

NACLO PRESS RELEASE

Teams USA and Canada win ten medals, including the team gold medal, at the 2014 International Linguistics Olympiad in Beijing

Eight American and four Canadian high school students won a total of 9 individual medals and one team gold at the 2014 International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL) held from July 21 to July 25 in Beijing, China.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hosted by Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU)
July 21 – 25, 2014, Beijing, China



Team Canada (left to right): **Simon Huang** (Toronto, ON), **Daniel Lovsted** (Toronto, ON), **Minh-Tam Nguyen** (Scarborough, ON), **Yan Huang** (West Windsor, NJ)

Team USA 1 (Red) (left to right): **Alexander Babiak** (Ithaca, NY), **Jackie Bredenberg** (Royal Oak, MI), **Deven Lahoti** (Houston, TX), **Darryl Wu** (Bellevue, WA)

Team USA 2 (Blue) (left to right): **Catherine Wu** (San Diego, CA), **Brandon Epstein** (Dix Hills, NY), **James Bloxham** (Marblehead, MA), **Kevin Li** (San Diego, CA)

Coaches: **Heather Newell** (Canada) and **Dragomir Radev** (USA), NACLO Chair **Lori Levin**, and Sponsorship Chair **James Pustejovsky** (not pictured).

On July 18, four Canadian and eight US students traveled to Beijing, China, to join 38 other teams from 28 countries around the world at the 2014 International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL). The North Americans, who all trained together, performed excellently.

The IOL, one of twelve international science olympiads, consists of two events. The first is the individual contest, a six-hour test, which this year had problems about Benabena, Kiowa, Tangkin, Engenni, and Gbaya. The second event is the team contest, which this year involved building a grammar for Armenian and translating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from Armenian to English. To solve these problems, contestants must apply knowledge about the way languages work as well as logic and reasoning skills to decipher unfamiliar languages and writing systems. Of the 152 contestants, 41 received medals (7 gold, 13 silver, and 21 bronze). Five teams received three medals each: USA 1 (1 gold and two silvers), followed by Canada (1 gold, 1 silver, 1 bronze), Russia 2 (1 gold, 2 bronze), China 1 (2 silver, 1 bronze), USA 2 (1 silver, 2 bronze). Seven teams received two individual medals each: Poland 1, Russia 1, China 2, India, Bulgaria 1, the Czech Republic, and Latvia. Thirteen teams received one medal each: the United Kingdom, Romania, Poland 2, Ukraine, Slovenia, Japan 2, Sweden 2, South Korea 1, Estonia, Sweden 1, Australia 1, and Singapore.

Individual Round: The three North American teams performed excellently this year, getting two individual gold medals: by Darryl Wu from USA and Daniel Lovsted from Canada. Catherine Wu, Deven Lahoti, Yan Huang, and Alexander Babiak earned silver medals; Kevin Li, James Bloxham, and Simon Huang earned bronze medals, while Minh-Tam Nguyen, Brandon Epstein, and Jackie Bredenberg earned honorable mentions. Three North American students earned best solution awards, namely Darryl for Problem 2, Simon for Problem 3, and Catherine for Problem 4. USA Team Red won the prize for the highest combined score in the individual contest with 230 points. Canada finished in second place in this event with 210 points, followed by a three-way tie for third place between Poland 1, China 1, and USA Blue, scoring 192 points each.

Team Round: In the team round, USA Red won the first prize (29 points), ahead of the two teams from Russia (24 and 23.5 points, respectively).

The three teams were selected through the *North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO)*. This annual competition, held since 2007, has two rounds, which are held at universities and high schools throughout the USA and Canada. This year over 1,600 students took the open round, a three-hour test. Approximately the top 10% of the students from the open round were invited to the next round, a more difficult, five-hour test. The joint US-Canadian practices, which were conducted via Skype and in person by the USA coaches *Dragomir Radev*, a professor at the University of Michigan, and *Lori Levin*, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, and the Canadian coach *Heather Newell*, a professor at Université du Québec à Montréal. Professor James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University chaired the fundraising committee for the team. The teams' sponsors include Yahoo!, the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics (NAACL), the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), The US National Science Foundation (NSF), Brandeis University, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Michigan, Université du Québec à Montréal, as well as individual donors and parents.

Students at IOL also toured various sites in Beijing in addition to competing, and made many friends from around the world. *Brandon Epstein* of USA Blue said "It was excellent! I had a lot of fun competing [...] We did problems based on languages with particularly interesting, idiosyncratic properties and we had to figure them out. I also got to meet a lot of new people

from a lot of countries I have never visited, like Poland and Sweden. I hope I qualify again next year!” *Minh-Tam Nguyen* added “I had never been to anything like the IOL before, and the experience surpassed my highest expectations. Within just a week I was able to form new friendships with people from all around the world and lasting memories that I will cherish forever. I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend IOL 2014, and I hope whole-heartedly that I will have the honour to represent my country again in the coming years”. *Jamie Bloxham* said “It was much more difficult than I was expecting, and I think in large part that was due to me not managing my time well during the contest. That said, I'm very pleased with how I did, and I'm encouraged by the fact that I know what I need to do to improve next year.” *Jackie Bredenberg* had the following to say “In America, we are surrounded by people who speak English. Even if it's not someone's first language, he/she is expected to learn it. Even businesspeople from other countries all seem to be fluent, because English is the language of business, etc. It's easy to grow up with the idea that learning other languages is not quite as important, because we fortunate Americans will always be able to find people who speak our native tongue. The trip to China really changed my perspective in this matter. I found myself dependent on Chinese-speaking friends, because without them I couldn't get directions, order food, or even locate the bathroom. I realized how great a barrier language can be in communication, and therefore what a powerful tool knowledge of languages is. At a contest of linguistics, this is a valuable lesson! *Deven Lahoti* concurred “I was really excited that I made the IOL team. The IOL was a great experience since it let me get to know people with similar interests from all over the US and all over the world.”

The next IOL will be held in Bulgaria in 2015.

More info:

NACLO <http://www.naclo.cs.cmu.edu> (includes practice problems, contest rules, and information about registering for NACLO)

IOL <http://www.ioling.org> (includes all results from this year's Olympiad as well as all previous editions)

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