



Lab Projects vs. Non-Lab Projects Debate

Recently, more of students who compete at PRSEF have had opportunities to work in industrial research or teaching hospital labs. Students, parents and judges have expressed concern about equity in judging these projects in competition with those done in more traditional places, i.e., home or school labs. We have considered how best to maintain a level playing field and that discussion has caused us to generate these guidelines.

Research is usually an activity that proceeds faster when ideas are exchanged and techniques are shared. This is especially true whenever the ideas shared are in part generated by a Specialist or Scientist working actively in the field in question. A student stands to gain considerable knowledge by association with these professionals and also usually has access to the latest research equipment. *To this point, however, it is essential that the judge determine just how the student connected with the lab. A student who chose the project and created the lab situation will be more highly rated than one who was led to those choices by someone of influence. The judge is evaluating the creativity of the student, not the mentor.*

The student researcher shall convince the judges of the following:

- *The student did all of the work.* All of the work reported must be done by the student. It is unacceptable to present other's work, and any project doing that will be disqualified.
- *A higher level of science is expected.* Whenever work is done in these labs it is expected to be more complex and advanced. In and of itself, this shall not influence a judge's evaluation. More complex science is usually presented in these cases; this is as expected and does not influence the rating.
- *The student has a complete understanding of the work reported.* Each judge shall thoroughly test the student's knowledge of the subject. If a judge is not familiar with the science of the project a Category Chair shall be notified and other judges assigned. Here especially, judges shall not be satisfied with "canned" presentations.
- *The student made use of the tools available.* The judge shall determine how effectively the student used resources available in the lab.

When deciding which of these projects to advance for Category awards, judges shall consider the Score Sheet attributes and reward projects that have scored well against those criteria. Just as judges are not unduly influenced by a flashy poster, they should not automatically assume that these are better science projects.