

Grade 11 - Informational

A Unique Competition

In April each year, teams of students from all over the United States represent their high schools in a national competition. Participants and coaches dedicate countless hours to preparation and training for the event. Cheering fans encourage their teams in anticipation of a national championship award.

This familiar scene, however, does not take place on a basketball court or other athletic venue, and competitors do not succeed based on their athletic skills. These students have earned the opportunity to compete in the Academic Decathlon, and they score points for their school by giving speeches, writing essays, and taking tests and quizzes.

Competitors

In an Olympic Decathlon, athletes compete in a series of ten events consisting of 100-meter, 400-meter, and 1,500-meter races; a race with hurdles to jump over; the high jump and long jump; the pole vault; and throwing events using a shot put, a discus, and a javelin. In an Academic Decathlon, students compete in ten events consisting of art, economics, essay, interview, language and literature, mathematics, music, science, social science, and speech.

An Olympic athlete competes in all ten events. He or she trains with teammates and qualifies for the Olympics as part of a national team yet receives an individual medal. Similarly, an academic decathlete writes essays, takes quizzes, prepares and delivers speeches, and undergoes personal interviews. But he or she does so as part of a school team, which hopes to win at the district level and proceed to state and then to national competition.

An important aspect of the Academic Decathlon is that it includes students from all achievement levels. Each team must include students from three academic levels, based on their grade-point average for the past two years. *Honors* students have a grade point of A in all academic courses; *Scholastic* students have a grade point of B in all academic courses; and *Varsity* students have a grade point of C or below in all academic courses. Winners at each academic level earn gold, silver, or bronze medals.

History of the Competition

Throughout his career in education, Dr. Robert Peterson believed that schools should have competitions to motivate students to train academically just as they do for sports. When he retired from his position as superintendent of schools in Orange County, California, Peterson decided to launch his dream. He started the Academic Decathlon in 1968, in his home district in southern California. Other schools in the state started teams, and then other states joined the competition.

In 1981, a national nonprofit organization, United States Academic Decathlon (USAD), was established. USAD continues to set themes, produce curriculum, and determine the rules for national competition. Each competing state has its own statewide organization and rules for participation.

Nebraska has a strong Academic Decathlon tradition. The statewide organization started in 1983 and has been growing ever since. About 800 students compete in the Nebraska Academic Decathlon each year, representing about 40 schools in large-school and small-school divisions. In 2011, Creighton Preparatory School of Omaha won eighth place at the national competition, out of 36 state-champion teams.

Preparing for the Competition

Each year, USAD chooses a theme for the following season's study and competition. The theme guides development of study materials in the ten academic areas. Preparation for the Academic Decathlon is similar to training for other school competitions in sports or clubs. A coach orders supplies, schedules scrimmages with nearby schools to practice performance skills, and guides students as they study the materials. Many groups meet once or twice a week—or more often— throughout the season.

Some themes pair history with a particular field of science; others include science from the historical period under study. Past themes have included The Great Depression/Introduction to Geology; The French Revolution; Latin America/Evolutionary Biology; The Civil War; and China/Introduction to Climatology. The 2011–12 study theme was The Age of Empire/The Age of Imperialism. Teams studied art and music from 19th century Europe, learned about advances in science during that period, and read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, along with other texts from the period.

Medaling in the Academic Decathlon requires a wide range of skills. Students must study in all ten areas, and many students learn new study techniques. They build their skills in interpretation, description, and persuasion by listening to music, studying art reproductions, reading literary selections, and writing essays. They may also need to strengthen other academic skills.

Students prepare a resumé and meet with officials for personal interviews. They write and perform speeches. They write essays. They answer questions under pressure, in both oral and written formats. They support teammates, raise money for trips to meets, and manage exacting schedules for preparation and attendance at events.

Benefits of Participating

According to the Nebraska Academic Decathlon Program, the purposes of participation are “to develop a greater respect for knowledge; to stimulate intellectual growth and achievement; to emphasize the need for increased communication skills; to

promote the development of team efforts; and to promote wholesome interschool academic competition.”

Months of coaching and preparation enable students to emerge with a broad, well-rounded understanding of the theme under study. Students verify that they not only achieve that purpose but also gain lifelong skills in study techniques and teamwork. Participants have an opportunity to meet students from other parts of the region, the state, and even the country as their team advances through the levels of competition.

One student summarized this unique competition by writing, “Being part of a community of peers who share a passion for learning is a rare opportunity, and I have found nothing like this . . . anywhere else.”

Additional Academic Competitions

| Competition | Competitors | Purpose |
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| Academic Triathlon | teams of 5 students, grades 5–12 | to reward performance in general intellect, academic abilities, leadership, visual and performing arts, and creative thinking |
| FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics Competition | teams of high school students | to solve engineering problems by designing, assembling, and testing a robot |
| Let’s Get Real! | teams of 2–6 students, grades 6–12 | to find solutions for everyday business challenges |
| American Regions Math League Power Contest | teams of 15 high school students | to work individually, in relay rounds, and as a team to solve math problems |