

Student ActivITE Guide

Guidelines and Research for Successful
Student Activities, Big and Small



Prepared by Team LITE Waves:

Bahman Moghimi

Bethany Judd, P.Eng

Farhad Shahla, M.Eng, P.Eng, PTOE, PMP

Tom Pagano, PE, PTOE

Victoria Edington, PE, PTOE

July 2022

Introduction

Engaging students is simultaneously one of the most important functions of ITE and one of the most challenging. The most common way to engage students is to hold events. ITE holds many such events, ranging from small gatherings at schools to the International Collegiate Traffic Bowl. ITE leadership continues to make efforts at all levels of the organization to make student events better and more inviting to increase participation.

We believe there is an opportunity to help by cataloging the past and existing efforts, identifying what has and hasn't worked, and providing this as a resource to ITE leadership. In this way, everyone, from ITE Headquarters to small sections, can build off of the work of ITE as a whole.

For this project, we spoke with ITE leaders across the US and Canada to gain their experience with student events. We compiled all of the findings, identified common trends, and organized the conclusions into actionable solutions for student leadership. This report details our findings and provides the following deliverables:

- A searchable database resource for all types of ITE student events
- Recommendations and lessons learned for various types of events based on our research
- Recommendations for key marquee events that could be promoted on an international level to supplement the Traffic Bowl, develop name recognition, and broaden involvement

Research

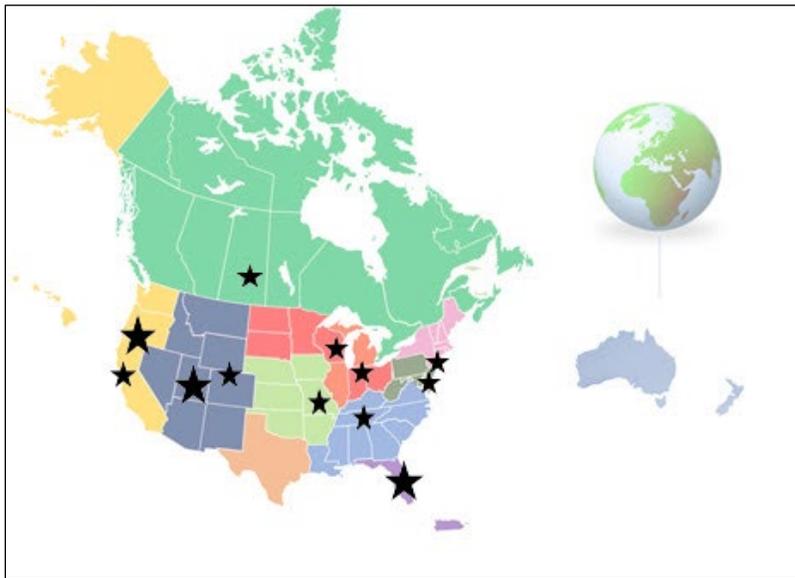
The LITE Waves team worked with ITE International leadership to identify student outreach superstars. ITE Leadership provided a list of active and successful leaders responsible for student activities throughout ITE. This included everyone from grad students and young professionals to Section and District leaders and school professors who are active in creating student activities.

Our team conducted virtual, real-time interviews with everyone who was available to speak. The interviews started with a list of questions designed to feed into the database, but the discussions were not limited to the pre-prepared questions. The team solicited and noted any other recommendations that were offered as well.

In the end, the team conducted more than 25 interviews, discussing over 50 student events happening across the organization. The research covered large portions of ITE, primarily in the US and Canada. The primary Sections and Districts that were interviewed are marked in Figure 1 on the next page.

Ultimately, the research we conducted identified a broad base of experiences across a large portion of ITE. In the future, the team hopes to expand this further to more fully cover ITE's footprint, including more Districts and Sections in North America and outreach to the international community, particularly Australia and New Zealand.

Figure 1: Interview Locations



Findings

The team tabulated the results of the interviews into a [database](#) of student activities. This is intended to be a live resource and will ideally be shared on the ITE website. The intention is that all ITE student leaders will be able to add to this database, so its value as a resource will not only grow by adding new events, but also showing adaptation over time as new ideas and technologies are tried and shared.

