USA and Canada Teams Win Ten Medals and several other prizes at the 2018 International Linguistics Olympiad in Prague, Czech Republic

Two USA teams and two Canadian teams, each consisting of four high school students, brought back huge success at the 16th International Linguistics Olympiad, held from July 26 to July 30 in Prague, Czech Republic. The teams took home ten individual medals, two team medals, two best solution awards, and an award for the highest combined scores.

August 7, 2018
Hosted by the Czech University of Life Sciences
July 26 - 30, Prague, Czech Republic

On July 24, eight USA students and eight Canadian students traveled to the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic. 192 contestants in 48 teams from 30 countries and territories participated in the 16th International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL). The two US teams and the Canada Anglophone team were selected by the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO), while the Canada Francophone team qualified through the Olympiade Linguistique Canadienne-Canadian Linguistics Olympiad (OLC-CLO).

The IOL is one of twelve International Science Olympiads for secondary school students. The contest consists of two events: the individual and the team contest. The individual contest is a six-hour exam with five problems. This year, the individual round featured the following

languages: Creek, Hakhun, Terêna, Mountain Arapesh, and Akan. In the team contest, team members collaborate to solve one particularly challenging problem. This year, teams were given four hours to translate a long list of words and sentences between three indigenous languages of Brazil - Mẽbêngôkre, Xavante and Krĩkatí. Problem solving at the IOL stresses the ability of contestants to decipher the mechanisms of languages by using logic and reasoning to explore a wide range of hypotheses.

The US team took home eight individual medals. Swapnil Garg of USA Red, Benjamin LaFond of USA Blue, Pranav Krishna of USA Blue, and Andrew Tockman of USA Red took home gold medals. Silver medals went to Mihir Singhal of USA Blue, Ethan A. Chi of USA Red, and Russell Emerine of USA Blue. Finally, Brian Xiao of USA Red was awarded a bronze medal. Team USA Blue was also recognized for receiving the highest combined individual scores, scoring an average of 70.25, and ahead of a team from Bulgaria and a team from the UK. In addition, Andrew Tockman was awarded the best solution for his answer to problem 1 and Swapnil Garg received best solution for problem 5. Lastly, USA Blue and USA Red took home gold and silver medals, respectively, in the team competition.

Meanwhile, for the Canadian team, Ken Jiang and Kevin Liang of Canada Anglophone took home bronze medals. Furthermore, Shuli Jones of Canada Anglophone received an honourable mention award.

In addition to the competition, the IOL also provided contestants with a variety of other activities to enjoy. Students and coaches sat in on lectures about neural networks and took an excursion to the city of Kutná Hora where they saw medieval cathedrals and took a tour at the modern art museum. The teams also participated in a special linguistics problem organized by the Bulgarian team in memory of mountaineer Boyan Petrov. When reflecting on this year's competition, the team members cherished the chance to meet so many incredible and interesting people from around the world. Shuli Jones of Canada Anglophone said, "I knew I would enjoy solving linguistics problems at IOL, but I never anticipated how much fun I would have meeting people who felt the same way." Similarly, Ethan A. Chi of USA Red stated, "I had a great time hanging out and exploring Prague with friends from not just the USA and Canada teams, but also all over the world." Ken Jiang of Canada Anglophone also added, "The IOL was also my first time in Europe, and the first time I met people from many of the participating countries." Overall, all the team members had a great time at the event with Mihir Singhal of USA Blue saying, "The IOL was a lot of fun, from the interesting problems to the amazing group of people that I got to meet." Pranav Krishna of USA Blue also said, "I have felt more comfortable at the IOL than I have anywhere else. The people are great, similar-minded, and friendly." Benjamin LaFond of USA Blue echoed many of the sentiments of his teammates concluding with "My ten days preparing for and competing in this year's IOL have been some of the best days of my life. I have cherished the rare opportunity to compete and hang out with people whose interests and temperament so closely match my own, and my only regret is that I did not discover competitive linguistics earlier."

The two USA teams and the Canada Anglophone team were selected through the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO). This annual competition, held since 2007, has two rounds, which are held at universities and high schools throughout the USA and Canada. This year over 1,700 students took the open round, a three-hour test. Approximately the top 10% of the students from the open round were invited to the next round, a more difficult, four-hour test. The joint US-Canadian practices were conducted online and in person by the USA coaches Dragomir Radev of Yale University, Lori Levin of Carnegie Mellon University, and Aleka Blackwell of Middle Tennessee State University, the Canadian coaches Daniel Lovsted of McGill University, Andrés Pablo Salanova of the University of Ottawa, and Gustavo Beritognolo, also of

the University of Ottawa, as well as other coaches Pat Littell of the National Research Center of Canada, Tom McCoy of Johns Hopkins University, and Adam Hesterberg of MIT.

Before travelling to IOL, some of the team members spent three days training at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where they were joined by several local high school students. They attended presentations by Pat Littell (phonology), Aleka Blackwell (morphology), Daniel Lovsted (IOL solution writing) and David Mortensen (phonetics). The teams also practiced solving several team and individual problems.

Other members of the organizing committee include James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University and Ali Sharman of the University of Michigan. The teams' sponsors include the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics (NAACL), the US National Science Foundation (NSF), Brandeis University, Carnegie Mellon University, Yale University, and individual donors.

The next IOL will be held in Yongin, South Korea from July 29 to August 2, 2019.

More Information
NACLO - http://www.nacloweb.org/ - practice problems, contest rules, and registration details
OLCLO - https://olclo.org/ - practice problems and registration details
IOL - http://www.ioling.org/ - all past IOL problems and results

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