial conditions forecast economic trends and defend their predictions in order to advance in the competition.

This year’s Rutgers-Newark team, Lakshya Aeri, Victor Castaneda, Michael Martins and Sharissa Barrow, took a risk with a non-traditional talk show style presentation. Adding to the tension, they couldn’t gauge how well they were doing because they competed last in the competition. As the teams completed their presentations, they were invited to watch the remaining competitors, but because the Rutgers – Newark team drew last position, they were essentially competing blind.

The Fed Challenge began at the district level and the Rutgers – Newark Fed Challenge Team won first place on November 5, 2009 when they competed against more than 30 schools in the New York District College Fed Challenge Competition.

“We prepared by reading everything we could on monetary policy including books, news and journal articles and even speeches,” notes Barrow. “Starting in September, we met every Friday with team coach and Economics Department Chair John Graham to go over the data we collected, work on questions, fine tune our presentation and update our competition website. As we advanced in the competition, we met more frequently.”

Teams were required to give a 20-minute presentation and then participate in a 15-minute question and answer session with a panel of judges.

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Warmest of greetings from campus! Happily, the campus emerged unscathed from the nor’easter of March 12-14, but we’re now battening down the hatches in preparation for another kind of storm — more budget cuts from Trenton.

Knowing that storm, which has swept colleges and universities throughout the nation, was coming, we have worked very hard to both put our college in order financially while pursuing our goals of excellence in education, excellence in research, and excellence in opportunity for our students. We remain dedicated to these goals, even as the state withdraws its support from higher education.

I have been intensively planning for a secure financial future for NCAS and UC. We are looking to an array of opportunities for new revenue streams for the colleges, from increased grant funding to off-campus programs. In addition, our Development Team and I are ramping up our efforts to reach out, both in New Jersey and beyond, to encourage greater levels of private support from alumni/ae such as you to secure those goals for our college and our students into the future.

One of the most important new initiatives is the establishment of the Dean’s Cabinet. These loyal men and women, whose pictures you can see in this newsletter, are dedicating a portion of their time and their resources to support NCAS and UC. We have held our first meeting, and now they are in turn reaching out to other alumni/ae in this effort. Our goal is to develop an effective alternative source of support so that the missions of NCAS and UC can continue to be healthy. While that is challenging in this economy, the response from you and your fellow alumni/ae has been gratifying. I have already seen how much enthusiasm you have for serving the students of the future so that they can continue to have the kind of college experience you did. Together we will achieve this goal.

Philip L. Yeagle

Dean’s Cabinet

Robert Alvine NCAS ’60
Kirk Baur NCAS ’87
Yvonne Sarcone Cali NCAS ’73
Bernard J. D’Avella, Jr. NCAS ’70
Margaret Derrick NCAS ’71
Lucia DiNapoli Gibbons NCAS ’86
George J. Hill IJCN ’99
Dominick Mazzagetti NCAS ’69
Gary Sobo, Esq NCAS ’65
Dr. Alexis J. Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences, is the first scientist ever to demonstrate and observe real-time protein synthesis in cells. This discovery has already had an impact on the world of biosciences by demonstrating the limitations of the green fluorescent protein, GFP, when imaging recently synthesized proteins. Using GFP, scientists can see where cellular proteins go. With the translation site imaging method, now scientists can see where and when a protein is synthesized. Following real-time protein synthesis in cells promises to enable scientists to track how cancer tumors form new blood vessels, how Alzheimer’s disease kills brain neurons, and how HIV infected cells produce new viruses.

“Alex has done what no man has done before,” says Professor Edward M. Bonder, Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences. “His breakthrough in microscopy was even cited in the 2008 Nobel Prize for Chemistry.”

Throughout his own microscopy training, Dr. Rodriguez participated in numerous minority research programs that provided him with the opportunities to present his work at various colleges. He noted that these colleges lacked the resources to train students so he set out to develop a program that takes advantage of Rutgers – Newark diversity, industrial partnerships and its location to build a modern imaging education program here.

