18th annual Finance Case Competition is test for judges

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Christopher Conoscenti (MBA/JD ’01) has served as a judge for the Rolanette and Berdon Lawrence Finance Case Competition for the past five years, but he says the 2014 contest, which took place at the A. B. Freeman School of Business on Friday (March 28), was without a doubt the toughest yet.



From left, Finance Case Competition judges Christopher Conoscenti, Chuck Tilis, Claire Liu and Joe Agular. Conoscenti said this year's competition was the closest in the five years he's served as a judge.

“This was the hardest year to judge out of any of the years that I’ve judged it,” said Conoscenti, managing director of Energy Investment Banking at JP Morgan Securities. “It was shades of gray in terms of differences between who we picked for number one versus two, three, four and five. It was just really tight.”

In the end, Conoscenti and his fellow judges — Joe Agular (A&S ’81, MBA ’88), investment manager at Johnson Rice & Co.; Claire Liu, assistant treasurer at LyondellBasell Industries; and Chuck Tilis (A&S ’77, MBA ’78) , partner, Assurance Leadership Team, at PricewaterhouseCoopers — decided that Ryan Bendinelli, Yifan Xu, Aaron Gaddie and Paul Whitmire, a team of MBAs from Vanderbilt University, had edged out the competition enough to win first place and this year’s grand prize of $7,000.

A team from the University of North Carolina — Joseph Quinn, Michael Baccich, Jimmy Colavita and Newton Sears — earned second-place honors and a prize of $5,000, while a team from the University of Texas at Dallas — Adriana Pizana, Samir Patel, Brit Sundberg and Mohammed Bourji — took home the third-place prize of $3,000.

“I’ve done this six, seven times at least, and it’s a real privilege to do it,” Agular (A&S ’81, MBA ’88) told the student teams. “I really thank you for having me again because I enjoy finance, first of all, but I also enjoy seeing how bright the future is for all of you, because you’re very talented. You all had great presentations, and it was tough to judge.”

In addition to the top three finishers, this year’s competition also featured MBA teams from Rice University, Washington University, University of South Carolina and Tulane University.



Dean Ira Solomon, far left, and competition sponsors Berdon and Rolanette Lawrence, center, awarded this year's grand prize of $7,000 to a team from Vanderbilt University.

The Finance Case Competition began in 1997 and has been sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence since 1998. Berdon Lawrence (BBA ’64, MBA ’65) is the founder of Hollywood Marine and former chairman of Kirby Corp., an operator of inland tank barges headquartered in Houston. Kirby purchased Hollywood Marine in 1999. Lawrence is also a former member of the Business School Council and a former member of the Board of Tulane.

“It’s hard to believe it’s been 18 years, but it’s been fun for me,” Lawrence said before announcing this year’s winners. “My MBA from Tulane was really helpful in my being able to build a company, so this is a nice way for me to tell Tulane that I appreciate what they did for me with my education.”

To see more photos from the competition, including photos of all the winning teams, visit the Freeman School’s Flickr page.