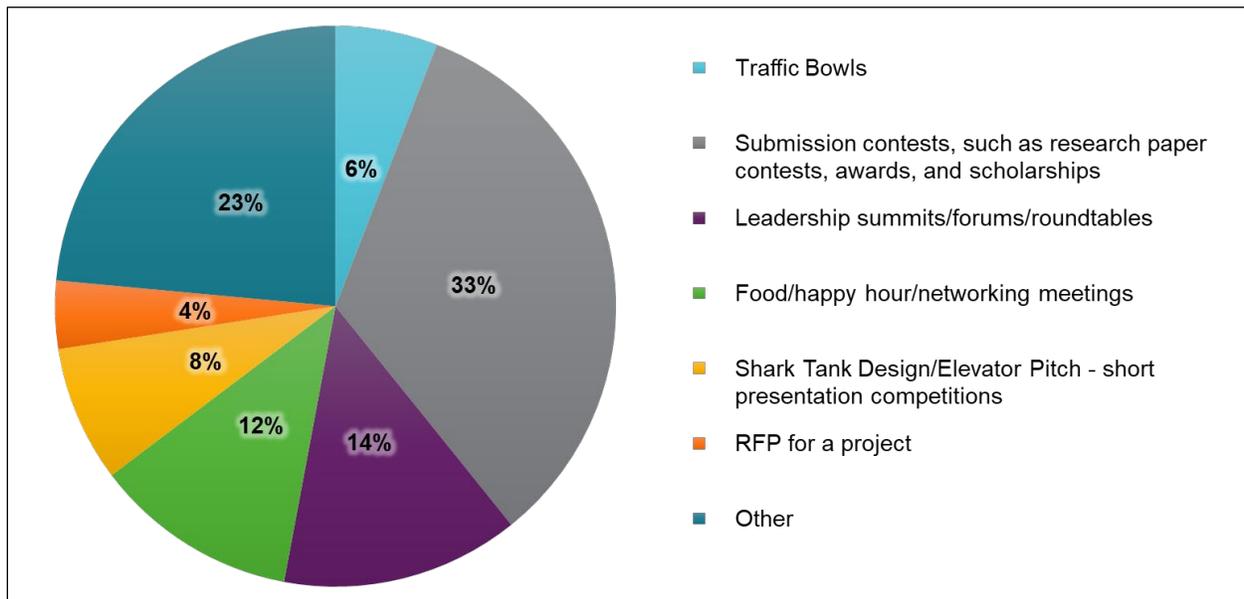
The interviews yielded a number of different events. Many fell into several popular categories as listed below and shown on the next page in Figure 2.

- Traffic Bowls
- Submission contests, such as research paper contests, awards, and scholarships
- Leadership Summits, forums, and roundtables
- Meetings involving food, happy hours, and/or networking
- Shark Tank Design or Elevator Pitch – short presentation competitions
- Responding to an RFP for a project

Other unique events identified during the interview process included:

- Mentoring programs
- Poster competitions
- Small meetings / social gatherings geared towards prepping for another larger event, such as TRB presentations or a career fair
- Tracks or sessions dedicated to students and young professionals at District meetings
- A remote speed networking and career fair event
- A contest to identify and promote safety improvements

Figure 2: Common ITE Student Activities



Our team reviewed the database and their individual interviews for common elements and identified key findings and recommendations. The findings are grouped together in certain overarching themes, but they can often apply universally. Some of the key categories discussed below include small vs. large event planning, low-bar vs high preparation events, school coordination recommendations, and specific highlights for Traffic Bowl style events.

Low-Bar vs. High-Preparation Events

One theme that became apparent in the review of the events being held was a dichotomy between low-bar of entry style events to high-preparation events. Low-bar of entry events are events that focus on turnout above all else. The idea is encouraging a potential attendee by making it clear that showing up is easy and does not require preparation, foreknowledge, or anything else. This often appeals to newer ITE members, students who have otherwise busy schedules, or students at schools where transportation is not a big focus. Low-bar events tend to involve quite a bit of networking and engagement with other students or professionals.

In contrast, high-preparation events have benefits as well. These are events where attendees prepare for weeks or even months ahead of an event. Examples of such high-preparation activities include group project contests or District Traffic Bowls. Benefits of these types of events include the team-building that happens when students prepare together and a build-up of prestige or momentum for an event. As students prepare and ultimately do a good job, word-of-mouth spreads about the overall experience, encouraging more turnout and participation at the next event.

One drawback of high-prep events is that they can unfortunately turn away students who feel too busy or not technically prepared enough for an event. This is exacerbated when an event is new; it can be particularly hard to convince students to put in a large effort for an event they have never participated in before. Another drawback is that high-preparation events tend to be team-based, and that team ends up working together throughout an event, potentially limiting networking outside of one's own core group. Still, high-preparation events can be some of ITE's biggest and most important events.

