Are you a graduate student in instructional design or human performance improvement looking for an opportunity to practice design and development skills, collaborate with peers, and receive mentorship from faculty members and practitioners? If you answered yes, then the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) PacifiCorp Design & Development Competition is for you! Last year, we won this competition and in this article we will describe the systematic process we used and offer advice for navigating the three phases of the AECT PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition.

What is the AECT PacifiCorp Design & Development Competition?

The PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition is sponsored by the Design and Development Division of AECT and PacifiCorp, a MidAmerican energy holdings company with headquarters in Portland, Oregon. The PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition began in 2004 and is a special event that culminates with a final presentation by the top three design teams at the International AECT Convention each year. The PacifiCorp Competition Committee releases the problem statement to AECT members at the annual International AECT Conference, and is available on the AECT website (www.aect.org/PacifiCorp). The competition is open to graduate students in masters or doctoral level programs of instructional or learning design and human performance improvement. Design teams are comprised of two graduate students that do not need to attend the same university. Team members must also be members of the AECT and the Design and Development Division.

What is the Purpose of the Competition?

The purpose of the PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition is for graduate students to engage in a mock systematic analysis and to propose “theoretical solutions” for a hypothetical design problem (Bishop, Schuch, Spector, & Tracey, 2005). Through this experience, graduate students engage in an opportunity to showcase their ability to collaborate with others, generate coherent proposals, manage projects during a specific timeframe, and explain their design solution to a panel of judges at the AECT International Conference (www.aect.org/PacifiCorp). This experience also allows graduate students the forum to present and explain the design process to people outside the field of instructional design and human performance improvement (Schuch, 2008).

The PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition consists of three phases. During the first phase, all of the participants choose their teams and create an initial plan in the form of a 1500 word abstract for addressing the proposed problem. Out of those proposals, the PacifiCorp Competition Committee selects the most promising proposals for the second phase. Once the second phase finalists are notified, the PacifiCorp Competition Committee assigns a mentor to each of the teams from an institution outside their own. These mentors assist the student design teams in transitioning their initial abstract into a fully developed proposal that includes a needs analysis, budget, work breakdown structure, instructional
The teams submit the fully developed proposal to the PacifiCorp Competition Committee for review by August 15 of the competition year. From the second phase teams, the PacifiCorp Competition Committee narrows down the selection to the top three submissions. These top three student design teams compete in the third and final phase of the competition by polishing their design plan and presenting it to a panel of judges at the annual International AECT Conference.

**What are the Components for Success?**

We are both graduate students at Nova Southeastern University and our doctoral program is completely online. We met for the first time at the 2012 AECT Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. We both attended the PacifiCorp reception held the night before the annual competition and met the members of the 2012 finalist teams. We decided to throw our hats in the ring for the 2013 competition before we left the convention that year.

**Our tools.** We returned home to North Carolina and Florida and began preparing for the first phase of the 2013 AECT PacifiCorp Design and Development Competition. Our first hurdle was figuring out how we were going to communicate at a distance to complete the proposal. We used several tools to facilitate collaboration at a distance. Through Google Hangout, a free video conferencing tool, we were able to meet and review drafts of our proposal. A second tool we enlisted was Dropbox, a cloud-based file syncing service. By creating a Dropbox folder for our work, it allowed us to share files and maintain the documents in a well-organized manner. We also frequently used typical electronic tools such as email, text messaging, and telephone calls. By maintaining consistent communication, we were able to collaborate effectively towards completing the many tasks involved in the competition.

**Our process.** Instructional design (ID) is the systematic process of designing and developing instruction in order to improve human performance (Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2013). The given problem statement indicated the need for information and training strategies to inform the public, an education program and materials for public school students, evaluation of the program, and funding, time, and staff requirements (AECT, 2012). We provided these deliverables by following the ID process. First, we researched the characteristics of the learners: the citizens of Portland, Oregon and the students of Portland Public Schools. Next, we pinpointed the objectives the learners would meet. We then decided on the instructional strategies to use. Finally, we created formative and summative evaluations to determine ways to improve upon the design. We developed a budget and timeline to determine the funding, time, and staff that would be necessary to implement the proposal. The procedural system of designing instruction led us through the process of creating the design, developing the instruction, a plan for implementation, and creating evaluations in order to meet the required deliverables of the 2013 problem statement (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009).

Although the competition occurred over the course of a year, the time passed by quickly with the other responsibilities we had as parents and graduate students. It was important to be adaptable and flexible with our process of managing each phase of the project (Wysocki, 2009). We set up regular meetings through Google Calendar, stayed in contact between meetings by using email or texting, created a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) for the first phase of the completion. We met, on average, once a week in a Google Hangout to discuss the solution we intended to purpose and planned how we would divide the responsibilities of getting the information that we needed to write the initial proposal.

In the second phase of the competition, the PacifiCorp Competition Committee assigned a mentor to assist our team in developing a detailed design plan. Our mentor was Suhana Chikatla, an instructional designer from Wallace State Community College. We met with her through Skype, another free video conferencing tool, in mid June 2013 for the first time. The second phase of the competition required conducting a needs analysis, developing a budget, designing and developing instruction, and developing a public awareness campaign. She guided us through planning and preparing the final manuscript that was submitted in August. The manuscript was our design plan and included the process we selected for addressing the problem, explaining each component of the design solution, and creating the deliverables to accompany the final proposal.

As we entered the third and final phase, communication increased from weekly to every 2-3 days. As time grew shorter for preparation, we adjusted our WBS to bring our project to completion on deadline. Part of our presentation included printed deliverables for the judges and audience members. We needed to prepare, proof, and print these deliverables prior to the final presentation scheduled in Anaheim. Most of our deliverables were printed prior to arriving in Anaheim.

**What Lessons Were Learned?**

Experience is a wonderful means of gaining knowledge. We learned several lessons from our PacifiCorp Competition experience including the harm procrastination can cause, being well prepared for the presentation, and how you should expect for everything to go wrong.

**Our recommendations.** First of all, do not allow your team to procrastinate. Set deadlines for accomplishing specific tasks. Assign work responsibilities and stay accountable to each other. You have up to one year to prepare for the presentation at the conference and you need to work on your proposal every moment possible.

The competition culminates with the presentation and you need to impress the judges. Prepare well for your presentation, be professional, and be creative. The judges want you to do