

Revisiting the Process for Qualifying for the AFS/Sea Grant Best Student Presentation and Poster Awards

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The American Fisheries Society (AFS)/Sea Grant Best Student Paper and Presentation awards are an important mechanism to highlight the students in our profession and the future leaders of AFS. In 2007, the process for selecting the AFS/Sea Grant Best Student Presentation and Poster awards was substantially revised (Sutton et al. 2007). Prior to the changes, all students were randomly assigned to a small group of judges. Accommodating the ever-increasing numbers of students giving oral or poster presentations at the AFS annual meeting required a large team of volunteer judges. However, it was not always assured that each student would receive evaluations from the same number of judges. Some students received reviews from three or more judges, whereas others did not receive any evaluations (Sutton et al. 2007). Further, the high levels of variability in scoring among judges created difficulty in determining winners in either the poster or presentation medium. During the AFS annual meeting in San Francisco (2007), a new process for selecting finalists and judging these prestigious awards was piloted with much success and positive feedback from both students and judges. This process has remained in place since that time with only a few minor changes.

Although the selection and evaluation process for this award has been in place for 6 years, the system still appears to be largely unknown to the society. For example, in 2012, only 22 applications for the Best Student Presentation award and six applications for the Best Student Poster Award were completed. This is far below expectations given the numbers of student members in the AFS and the number of students who attend the annual meeting. Here, we describe the application process for students to be considered for Best Student Presentation or Best Student Poster awards, the selection of finalists, and the judging that occurs during the AFS annual meeting. We also address questions that are frequently asked by students and advisors in an effort to enhance participation in the process.

THE BEST STUDENT PRESENTATION/ POSTER AWARD PROCESS

How do students apply for consideration for either award?

Application for consideration for these awards is very similar to the standard abstract submission process for the AFS annual meeting but with two additional requirements: an extended abstract and letter of support from the student's advisor (Figure 1). Students begin by uploading a standard abstract for one medium (i.e., poster or presentation) to the online abstract submission system as described in the Call for Papers in *Fisheries*. Once the standard abstract is uploaded, the system will ask the student whether he or she wishes to be considered for the Best Student Presentation or Best Student Poster award. If the student selects "no," then the process is complete and the student is assigned to an appropriate alternative symposium by the Annual Meeting Program Committee (Figure 1). If the student selects "yes," then the abstract submission system prompts the student to upload an extended abstract, which is no more than three pages in length and includes background, methods, results (including up to five tables or figures), discussion, and references. Examples of extended abstracts can be found online at <http://www.fisheriessociety.org/education/BSP.htm>. The student will also be reminded to request an electronic letter of support from his or her advisor that must be e-mailed to the organizers of the Best Student Presentation/Poster symposium. The letter must indicate that the student's research is at a stage appropriate for award consideration. In other words, the research project or specific objective must be complete or nearly complete. Both the extended abstract and the advisor's support letter must be provided by the same deadline as outlined in the Call for Papers in *Fisheries* for standard abstract submissions. Failure to receive all of the required components will prohibit the student's application from further consideration (Figure 1).

