

Science Fairs: A Road to Recruitment?

TOM THUNDER, AuD, ACOUSTIC ASSOCIATES, PALATINE, IL AND STEPHEN HALLENBECK, AuD, RUSH UNIVERSITY, CHICAGO, IL

When did you first consider pursuing a career in audiology? And what experience triggered the notion of being an audiologist? According to Neal (1994) you were probably in college since 88% of our young audiologists first considered the profession after reaching the age of 18. In sharp contrast, Figure 1 shows that about 85% of physicians and dentists first considered entering their profession before the age of 18 years – which means many were likely in high school. Many of us somehow just “stumbled” or “backed in” to the field of audiology, perhaps as an alternative to the track we were on? Whereas most young people have encountered physicians and dentists numerous times before they walk the stage to receive their high school diploma, it is highly probable that they have never visited an audiology office.

selecting undergraduate majors that traditionally lead to graduate degrees in audiology has declined. At the same time, the demand for audiologists is expected to increase over the next two decades (Nemes, 2002). Where will our new audiologists come from?

MORE THAN JUST BASKETBALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

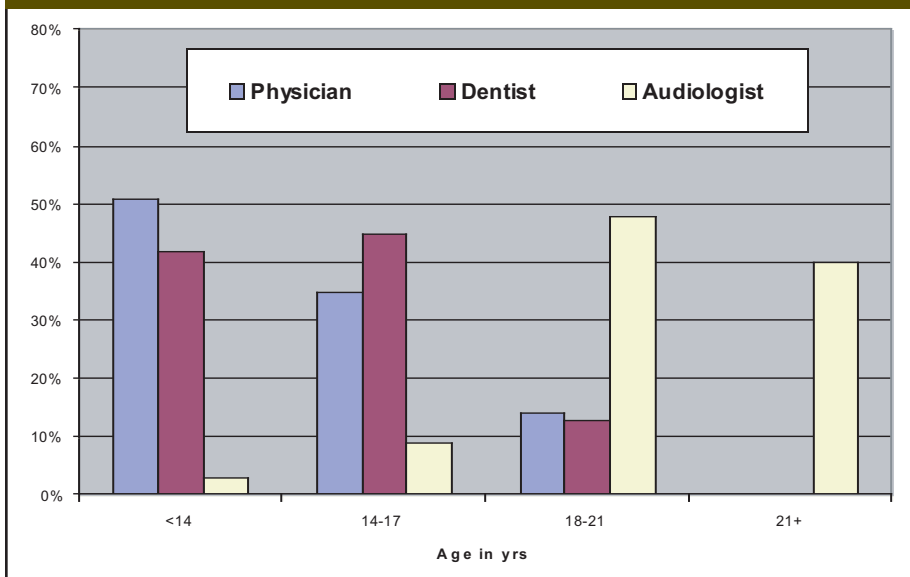
Ten years ago, the Illinois Academy of Audiology (ILAA) discussed the idea of attending the state science fair at the University of Illinois as a means to help meet two objectives of our state organization: 1) to develop an awareness of audiology and, 2) to promote audiology as an autonomous profession. After all, with 1000 science projects on the floor at Assembly Hall (where Illini basketball is played), the fair and the awards ceremony draws some 7,000

students. In addition, because many high school science teachers and counselors are present to judge the projects, our activities in this venue may be instrumental in revealing audiology as a viable career option to an age group we very much need to reach.

The Illinois Junior Academy of Science is a state-wide organization that aims to encourage students with special abilities and



FIGURE 1: AGE STUDENTS FIRST CONSIDERED ENTERING THEIR CHOSEN PROFESSION



At a time when audiology is a profession distinct from speech pathology, and when AuD programs are trying to broaden their enrollment by attracting students from outside the traditional speech and hearing major, contact with students in grades 7-12 is critical. This is especially so when one considers that the number of college students

attendees comprised not only of student participants, but also interested citizens, inquisitive relatives, proud parents and active grandparents. It has only been in more recent years that we have learned that this venue may serve another purpose: to introduce the wonderfully active and vital field of audiology to promising, scientifically-minded young stu-

interests in science to go beyond the classroom in developing their own ideas and aid them in their progress towards a career in science. Held the first weekend in May, a student earns a spot at the fair by competing at the school, district, and then regional level. In the end, about 1,000 students make it to the state level and compete in 17 categories including behavioral science, health science and physics — categories that most commonly include topics about hearing and/or sound.

