Bringing Competitions into the Classroom: Reflections on High-Impact Course Design

Overview

This guide outlines my approach to integrating a national extracurricular competition—specifically, the Washington Media Scholars Foundation (WMSF) Media Case Competition—into ADPR 352: Media Planning, an upper-level advertising course at Ball State University. This initiative exemplifies High-Impact Practices (HIPs) as identified by Kuh (2008).

Since Fall 2019, I have taught ADPR 352, officially designated as a high-impact undergraduate research course. Beginning in 2024, the course has been co-taught on an alternating semester basis. Around this time, I introduced the WMSF competition into the curriculum. This integration provided students with meaningful experiential learning opportunities, and strengthened their confidence, and led to national recognition. Notably, one team won second place nationally in 2022, and another was named a finalist in 2024. Both accomplishments were directly tied to their application of course concepts within the competition framework.

Encouraging students to participate in external competitions can be challenging due to their time constraints or initial hesitation. However, when the competition is thoughtfully embedded into the course curriculum, such as a structured assignment, students are more likely to engage, persist, and find value in the experience.

While the example presented here is situated within advertising education, the strategies and framework can be adapted across disciplines. This shareable resource explains how to identify and align an external competition with course content, structure, and timing. It complements my peer-reviewed article (Chung, 2025), which discusses subject-specific instructional design with examples of course alignment, grading rubrics, and student feedback. As the article is not open access, this guide offers accessible, practical insights into a replicable course model that faculty across disciplines can adapt for their own contexts.

Selection and Alignment

(1) Understanding Course Needs

External competitions can support various HIPs, including undergraduate research, collaborative projects, ePortfolios, and capstone projects, depending on instructional goals and course design. For ADPR 352, I focused on undergraduate research—one of Ball State's four designated HIPs—and collaboration due to the analytical nature and team-based structure of the media plan competition.

ADPR 352 Media Planning is designed to develop students' skills in strategic, data-driven decision-making for selecting and scheduling media time and space. Students learn audience

segmentation, brand and competitor analysis, and budgeting, and the development of cost-efficient media plans. Assignments typically include research-based group projects. For these reasons, the course has been officially designated as a high-impact undergraduate research course at Ball State University.

However, the course had a recurring challenge: students in ADPR 352 often exhibited lower motivation and confidence, especially when compared other creativity-focused advertising courses. Students often find media math and efficiency calculations abstract or intimidating. Although the course already included research components, these often lacked a sense of urgency and connection to real-world outcomes.

Initially, I thought about incorporating client-based immersive learning. However, I realized that such approaches are better suited for our capstone courses, *Advertising* or *Public Relations Campaigns*, which emphasize creative deliverables tailored to client needs. In contrast, media planning focuses more on budget allocation and media efficiency calculations, which don't align well with clients' expectations from students. So, I needed an alternative that better supported the course's focus on data-driven budgeting and efficiency.

(2) Why the WMSF Competition?

While exploring potential options, I was introduced to the WMSF's Media Case Competition through colleagues. Unlike most advertising competitions or contests that center on creativity or message strategies, this competition focuses exclusively on media strategy and planning, making it an ideal fit for ADPR 352.

The WMSF competition provides realistic fictional scenarios, structured datasets, and clear evaluation criteria that directly align with the course's learning objectives. Students are challenged to apply course concepts to develop strategic media plans under real-world constraints.

The competition's credibility also factored into my decision. It has supported over 800 students and awarded more than $3 million in scholarships across over 200 colleges. Moreover, the competition has been held annually, ensuring its reliable, long-term integration into the curriculum, not just for a single semester.

The competition consists of three rounds over six months, but only invited participants advance to the next round. The first round (November to January) requires a two-page response to given questions using provided data. The second round (February to March) requires more detailed planning responses (i.e., a 10-page long Word document and data inputs in Excel). For the final round (June), only six finalist teams are invited to Washington, D.C. to present their media plans to a panel of professional judges representing leading media organizations. All finalists receive an all-expenses-paid trip. The first-place team receives $5,000 per member, the second-place team $3,000 per member, and one participant is selected for the Mia Guion

Memorial Scholarship of $2,500. Finalists also have the opportunity to network with media professionals and visit top media companies.

Competitions like this do not need to be national to be effective. Regional or local opportunities can work just as well, as long as they align with course objectives and timing.

(3) Alignment with HIPs

At Ball State, faculty are encouraged to integrate HIPs into their courses, when appropriate, to promote deeper student engagement and other educational benefits. For ADPR 352, I aligned the WMSF competition with two HIPs most compatible with the course structure: undergraduate research and collaborative learning.

Undergraduate research is one of Ball State's officially designated HIPs. Although collaborative learning is not currently yet tagged in Banner, they are widely recognized as essential elements of high-impact learning.

HIPs can take many forms, such as capstone projects or ePortfolios. In this case, undergraduate research and collaboration were the most relevant to ADPR 352. For instructors exploring similar integrations, I recommend consulting the HIPs frameworks provided by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Ball State to ensure alignment with course objectives and measurable learning outcomes.

- AAC&U: High-Impact Practices
- Ball State HIPs Overview

For example, the Undergraduate Research section of the BSU High-Impact Practices (HIPs) webpage offers a framework for adaptation and implementation, outlining the following key components:

Criteria:

- Students are asked to design an "authentic" research project,
- Conduct the study, analyze findings, and
- Share the results of the research project, typically in a forum beyond the classroom.

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Students will explain relevant issues within the context of the course or project.
- Students will apply high-impact skill sets to their field of study.