Team Structure

In the particular context of a high-preparation event, it is common for a school to develop its own teams to participate in a larger event or competition. This is natural in situations where a team needs to work together on a project or study together for a knowledge-based event. It also has the strong benefit of building bonds between students who work together on teams.

However, strong consideration should also be given to mixing teams at an event. Networking is often a key goal of a student event, and having students work together on a team with students from other schools or other professionals creates an ideal opportunity for networking (with the activity itself serving as a natural ice-breaker). With the increased use of virtual conferencing technology in the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distance is not as much of an impediment towards formation of team involving students from multiple schools.

Skill and Knowledge Gaps

Another element to consider, particularly when thinking of high-preparation events, is the skill and/or knowledge level of the participants. ITE represents a broad base of skill sets, ranging from engineering design and analysis to transportation planning, data analytics, and much more. Focusing on a high level of knowledge in any one specific area can discourage participation from those who are not skilled in that discipline.

A particular example of this trend is the International Collegiate Traffic Bowl. The Traffic Bowl in its current form is geared towards students with the highest technical knowledge, and as such, students in schools with a strong transportation engineering program (particularly those with a graduate program) tend to perform very well. However, students at schools with smaller or less-specialized civil engineering programs, or transportation planners whose academic focus might be different, may be discouraged from partaking in the competition. Good workarounds to this may include relying on trivia-based knowledge or skills that could be picked up at an event, rather than learned over many years at school. This definitely presents a trade-off for any high-preparation event, by encouraging work ahead of time without relying on a particular field of knowledge.

School Coordination

School coordination can be a key element for successful student events and activities for a few key reasons. From an event marketing perspective, having a good connection with a faculty liaison is key to getting in touch with students and making them aware of upcoming events. Strong connections between schools and their local Chapters or Sections can also help with both recruitment of students and retention after graduation.

Being cognizant of student schedules is important for event scheduling. At a high level, avoiding times that are associated with testing is good. For example, it may be best to avoid scheduling events in late December or at the end of the school year to avoid final exams. On a smaller scale, if there is close coordination with school faculty, finer scheduling adjustments can be made, such as avoiding a particular large deadline for a transportation class.

It was observed that offering extra credit for students to attend ITE events has helped to encourage turnout. While this is a good suggestion, it is important to take care to respect a class's integrity by not pressuring professors to give out credit they feel should be earned through academic achievement.

Small Events

Many ITE events are small in nature, on the level of a single student chapter or a few students across a section. Examples of smaller events can include happy hours, meals, joint meetings between student chapters and local Sections, or informal Traffic Bowl-type competitions. Our team captured many of these types of events in the database, but it is likely that there are far more of these across ITE than have been documented. These can be crucial, as they are often a student's first exposure to ITE.

Low-bar of entry events tend to work well in a small event context. While encouraging new turnout, it often requires a lower level of effort for student organizers, who are often otherwise-busy volunteers. Smaller events also benefit greatly from coordinating scheduling with schools. Small events with lower turnouts are more likely to be heavily impacted by a scheduling challenge.

ITE could provide a lot of assistance here. It seems that many smaller events are prepared ad-hoc by volunteers on the local level. If possible, it could be quite helpful for ITE to develop templates and tool kits for small events. These templates could be for a series of small events, and list out tailored steps, needs, and recommendations for such an event. That way a small volunteer operation would have a listing of potential ideas for small events, and a good starting point for planning the event.

Large Events

Large events are key to ITE's success. They often start with a grand idea from a few passionate volunteers and are carried out by dedicated professionals and students, growing sometimes to an international level. The Marquee Events section of this report directly discusses some of the most successful large events currently being held across ITE.

Much of what is needed for the success of large events comes from a good idea, dedicated volunteers and students, and good marketing/word-of-mouth momentum. In general, high-preparation events tend to work well here, so long as they keep in mind the broad base of students involved in ITE.

It was also noted that the largest ITE events are often built into larger District- or International-level ITE meetings. This offers the synergy of a dual draw and fewer expenses for students to travel to both the student event and the larger ITE meeting together.

An interesting case study came out of The MiteY Race, which is a medium-to-large event pioneered by the Western District. In the early years of the event, cash prizes were offered, with the belief that this would encourage more turnout. However, after building up a following for the event, the cash prizes were dropped, and no change in turnout was observed. This is only a single data point, but it suggests that there are other factors that could significantly outweigh cash prizes when it comes to attracting students to an event.

Traffic Bowl Events

The International Collegiate Traffic Bowl is by far the most popular ITE events for students, and by all accounts is very successful. The reach that the Traffic Bowl has had since the International competition was launched in 2009 now extends out to hundreds of students each year, many of whom have now transitioned into volunteering for the Traffic Bowl each year. Many Chapters, Sections, and Districts hold smaller, informal Traffic Bowls as a part of happy hours or other social events.

