

Science fair: Training ground for young thinkers

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Organizing a regional science fair for 350 secondary school students may seem like a daunting task, but for Annette Oertling, it's all part of her job as assistant dean for K-12 outreach in the Tulane School of Science and Engineering. Working with young scientists and their teachers is “a pleasure,” she says, and important community outreach.



Erica Guido, left, who attends John Curtis Christian School, talks about her science fair project with Annette Oertling, right, Tulane assistant dean and director of the fair. (Photo by Guillermo Cabrera-Rojo)

“Their ingenuity is just amazing,” [Oertling](#) says of the middle school and high school students from 25 New Orleans’s area schools with projects in the Greater New Orleans Science and Engineering Fair, held Feb. 28–March 1 at the University of New Orleans, which partners with Tulane in the event.

With projects from a variety of scientific fields, the students competed for scholarships and school grants. Among the top projects, Oertling says, were a demonstration model to investigate principles used in building a fusion reactor and a proposed redesign for solar cell technology.

She and her scientific committee must preapprove all projects, and at times put the brakes on students' somewhat edgy experiments, like launching mice inside rockets or culturing E. coli bacteria at home. Those young scientists had to change protocols after consultation with Tulane and UNO scientists, but it's all part of the learning process.

“The fair is all about scientific inquiry,” says Oertling, fair director. “Students pick a topic they're curious about and develop a project. Winners of school fairs come to the regional competition.” In all, the fairs touch an estimated 4,000 students citywide, she says.

Supported by organizations such as the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation, the fair helps fulfill Tulane's mission to be engaged with the community and also encourages more students to seek out scientific careers. Oertling calls it the [STEM](#) pipeline (science, technology, engineering and math) that feeds into Tulane programs: “We want to get the word out about what Tulane has to offer.”