

Improving Student Competitions
Theory-of-Change Symposium
indisputably.org/2019/09/theory-of-change-symposium-part-1
September 19, 2019



Tom Valenti has worked in the area of student negotiation and mediation competitions for many years, and he is concerned that we are not doing as good a job as we could in using these competitions to achieve their intended goals effectively. He is a Chicago-based conflict resolution specialist offering mediation, arbitration, and facilitation services and training around the globe.

The threshold question about student competitions is what are the goals of the competitions. I have noticed that the goals differ depending upon whether they are analyzed from the perspective of a student, a coach, an assessor (which may be described as a judge, expert, professional), and a participating university or a sponsoring organization. In negotiation parlance, we may even ask what are the “interests” of each of these stakeholders. Without assigning the interests to any one of the stakeholders, they may include:

- Winning
- Learning
- Brand recognition
- Personal recognition
- Status
- CV enhancement
- Self-promotion

None of these are bad in and of themselves. However, I am concerned that we sometimes create competition structures that unintentionally undermine the primary goal of promoting learning for all. We should agree on the priorities of the goals of competitions and create structures assuring that the highest priority goals are part of every competition.

In planning competitions, organizers should consider the following questions:

- Is the structure of the competition well designed to promote learning?
- Is the structure of the competition well designed to fit the time frame?
- Are the entry qualifications fair and transparent?
- Do the problems test the skills that are the focus of the competition?
- Do the problems fairly challenge the competitors?
- Do the competitions favor students:
 - of upper economic strata?
 - who have coaches?
 - from schools that have existing DR courses?

- Are there subconscious biases in assessing performance based on:
 - problem content?
 - student language skills?
 - school reputation?
 - relationships between coaches and organizing committee participation?
- What quality controls are in place for assessing?
- Are the assessors:
 - knowledgeable enough in negotiation to assess fairly?
 - able to identify the challenges in the problems?
 - able to assess fairly across the competitors?
- Are the scoresheets appropriate for the competition?
- Is feedback more often helpful or confusing?
- Are the awards appropriate?

Here are my thoughts about some of these questions, and, most importantly, to prompt discussion of others' views:

- Participant teams should be anonymous.
- Competitions should have workshops for participants that go beyond instructing in the rules of the competition itself.
- Students should draft the problems under the guidance of experts who serve as editors.
- Problems should have a maximum length of 2000 words. Confidential statements should have a maximum length of 1000 words.
- Scoresheets should be re-designed to reward those who exhibit deeper knowledge of negotiation theory and practice.
- Assessors should be:
 - advised in advance of the challenges posed in each problem.
 - selected based upon both mediation and negotiation experience.
 - trained in advance of the competition so that they have the same understandings and perspectives of the problems. The trainings should include cross-cultural competencies.
 - trained to give feedback emphasizing that feedback sessions should provide specific advice related to the scoresheet rather than simply be playbacks of the session.

I hope that we improve the overall quality of student competitions to make them more focused on promoting learning and that learning components are incorporated into the structure of each competition. In designing the competitions, we should take into consideration the vast differences in students' learning before they participate.