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Mobile App Challenge Reproduces the Entrepreneurial Experience

Corporate sponsors take competition to the next level by helping students turn their entrepreneurial ideas into viable businesses

MERCED, Calif. — After six months of intense planning and programming, the winning team of the [Mobile App Challenge](#) at the University of California, Merced, will be announced during a showcase finale April 26.

The Mobile App Challenge Showcase, held at noon in the California Room on campus, will allow each of the eight teams that participated to highlight the importance of their application in hopes of earning \$4,500 in scholarships, among other prizes. In addition, industry leaders will speak about emerging technologies and trends in the mobile embedded software space.

This year, the challenge – which is hosted by UC Merced's [Career Services Center](#) – gained corporate and foundation sponsors to further support scholarships for the winning teams.

AT&T, the lead sponsor of the Mobile App Challenge, is focused on cultivating and supporting interest in tech innovation and technology careers among California's youth. Danika Patrick, innovation lead at the AT&T Foundry in Palo Alto, will address students and faculty at the Mobile App Challenge.

"Innovation comes from students who feel comfortable challenging the status quo to solve problems. At AT&T, we have opened up our network through APIs, app challenges,

Quick Facts

- The winning team in UC Merced's Mobile App Challenge will be announced April 26.
- This year, 35 students on eight teams are competing for scholarship funding.
- Corporate and foundation sponsors include AT&T, IBM and its Students for a Smarter Planet division, Womble Carlyle, Go Big and the Yadav-Ranjan Foundation.

hackathons and our work at the foundry so that we can commercialize and implement innovative solutions as quickly as possible,” Patrick said. “It is always amazing to see what students can come up with, and I am excited to hear directly from UC Merced student entrepreneurs about their ideas and products.”

As one of the first hires to the AT&T Foundry, Patrick brings years of experience in user-centered research and design strategy and has been instrumental in shaping its culture and processes to ensure AT&T is meeting its goal of innovation for human progress.

[Paul Maglio](#), a professor in UC Merced’s [School of Engineering](#) and an IBM research scientist, will discuss IBM’s view of mobile computing for enterprise applications.

The idea for the competition grew out of a meeting between UC Merced Foundation Board of Trustee Rani Yadav-Ranjan — CEO and managing member of Purple Leaf, a technology development and IP licensing company — and university officials including Brian O’Bruba, director of Career Services.

O’Bruba said the main goal of the challenge — now in its second year — is to help students sharpen technical skills, showcase their creativity and cultivate their entrepreneurial spirit.

“The Mobile App Challenge is about helping students turn entrepreneurial ideas into viable businesses, which will help prepare them for entering the workforce upon graduation,” O’Bruba said. “With the addition of our corporate sponsorships, we have been able to take the challenge to the next level and offer students a more well-rounded learning experience.”

Thirty-five students representing each of the university’s three schools took the challenge to develop innovative and custom applications for wireless devices. Some teams tackled students’ real-life problems, such as manually assigning chores, dividing bills and keeping track of personal finances; downloading homework, exams and other study tools; and exploring career options. Others created a breathalyzer with a social component and mobile games.

The five-member team known as HiFive tackled event posters. Junior Alyson Cabral said she and fellow students Nectali Castellanos, Robert Hewitt, Raymond Lee and Kevin Rodriguez wanted to make it easier for students to know what events are taking place across campus without having to memorize everything posted around campus.

Their app, called Posters, allows clubs and organizations to post events so they are easily accessible to students and can be sorted events by categories, including free food, academics, athletics, professional development and more.

“The Mobile App Challenge is a great opportunity for all students because it gives us the hands-on experience needed to develop relevant skills for the work place, regardless of

discipline,” said Cabral, a [mechanical engineering](#) major from Merced. “I have no doubt that this experience will benefit my future greatly.”

Cabral said she was drawn to the competition after watching last year’s final presentations.

“Seeing the teams’ final products first hand inspired us to want a piece of the experience as well,” Cabral said. “It is important to take part in opportunities like the Mobile App Challenge because experiences like these develop our confidence, professionalism and collaborative skills.”

A panel of judges will award the grand prize based on the quality of the app, innovation and a professional pitch to the panel. The campus community voted earlier in April to award four other prizes that include the most original app and the app with the best functional design.

In addition to AT&T, sponsors include IBM and its Students for a Smarter Planet division, Womble Carlyle, Go Big and the Yadav-Ranjan Foundation.

“Students for a Smarter Planet decided to support UC Merced’s Mobile App Challenge because our goals very much align. We want to encourage new entrepreneurs, plus promote innovation and creativity for solving real-world problems,” said Wendy Murphy, executive program manager at IBM. “Entering this challenge helps to prepare students to enter the workforce and helps them grow their skills in several areas, not only technical.”

In addition to being popular on campus, the challenge was recently recognized by the International Data Group as a 2013 Laureate for the Computerworld Honors Program. The annual award program honors visionary applications of information technology promoting positive social, economic and educational change. The award will be presented on June 3 in Washington, D.C.

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UC Merced opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the 10th campus in the University of California system and the first American doctoral research university of the 21st century. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research, a model of sustainable design and construction, and a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region.