Project judging at the science fair is accomplished by science teachers and interested volunteers. In each of the 17 categories, students are awarded a bronze, silver or gold certificate. But the real fun is the “special award” judging. This is where 20-30 private organizations give cash, scholarships, savings bonds and gifts based on their own judging criteria. Special award sponsors have included national organizations such as the Office of Naval Research, the U.S. Metric Association and the Optical Society of America. But it also includes state organizations such as the Illinois Dental Society, the Illinois Woman in Agriculture Society and the Illinois



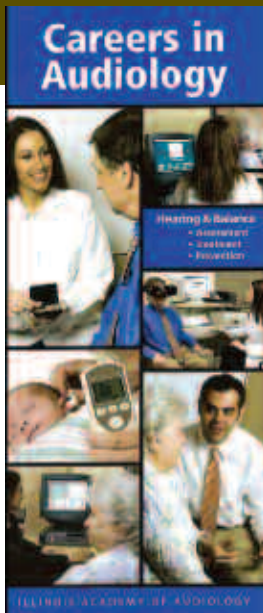
Engineering Council. At the 2004 Fair, \$10,000 was awarded to 96 winners for an average award of about \$100 per student. But there were also gift prizes including calculators, MP3 players, CD players, etc.

At the 2005 Junior Academy of Science Fair, the ILAA awarded cash prizes totaling \$450. The gift awards came from Illinois audiology-related manufacturers such as Etymotic Research, Phonak and GN Resound. In other years, our prizes have included FM radios, sports bag, mugs and CD cases. There is nothing more exciting than watching a young face light up as he or she is presented with cash and gift awards while their picture is being taken.

STUDENT TO STUDENT

Early in ILAA's history, we wanted to get our graduate audiology students involved in their chosen profession. So, we included students from Rush University and Northwestern University to help us serve as judges. After all, sifting through 1,000 projects looking for relevant topics, screening those projects, and then judging the final projects was a daunting task for just one or two ILAA members in a 3-hour period. Actually, the AuD students relate better to the teenagers at the Fair than some of us oldies, and they demonstrate an enthusiasm about audiology in a fresh and exciting way to these younger students.

Our protocol is to screen the 1000 or so projects for topics in hearing, sound, or balance. This usually nets about 20-25 projects. With titles such as "Cochlear Markers in Guinea Pigs" or "Can you Hear What I Hear?" the project selection is straightforward. But because titles such as "Shh" or "Can you Hear Me Now?" can lead us astray, we must scan the arena floor to ensure that the screened projects are indeed relevant to our field and to identify projects we missed based on our review of titles alone. During the initial floor



scan, our AuD students introduce themselves, briefly discuss audiology as a career, and hand out a brochure that ILAA recently developed called "Careers in Audiology." This ensures that every student doing a related project is aware of the profession and has a resource for additional information. After the preliminary floor scan, our AuD students reassemble to select the best 8-12 projects for final judging. They return to the projects in pairs to interview the student, examine the project board, and listen to the student's presentation.

The AuD students then meet with the onsite ILAA member to review the projects and decide the winners. This information is given to the special judging coordinator so that names can be calligraphed onto an attractive award certificate from ILAA. Over lunch, our students meet with the onsite ILAA advisor to discuss how to distribute the cash and prizes when they return to Assembly Hall to announce the winners. As the winning students walk down to get their award, our graduate students read a short speech to identify their academic programs, characterize audiology, describe our state academy, and thank the manufacturers for their gift contributions. Some winning projects were so well done that ILAA invited the student and his or her parents to display their exhibit during the poster session at the next ILAA convention.

These science fair projects have been gratifying for the ILAA, challenging for our AuD students, and profitable for our young winners! But might this opportunity serve as a mechanism to recruit promising young people into our field? We think so. Although the ILAA has not done follow-up on what careers our winning students have actually pursued




scan, our AuD students introduce themselves, briefly discuss audiology as a career, and hand

out a brochure that ILAA recently developed called "Careers in Audiology." This ensures that every student doing a related project is aware of the profession and has a resource for additional information. After the preliminary floor scan, our AuD students reassemble to select the best 8-12 projects for final judging. They return to the projects in pairs to interview the student, examine the project board, and listen to the student's presentation.



junior high and high school years and entice them to consider our profession.

The membership of ILAA has been pleased with the success with this annual state science fair venue which allows us to work with our state AuD students and outstanding teenage science students. We provide this description as a worthwhile activity that could be mirrored or developed across the country by other state audiology academies. As a profession, it is our responsibility to ensure our future by taking a more active role in recruitment efforts. We urge other state Academies to consider using state science fairs as a recruitment project to attract promising young people into the profession of audiology. 

REFERENCES

- Neal, L. The Professionalization of Audiology Students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, Lafayette, IN, 1994.
- Nemes, J. Fearing Shortage of Audiologists, profession Seeks Ways to Entice Students. *The Hearing Journal*, 55 (6), June, 2002.