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Learning Beyond the Classroom

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Learning beyond the classroom

When Keston Obendorf '08 and Nathan Oliver '09 spent an afternoon playing rock, paper, scissors last fall, it was more than just casual fun.

Hunched over a computer in an auditorium full of competitors, the two computer science majors collaborated on code directing a computer to play the age-old children's game at the Pacific Northwest Regional Intercollegiate Programming Competition (ICPC) at the University of Washington. Once that was accomplished, they tackled 10 other problems during the intense five-hour contest, successfully solving three and finishing in the top half of the regional competition.

"It's like taking 11 consecutive final exams," said Dan Ford, assistant professor of computer science, who accompanied eight Linfield students to the competition. "They did exceptionally well."

Obendorf and Oliver are part of a growing segment of Linfield students taking part in academic endeavors off campus. Each year, an average of 250 students, representing half of the academic departments on campus, travel to professional conferences and competitions, according to Elizabeth Atkinson, associate dean of faculty and associate professor of chemistry.

Students represent academic departments spanning the curriculum, including humanities and the social and

physical sciences. Some students present scholarly research developed with faculty mentors at professional meetings. Others perform creative works at music and theatrical competitions. Still others, like Obendorf and Oliver, enter academic competitions.

"Linfield is committed to giving students opportunities for hands-on learning so they achieve success in graduate school or in the workplace," said Atkinson, who has accompanied chemistry students to regional and national conferences. Linfield students have also competed internationally. "These types of experiences enhance students' eligibility for future internship opportunities."

What's more, academic travel exposes students to cutting-edge work from other institutions and notable experts from around the world. Students interact with CEOs, administrators, graduate school representatives and student peers.

"They find soul mates, others who are passionate with similar interests," Atkinson added. "It gives them insight into what they can do beyond their undergraduate careers. It's eye opening."

That interaction with students and faculty from other institutions is crucial, Ford said. The ICPC is the largest programming contest in the world with more than 21,000 students taking part worldwide.

"It helps to boost their confidence knowing they can compete," Ford said. "It also shows us what we can improve on. We realized a lot of math is required for this computer competition."

As a result, Oliver enrolled in a mathematical graph theory class and plans to be better prepared for next year's competition. Obendorf is contemplating graduate school and said the competition advanced his computer science skills.

— Laura Davis

Karen Shaw '08, left, and Chris Braden '08, along with Jennifer Johnson '09 (not pictured) presented their research on cancer cell motility at the American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in San Diego, Calif., in April.