Still, there is potential for improvement in how Traffic Bowls are organized and implemented. One key point regarding all Traffic Bowl-type events is the fact that they currently cater the most towards students with a strong educational background in transportation engineering, and potentially disadvantages students in schools with smaller transportation engineering programs or in transportation planning programs. ITE has already taken some steps to mitigate this by defining certain resource materials within the Rules section of the International Traffic Bowl website. This helps students at all levels by providing them with a limited list of resources to learn in order to compete. Our team would like to recommend that this list be broken out from the Rules section in a more prominent location on the Traffic Bowl website for potential participants to find.

Moving beyond that, ITE could consider creating focus areas or rounds of the Traffic Bowl that cater to specific groups. For example, one or two rounds of the traffic bowl could focus on technically engineering concepts, while another could focus on planning concepts, and another could be more transportation trivia based. This would allow more students to feel included.

ITE could consider providing additional resources to assist with smaller traffic bowls at the Chapter or Section level. One idea would be to provide simple guidelines for a small traffic bowl, with instructions and options tailored for smaller events, recommendations for venue type, a list of needed equipment, and anything else that might be helpful. Also, we noted that some examples of smaller traffic bowls in the database had informal assistance from ITE HQ with developing questions. If ITE were able to assist with providing questions for these smaller competitions in an official capacity, it would be a big help.

There are several additional recommendations for smaller traffic bowls that are hosted at the Chapter or Section level, including the following:

- Use a novel venue like a brewery to encourage turnout
- Use a novel guest emcee, such as someone from ITE leadership or another local leader
- Local groups should reach out to others who have put on similar smaller traffic bowls for advice
- Use the smaller format to be creative about team structures:
 - Consider allowing everyone to participate individually without a formal team structure
 - Mix students and professionals on teams to encourage networking

Remote Events

One event noted in the database used gather.town to host a remote speed networking and career event. This platform allowed for a unique remote experience, different from most virtual meetings. Unlike many remote platforms where participants all share a single group or smaller breakout sessions, gather.town instead gave each participant an avatar that could walk through a virtual environment. This allowed participants to choose to walk up to other avatars (individuals or groups) to have a conversation. This provided a networking experience that closely mimicked in-person interaction. It was similar to having a gathering in a room where participants could walk up to people they wanted to talk with, without everyone talking to each other at once (like a single room remote event) or everyone being consigned to a single room (like remote breakout rooms).

This platform also offered the opportunity to provide activities like speed networking (where a single mentor sat at a virtual table, and participants moved between tables at regular intervals) or even host a career fair. This offers an opportunity for vitalizing remote events where they are necessary (due to health-related restrictions) or beneficial (helping bridge large distances without extensive travel). Note that there are other platforms that offer similar experiences to gather.town.

Marquee Events

Over the course of conducting research for this project, the LITE Waves team identified several existing student engagement activities that may be able to become marquee events. These are events that have already been held by one or more ITE Sections or Districts and have seen a high level of enthusiasm from both students and professionals. With some additional support from ITE HQ and other ITE leaders, we believe that these events have the potential to make a lasting impact on ITE student members for many years to come.

The following events are the ones we have elected to highlight:

- Student Leadership Summits
- Learning by Traveling
- The MiteY Race
- Student Design Competitions

A two-page primer for each of these events has been attached to this report. These write-ups contain details about the history and general guidelines of the activity, as well as recommendations from the existing activity planners and the LITE Waves team regarding how ITE leaders can help make these events even better with a wider reach across all of ITE.

Next Steps

The key next step for this project is to make sure it gets into the hands of the leaders who need it the most – both students and District, Section, and Chapter leaders. This should begin with posting the database and this report to ITE's website, but should continue to push forward from there. We hope that the database can be posted in such a manner that it is easy for others to access and add to it.

After that, a marketing push should be made to highlight this tool. Our team is willing to work with ITE HQ on a two-pronged front, working with ITE leadership to share with current leaders and also to personally reach out to our own contacts at our local groups. The team will also request the same from the entire LeadershipITE class, expanding the personal reach out to the widest net possible.

As part of the outreach, the research should be expanded to more ITE groups. This round of research focused on Districts and Sections in the US and Canada, but more outreach in North America and across the Global District is needed.

With regard to the key marquee events we have highlighted, the LITE Waves team is willing to work with ITE leaders to identify one or more volunteers to champion these events. With dedicated support, at least one of the proposed ideas could become a true ITE marquee event.