

04/13/11**Caltech's (Science) Olympians Give Back**

Most high-school students are busy getting their driver's licenses, going to football games, planning for prom, and stressing over college applications. For many Techers, these activities also included the Science Olympiad, an academic track meet of sorts that tests knowledge in all areas of science and engineering, from forestry and ornithology to physics and biology.

In fact, 50 of the 214 members of this year's freshman class participated in the Science Olympiad

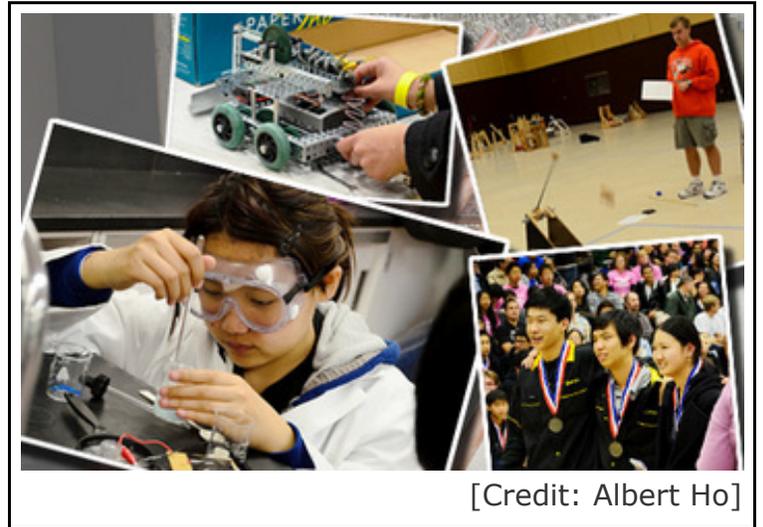
in high school, according to Caltech graduate student Peter Hung. The proportions are similar for the rest of the student body. But even though they've now retired from competition, former Science Olympians at Caltech have been giving back, helping to run the contest for today's high schoolers.

"We can help educate the next generation and spark an interest in science for the students," says Hung, who heads up Caltech's involvement in the Olympiad. "It shows them that science isn't about textbooks and memorizing facts." Instead, science can be tangible with real-world applications.

Last Saturday, April 9, 43 students from Caltech traveled to Canyon High School in Anaheim for the Southern California State Science Olympiad, where they organized, scored, and judged the various events. Caltech accounted for more than two-thirds of all the Olympiad volunteers. Caltech students also designed 44 of the 46 events.

The 52 participating teams—26 each for the middle school and high-school divisions—had to beat out hundreds of other schools in the regional round of competition. The Los Angeles Regional competition was held in February, and involved 42 Caltech student volunteers who wrote, prepared, and graded most of the events.

Each 15-person team pits their scientific brains against one another in three types of events. The first is a written test, consisting of calculations and multiple-choice questions. The second tests laboratory skills, with tasks such as identifying mystery chemicals using lab techniques like titration. The final set of contests challenges teams to build gadgets such as a rubber band-powered helicopter, a bottle rocket, a trebuchet, or a Rube Goldberg device. The teams were told last fall what the construction



challenges would be, giving them adequate time to test and build.

After a day of hard-fought competition, Troy High School and Muscatel Middle School emerged victorious, with each earning a trip to the national competition at the University of Wisconsin in May. Troy, which has won the state competition for 16 consecutive years, has claimed three of the last five national titles.

Hung, who went to Arcadia High School, competed in the Science Olympiad for two years, and he started helping with the program when he arrived at Caltech as a freshman in 2004. At the time, the Los Angeles County Office of Education ran the entire Regional Olympiad, he says. But budget cuts over the years meant volunteers have now had to take a bigger role.

Hung has stayed on campus as a graduate student in applied physics and is the co-director of the Southern California State Science Olympiad. In the seven years Caltech has been involved in the Olympiad, about 150 Techers have lent a hand—despite the notoriously busy life of a Caltech student.

"Science Olympiad was the single most influential part of my high-school career, as it inspired me to become an engineer," says senior Emmet Cleary, who spent all of last Saturday judging Rube Goldberg machines. "Volunteering at competitions is my way of giving back."

And Hung agrees, as the Olympiad was what led him to pursue science, he says. "It's the reason I'm at Caltech."

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