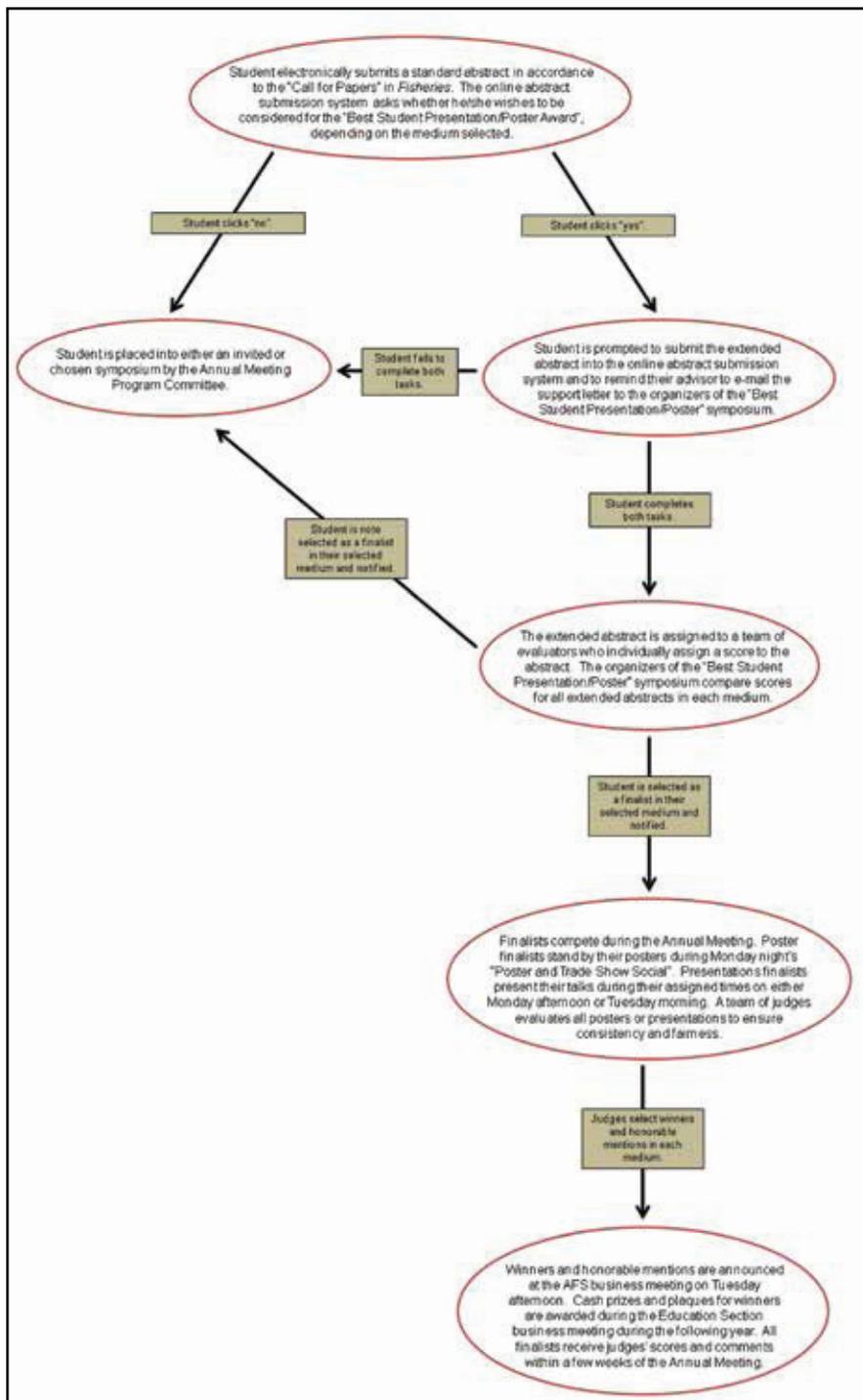


Figure 1. Flowchart describing the process for selection of the Best Student Paper/Poster at the AFS annual meeting. This process has been followed since the 2007 meeting in San Francisco.

The required elements were provided by the student and advisor. What happens next?

The next step in the process involves evaluation of the extended abstracts submitted by those students who completed the application process. The full list of applicants is reduced to a maximum of 20 finalists in each medium (though the total number of poster submissions has never exceeded 10 since 2007). From 2007 to 2011, the organizers of the Best Student Presentation/Poster symposium evaluated all of the extended abstracts for both mediums and selected the finalists. In 2012, a new system was piloted that assigned abstracts to division representatives from the

Education Section and the Student Subsection who evaluated and scored each of the assigned abstracts based on a rubric (see the Extended Abstract Evaluation Form at <http://www.fisheriessociety.org/education/BSP.htm>). This system will likely continue into the future. The evaluators' scores are tallied and the distributions of scores are examined by the symposium organizers to select the list of finalists. All student applicants are notified whether or not they have been selected as a finalist very soon after the abstract submission deadline (Figure 1). Those students not selected as finalists are placed into appropriate alternative symposia by the AFS Annual Meeting Program Committee. Finalists in both mediums are assigned to the Best Student Presentation/Poster symposium and compete for the awards at the AFS Annual Meeting (Figure 1).

For those who are selected as finalists, what happens during the AFS annual meeting?