Considerations for Strategic Integration

(1) Aligning Content Coverage

Successful integration depends on thoughtful content and timing alignment. Before integrating a competition to a course, instructors should carefully review its materials and assess the required knowledge and skills. The primary consideration is whether the course delivers the knowledge and skills needed to tackle the competition challenge. If the competition changes scenarios or datasets annually, like the case with WMSF competition, the instructor must double-check each year to ensure students are exposed to all relevant topics and skills. Any uncovered areas should be supplemented within the course.

(2) Aligning Course and Competition Timing

The timing of both the course and the competition is crucial. If the competition is annual and not held every semester, it may only be considered for the semester in which it occurs. For example, the WMSF competition starts in November and ends in June of the following year. Therefore, the fall semester is ideal for integrating the competition.

Additionally, students must acquire all the necessary knowledge before the deadline. For example, the WMSF competition has three rounds:

- Round 1 (Qualifying): Typically opens in November and closes in January.
- Round 2 (Semifinal): Invitation-only and close in March.
- Round 3 (Final): Held in June in Washington, D.C., for the top six teams.

Given this timeline, I would more closely incorporate the competition into fall semester courses, focusing on Round 1 submissions. This ensures that students are well-prepared before the January deadline. Students selected for Round 2 can continue their work independently or with the continued support of a faculty advisor after the semester ends. Of course, students in the spring semester may still be encouraged to participate voluntarily, even if the competition is not integrated into the course.

(3) Getting Students Engaged Early

Some students may initially hesitate to enter external competitions due to time commitment, lack of confidence, or unfamiliarity with the competition. To address these, it is important to clearly communicate the scope, value, and alignment of the competition with course objectives early in the semester. Emphasizing the competition's alignment to the course content and highlighting its credibility—especially if it's well-known within the field—can help motivate students to participate.

For instance, the WMSF competition runs from November to January, which is much later than the start of ADPR 352. To encourage engagement, the competition could be introduced during

the first week of class and revisited mid-semester. In these sessions, I would outline the competition's structure, rewards, and connections to course concepts, while also sharing past student outcomes, such as teams that placed nationally or advanced to later rounds.

Even if students do not advance beyond the first round, the experience remains valuable. Preparing a competitive first-round entry allows them to apply course concepts to real-world challenges and build confidence. For those who do advance, the competition provides additional benefits, such as recognition, networking opportunities, scholarships, and an all-expense-paid trip.

Instructors may also share anonymized examples of past student submissions (with permission) or testimonials to illustrate how the experience supports academic and professional growth. Doing so helps students see it not as an added burden, but as an integrated and rewarding part of their learning experience.

Instructional and Ethical Responsibilities

Incorporating external competitions into coursework involves several important considerations.

(1) Respecting Copyright and Usage Restrictions

Many competitions, including the WMSF Media Case Competition, impose strict guidelines regarding copyright, academic integrity, and external assistance. For example, their materials may not be reproduced or modified without permission. Therefore, instructors should verify usage permissions before incorporating competition content into coursework. When needed, students can be directed to access official materials independently.

(2) Maintaining Originality and Fairness in Student Work

Another key responsibility for instructors is guiding how student work is developed, reviewed, and shared. Competitions often set strict boundaries on collaboration and feedback before submission to maintain originality and fairness. Thus, instructors should carefully review the guidelines and consider the following:

- Are students are allowed to share work-in-progress with peers?
- Are public discussions or peer reviews permitted prior to submission?
- Is faculty feedback allowed, and if so, at what stages?

While feedback may be allowed, it should be designed to encourage students' independent thinking, rather than providing direct or specific solutions from instructors. This coaching-based approach allows students to develop and refine their own strategies while still receiving meaningful guidance. To support fairness and originality, peer review may be reserved until after all submissions are finalized.

(3) Considering Practical Barriers to Participation

Some external competitions may involve entry fees or travel costs, particularly for final-round participants. Instructors should check these financial considerations in advance or explore potential sources of institutional support, such as departmental, college, or university funding or grants. This is especially important when participation enhances the university's visibility and aligns with its academic mission.

If such support is uncertain or unavailable, the competition might be offered as an optional or extra-credit opportunity rather than a required part of the course.

(4) Promoting and Celebrating Student Work

Faculty play a key role in recognizing and elevating student success. Public acknowledgment not only builds student confidence but also fosters a culture of achievement and academic pride. Meaningful ways to celebrate student work include:

- Featuring outstanding projects at departmental, college, or university showcases
- Highlighting achievements on institutional websites, newsletters, or social media
- Writing recommendation letters that highlight students' competition accomplishments or related experiential learning

An example appears in the Ball State University blog post, 'From Classroom to Competition: Ball State Advertising Students Share Their 2024 Media Case Experience' (Criss, 2024).

Benefits Beyond the Classroom

Working together on competitions outside the classroom enhances students' competitiveness in the job market, while improving their eligibility for internal and external scholarships or top student awards. These experiences also deepen faculty-student mentorships and often lead to long-lasting professional relationships.

Even when students do not place in a competition, they still benefit from developing professional-level deliverables and receiving real-world feedback—both of which are valuable for their resumes, portfolios, and continued growth.

Lastly, students who participate in these experiences often become excellent mentors and feedback providers for future cohorts, helping to build a cycle of peer learning and continuous improvement that strengthens the overall learning community.

References

Chung, S. (2025). Enhancing advertising education through high-impact practices (HIPs): Integrating extracurricular competitions for undergraduate research and collaboration. *Journal of Advertising Education, 29*(1), 31–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/10980482251315928

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