Dr. Rodriguez established a 10-week course that provides minority undergraduate biology students with the multidiscipline expertise to conduct complex biomedical research. The course prepares the next generation of minority students for cutting-edge research in microscopy. With support from the University’s Academic Excellence Fund, the Initiative for Minority and Graduate Education in Imaging Program (IMAGE) instructs students in the fundamentals of live cell imaging while also building a network of private and public partnerships with imaging hardware companies.

“Instructors in the IMAGE Program offer technical training that cuts across scientific disciplines including biology, physics, and chemistry,” explains Dr. Rodriguez. “Microscopy has evolved and requires cross-disciplinary training. The program combines theory and practical experience, giving undergraduate students the necessary skills and methodologies they can use during their research careers.”

The IMAGE Program is forming the basis for future breakthroughs in microscopy while creating a multidisciplinary network of imaging professionals and skilled minority students linked to Rutgers-Newark. The program is advancing the research mission of the university by grooming a core group of researchers who require advanced optical techniques to address today’s and tomorrow’s biological mysteries. In essence, the IMAGE program is setting the stage for potential biology scholars to join the ranks with Dr. Rodriguez and do what no man or woman has done before.
A Love of Libraries and a Thirst for Knowledge

Merve embodies the diversity on campus, having come to the U.S. when she was a year old. The first to enroll in college, she lives at home, works three part time jobs and is a double major. The Blumenthal Scholarship is awarded to a full-time undergraduate student at NCAS based on academic merit. The recipient must demonstrate outstanding achievement or leadership in service to Rutgers – Newark, voluntary community service or participation in extracurricular activities.

If she had endless time and resources, Merve Fejzula would major in every subject offered at Rutgers - Newark. She is a dual-major in English and History with a minor in Philosophy. Merve reports that the combination “teaches you to think.” “My outlook is more enriched since studying these disciplines.”

Merve, a Henry Blumenthal Scholarship recipient with a 3.89 grade point average, has embraced her college experience and advocates for the campus and all it has to offer. “When you come to Rutgers-Newark, you comprehend life’s potential and experience things that you would never have thought possible.”

One of the things that Merve had not imagined was becoming news editor of The Observer, the independent student newspaper of Rutgers-Newark. She never considered running for an office, but a friend said she was qualified and suggested she go for it. Merve ran unopposed and quickly learned how to multitask. “Things happen so fast and it is good to experience how to juggle school, the paper, and work successfully.”

When she isn’t running down a breaking story or studying for a test, Merve can be found working at her favorite libraries. She is a research assistant for Mark Winston, Director of Dana Library and Assistant Chancellor of Rutgers-Newark. She seeks relevant information for his publications on leadership, diversity and ethics. Merve is also a veteran among the stacks at the Garfield Public Library where she has worked part-time since high school.

When looking towards the future, Merve is considering a summer study abroad program before beginning her senior year. “This is beyond my wildest dreams,” she says. “Many of the programs provide a cultural immersion even beyond the classroom learning experience. I could not afford to consider this opportunity if it wasn’t for the Blumenthal Scholarship. The Scholarship has made so many wonderful things possible for me that it’s hard for me to express the depth of my gratitude.”

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“We were so excited to hear we won,” said Barrow. “It was a long, hard day and when we got the news, we broke out into whoops and hollers. Then we realized the work was just beginning!”

The team advanced to the November 20 semifinals at the New York Federal Reserve defeating Pace University, College of New Jersey, and State University of New York-Oneonta. Then it was on to Washington D.C., Federal Reserve Headquarters, for the national finals. They met Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and competed in the prestigious Federal Reserve boardroom.

“During the last five years, Harvard and Northwestern had a stranglehold on winning the first or second place spots until Rutgers-Newark and Lafayette unseated them,” states Professor Graham. “Once again, we have shown the country that Rutgers – Newark is a formidable team with a successful record that continues to soar.”

On December 2, the Rutgers – Newark Fed Challenge Team placed second and made competition history by edging out Harvard and Northwestern Universities who trailed in third and fourth places. Lafayette College placed first.

And the team has equal praise of their professor who was pivotal in guiding the team to their success. “Professor Graham loves macro economics and his enthusiasm is contagious,” explains Barrow. “He is well read, knowledgeable and he instills in his students the ability to think critically. We have the utmost respect for him and his ability to teach us a difficult subject yet make it fun, challenging and an overall win for us who can boast that we are national finalists.”