The final phase of the competition for these awards takes place during the AFS annual meeting; student finalists present their oral presentation or poster early in the week. The Best Student Presentation symposium typically takes place on Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning each year. The finalists for Best Student Poster stand next to their work during the Monday night poster and trade show social. Students must adhere to the guidelines for poster dimensions and presentation criteria as described on the AFS annual meeting website for all presenters in any symposium. The Best Student Presentation/Poster co-organizers assemble a team of volunteers to evaluate the finalists within each medium—five judges for presentations and three for posters. Each judge scores and provides comments to all students within each medium category based on established evaluation guidelines (see the Best Student Presentation and Poster Judging Sheets at <http://www.fisheriessociety.org/education/BSP.htm>). At the conclusion of the Best Student Presentation symposium on Tuesday, all of the presentation and poster judges meet to examine the distributions of scores for all finalists within each medium, discuss any potential ties, and decide on the winners and honorable mentions in each category. The overall winners and honorable mentions for

the Best Student Presentation/Poster awards are then announced during the AFS business meeting on Tuesday afternoon. The overall winners in each category receive their plaques and prize money (\$450 for each award) during the Education Section's business meeting the following year. All student finalists receive scores and comments from the judges by mail from the Best Student Presentation/Poster co-organizers within a few weeks of the AFS Annual Meeting (Figure 1).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Question #1: Why are the extended abstracts and advisor letter required as part of the application for the Best Student Presentation/Poster awards?

Both requirements provide support that the student's overall research project or at least one of the objectives is at or near completion. Results and tables and/or figures as required in the extended abstract indicate that data have already been collected and analyzed. The advisor's letter lends further evidence that the student's work is at the appropriate stage for consideration for these awards. Students will often present proposal or preliminary data at the AFS annual meeting to gain audience feedback or practice in scientific presentations, both of which are laudable goals. However, such presentations are not competitive and do not fit the goals of the awards described here. Completed projects represent the best of the best of what AFS students can produce.

Question #2: I was a student at [insert name of university or college here] and recently completed my master's or Ph.D. program. I am currently working as a fisheries professional. The presentation I am planning for the AFS annual meeting is from my recently completed thesis or dissertation. Am I still eligible to apply for this award?

In short, the answer to this question is yes. If the research that the recently graduated student will be presenting was completed during the time spent in undergraduate or graduate study and all of the required application materials are received by the deadline listed in the Call for Papers in *Fisheries*, the student will be considered for either the Best Student Presentation or Poster award, depending on the medium he or she selected.

Question #3: Can I [a student] give the same presentation in both the Best Student Presentation symposium and in a second symposium that is related to my research topic?

The answer to this question is a simple no. Difficulties are often faced by the AFS Annual Meeting Program Committee to accommodate all of the presentation requests received. By submitting the same presentation in two separate time slots, students are potentially affecting someone else's opportunity to present his or her work. A student may decide that presenting in a topic-specific symposium will be a better opportunity to share information with colleagues and network with potential collaborators and employers and that this will benefit him or her more than possibly winning the Best Student Presentation award. The

student and his or her advisor should collectively decide what is in the student's best interest in the case of such conflicts. But we emphasize that students should only submit their presentations *once* for inclusion in the AFS annual meeting program because if the submission is not chosen for inclusion in the Best Student Paper/Poster symposium, it will be automatically submitted for inclusion in the general program.

Question #4: Did you mention that there was prize money associated with the Best Student Presentation/Poster awards?

The overall winners in both categories each receive a US\$450 cash prize and a plaque during the Education Section business meeting the following year. Honorable mentions receive a plaque but no cash prize.

CONCLUSION

The criteria for applying and evaluating students for the AFS/Sea Grant Best Student Presentation and Poster Awards since 2007 is more rigorous compared to the previous system, but final evaluations and feedback from student finalists and judges indicate that they system is greatly improved. The collective confidence in selecting deserving winners and recognizing honorable mentions has increased since implementation of the new system. We hope that the number of students applying for consideration for these awards will continue to increase for 2013 and into the future. If there are any other questions that were not addressed in this article, we encourage the reader to contact the Best Student Presentation/Poster co-organizers or the Education Section officers (see <http://www.fisheriessociety.org/education/officers.htm> for contact information). Best of luck to all who apply! We look forward to seeing the products of your hard work.

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REFERENCE

Sutton, T. M., D. L. Parrish, and J. R. Jackson. 2007. Time for a change: revising the process for judging student presentations at the annual meeting. *Fisheries* 32(1):42-43. 