

Time For A Change: Revision of the Process For Judging Student Presentations at the Annual Meeting

Trent M. Sutton, Donna L. Parrish, and James R. Jackson

The number of student presentations given at the Annual Meeting of the American Fisheries Society (AFS) has increased steadily each year from 17 (1989) to 336 (2006). The increase has created challenges in determining the Best Student Paper and Best Student Poster Awards. For example, securing enough judges to evaluate the presentations in a consistent manner is an ongoing challenge. For the 2006 Annual Meeting, there were 256 papers and 80 posters presented by students. With a target of three judges per paper and four judges per poster, a total of 251 different judges were required to cover the 1,088 judging events. Even though this target number was secured prior to the meeting, 130 of the 1,088 judging events (12%) were not evaluated during the meeting. As a result, some students only received feedback from one or two judges and could not be considered for one of the awards. Variability in judging consistency was also high, with some students receiving scores that ranged as broadly as 40 points (e.g., 54 to 94 out of 100) or as narrowly as 3 points (e.g., 71 to 74 out of 100). As a consequence, this variability more than likely plays as large a role in the outcome of the judging process as the quality of the presentations themselves. The *ad hoc* Paper and Poster Judging Changes Committee of the Education Section was created to develop a solution to alleviate problems in presentation judging. Respondents to an Education Section newsletter survey echoed the problems observed in 2006 and identified obtaining and scheduling judges, inconsistency of evaluations across judges, and a lack of timely and useful feedback to students as the primary problems with the current judging system. Given these concerns, how does the Education Section fix the problems?

During fall 2006, members of the *ad hoc* Paper and Poster Judging Changes Committee and the Education Section Executive Committee developed a more manageable and equitable process for determining student presentation award winners. These changes will be implemented for the 2007 Annual Meeting in San Francisco, California, as a trial for the new process. The steps in this process are outlined below, but student presenters will need to consult the Education Section website or the Annual Meeting section on the AFS webpage for details.

Abstract Submission. – Students will be required to submit an abstract that follows the guidelines described in the Call for Papers in *Fisheries*. On their abstract, the student must indicate if they wish their abstract to be considered for competition for a best presentation (i.e., paper or poster, but not both) award. If they respond “no”, the presentation will be considered for inclusion in the Annual Meeting by the Program Committee but will not receive further consideration by the Judging Committee. If students indicate “yes”, they will be required to submit an application directly to the Judging Committee. Components of the application will include an extended abstract and a check-off from their mentor indicating that the study is at a stage appropriate for consideration for an award. An example of the extended abstract is posted on the Education Section and AFS websites and will include the following: title, authors and affiliations, background, methods, results (including up to five figures and/or tables), discussion, and references. The discussion should include how the research advances knowledge of fisheries theory and/or management and what the most significant finding is and why. Extended abstracts

will be limited to three pages in length and must be written in 12-point Times New Roman font with 1" page margins. The deadline for submission is 23 February 2007; applications that do not follow the format guidelines will not be considered for an award.

Application Review. – The Judging Committee will review submitted applications and evaluate them in terms of scientific merit, writing style, and mechanics. By 02 March 2007, the top twenty papers and top twenty posters will be selected for inclusion in special symposia to be held at the Annual Meeting. Finalists will be notified and given the option of participating in one of these symposia or remaining in an invited or contributed session. Students not selected for one of these symposia or those that decline inclusion will be assigned to an appropriate symposium by the Program Committee.

Symposia. – A symposium of oral presentations selected as finalists for the Best Paper Award will be hosted by the Education Section over two half days (ten presentations each day). Posters will be given during the regular poster symposium; however, finalists will be grouped together in one area and identified appropriately. Judging will be conducted by a panel of judges using a standardized grading rubric. Judging panels will be consistent for each award category in order to ensure equity in scoring. Student papers will also be videotaped and copies of the presentations will be provided to the judges for additional review following the session. Similarly, judges will be provided with copies of student posters for similar post-presentation review. Because each presentation will be evaluated by the same judges, there will be greater consistency in the judging process and feedback will be more rapid. The Best Student Paper and Poster Awards will be announced later that fall and the winners will receive their awards at the following year's AFS meeting.

Feedback. – Students in regular invited or contributed paper and poster sessions will also have an opportunity to receive feedback. Evaluation forms will be distributed to willing evaluators, and the forms will be collected and provided to the student following his/her presentation or symposium.

Proposed changes to judging student presentations should help to alleviate the problems that have plagued the process in recent years. However, the *ad hoc* Paper and Poster Judging Changes Committee will carefully monitor the new process and make changes as experience is accrued. Because feedback is critical, the Education Section strongly encourages comments and suggestions to ensure that the judging format meets the needs of both the student presenters and the AFS membership.

Sutton is an Associate Professor in fisheries biology in the Department of Forestry and Natural Resources at Purdue University and can be reached at tsutton@purdue.edu. Parrish is the Unit Leader for the U.S. Geological Survey, Vermont Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and is a Research Associate Professor in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont. Jackson is a Senior Research Associate at the Cornell Biological Field Station.