Student Activities Department staff facilitated a variety of academic competitions for students in grades two through twelve during the 2014-15 school year. Student Activities staff organized, conducted, and monitored each academic competition and also provided competition coaches with training, support, and resources.

**Program Description**

The Student Activities Department mission for the academic competitions was to build student knowledge and character. Goals included increasing academic competition participation, improving student achievement, helping students become critical thinkers, and encouraging team collaboration. The academic competitions complemented the academic curriculum in Dallas ISD schools.

**Methodology**

The evaluator and Student Activities staff selected ten academic competitions to evaluate. The ten competitions included: Academic Decathlon, Academic Pentathlon, Lone Star Challenge, High School University Interscholastic League (UIL), Middle School UIL, Elementary UIL, UIL Cross-Examination (CX) Debate, Middle School Dallas Urban Debate Alliance (DUDA), High School DUDA, and Destination Imagination (DI). The evaluator surveyed coaches about training and support received, the impact of the competitions on students, and the successes and obstacles they experienced while coaching. The evaluator surveyed students on the benefits, drawbacks, and overall satisfaction regarding the competition as well as the reasons they participated. The evaluation also included interviews and informal communication with Student Activities staff members.

**Program Activities and Implementation**

During the 2014-15 school year, participation in each of the competitions ranged from 13 to 44 schools (72 to 1,078 students). One of the goals for the Student Activities Department was to increase participation in academic competitions. Between the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years, school participation increased for eight of the ten evaluated academic competitions and student participation increased for seven.

Several teams advanced to regional, state, and global competitions. For the Academic Decathlon, 16 schools advanced to the Region XII competition, and two schools advanced to the state competition. UIL CX Debate teams from seven schools advanced to state competitions. Finally, 21 schools advanced to the state DI competition and five advanced to the global competition.

More than 80 percent of coach survey respondents felt they received adequate resources and communication to feel prepared for coaching. Between 57 and 60 percent felt the training was relevant, high quality, and well-organized. Coaches that were coaching for the first time in 2014-15 did not feel as sufficiently trained to coach and were less satisfied with district communication than their more experienced colleagues.

According to coach respondents, many students improved in perseverance and self-esteem due to participation in academic competitions. Most coaches also reported that students improved their social skills, such as collaboration and communication. In the open-ended coach survey questions asking about successes of the competitions, one of the most prevalent themes was academic recognition for students. Some coaches mentioned students were recognized for their academic skills, which built confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, according to student respondents, the most widespread benefit of the competitions was that the competition allowed them to be academically recognized or prove their academic skills.

According to student respondents, students were most motivated to participate in academic competitions for the challenge or experience. Social factors, including participating with friends and the chance to be on a team, also played a strong role. On the open-ended survey questions, students felt that making new friends and working together as a team was one of the best parts of the competition.

Although less than 30 percent of student respondents felt that the competition got in the way of other school activities, one of greatest struggles for coaches was arranging practice around students’ other activities. Three common reasons for the struggle included aligning practice with the bus schedule, competing with students’ other after-school activities, and getting parents to bring students to practice.

Overall, both coach and student respondents were very positive about their overall competition experience. Across all competitions, between 89 and 95 percent of
coaches indicated they would coach again and between 89 and 100 percent reported they would recommend coaching to their colleagues. More than 80 percent of students said they enjoyed participating in the competition and would encourage their peers to participate.

According to the spring 2015 board update, Student Activities staff plan to implement a districtwide competitive chess program and robotics competition for students in 2015-16. They also plan to continue increasing the number of schools participating in academic competitions.

**Recommendations**

The evaluator recommends two areas of improvement for the academic competition program. The first area of improvement is improving coach training, particularly for first year coaches. A lack of training was expressed in both the open-ended and close-ended survey questions. About one third of first year coaches (34%) felt they received sufficient training, and, in the open-ended questions, some new coaches expressed confusion about the rules of the competition or where to find help and resources.

Secondly, the evaluator recommends either advocating for an academic competition school course or helping coaches brainstorm for ways to prepare students outside of their regular school day. Many coaches expressed difficulty in getting their students together for practice because of after-school conflicts and the inability to practice during the school day. In addition, 29 percent of student respondents felt the academic competition got in the way of their other school activities. A few coaches mentioned that they originally had a course designated solely for the academic competition; advocating for this course to return could greatly improve student engagement, participation, and outcomes in the academic competitions. Student Activities staff could also provide tips or extra resources for campuses where this is not possible.

The evaluator strongly recommends that Student Activities staff construct and maintain a registration database, which would allow for evaluation of participants’ academic achievement and attendance between the fall and spring semesters. A database was in the process of being built during the 2013-14 school year, but was not ready for use in the 2014-15 school year. More district Information Technology support provided to the Student Activities Department could help the district monitor the competition process more effectively.

Recommendations to improve future evaluation include improving survey administration for students and modifying the survey. During the 2014-15 school year, students had to take paper surveys because computer labs were not guaranteed at the competition events and the wireless internet prevented students from using their mobile devices. The format of the survey also made it difficult to fit on a scantron, requiring the evaluator to enter data from the surveys by hand. Finding a new way to administer the survey electronically to students would be ideal and also allow more students to respond. The coach survey should also be modified to include a not-applicable option to the training section. In the open-ended responses, several coaches mentioned they did not receive any training, but they were unable to express that on the closed survey questions.