



# Guide to Running a *FIRST*® Robotics Competition Team

*FIRST*® is a global robotics community that prepares young people for the future.



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# 1 Overview of *FIRST*<sup>®</sup>

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*FIRST*<sup>®</sup> (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) was founded by inventor Dean Kamen to inspire young people's interest in science and technology. As a robotics community that prepares young people for the future, *FIRST* is the world's leading youth-serving nonprofit advancing STEM education. For 30 years, *FIRST* has combined the rigor of STEM learning with the fun and excitement of traditional sports and the inspiration that comes from community through programs that have a proven impact on learning, interest, and skill-building inside and outside of the classroom.

*FIRST* provides programs that span a variety of age groups:

- *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> Robotics Competition for grades 9-12, ages 14-18
- *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> Tech Challenge for grades 7-12, ages 12-18
- *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> LEGO<sup>®</sup> League for grades PreK -8, ages 4-16\*
  - *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> LEGO<sup>®</sup> League Challenge for grades 4-8 (ages 9-16\*)
  - *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> LEGO<sup>®</sup> League Explore for grades 2-4 (ages 6-10)
  - *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> LEGO<sup>®</sup> League Discover for grades PreK-1 (ages 4-6)

*\*Ages and grades vary by country*

Please visit our website: [www.firstinspires.org](http://www.firstinspires.org) for more information about *FIRST* and its programs.

## 1.1 *FIRST* Mission

The mission of *FIRST* is to inspire young people to be science and technology leaders and innovators, by engaging them in exciting mentor-based programs that build science, engineering, and technology skills, that inspire innovation, and that foster well-rounded life capabilities including self-confidence, communication, and leadership.

## 1.2 *FIRST*<sup>®</sup> Robotics Competition

*FIRST* Robotics Competition combines the excitement of sport with the rigors of science and technology. Teams of students are challenged to design, build, and program industrial-size robots and compete for awards, while they also create a team identity, raise funds, hone teamwork skills, and advance respect and appreciation for STEM within the local community.

Volunteer professional mentors lend their time and talents to guide each team. It's as close to real-world engineering as a student can get. Plus, high school students gain access to exclusive scholarship opportunities from colleges, universities, and technical programs.

## 1.3 *Gracious Professionalism*<sup>®</sup>

*Gracious Professionalism*<sup>®</sup> is part of the ethos of *FIRST*. It's a way of doing things that encourages high-quality work, emphasizes the value of others, and respects individuals and the community. With *Gracious Professionalism*, fierce competition and mutual gain are not separate notions. Gracious professionals learn and compete like crazy but treat one another with respect and kindness in the process. They avoid treating anyone like losers. No chest thumping tough talk, but no sticky-sweet platitudes either. Knowledge, competition, and empathy are comfortably blended.

*FIRST* often uses this term, and it goes a long way to describing the program's intent. [Dr. Woodie Flowers](#), (1943 - 2019) EAB Chair Emeritus & Distinguished Advisor, coined the term *Gracious Professionalism*. He often asked this question: "Why do *FIRST* folks talk so much about that phrase?" As a mentor and facilitator, this is one of the most important concepts you can teach a young person. At *FIRST*, we see team members helping fellow team members, but we also see teams helping other teams.

This is an indicator that this concept is effective and productive. Spend time with your team reviewing some of the wisdom from Woodie:

*“Obviously it would not make sense to endorse “asinine professionalism” or “gracious incompetence.” It is, however, completely consistent with the FIRST spirit to encourage doing high quality, well informed work in a manner that leaves everyone feeling valued. Gracious Professionalism seems to be a good descriptor for part of the ethos of FIRST. It is part of what makes FIRST different and wonderful.*

*Gracious Professionalism* has purposefully been left somewhat undefined because it can and should mean different things to each of us. We can, however, outline some of its possible meanings. Gracious attitudes and behaviors are win-win. Gracious folks respect others and let that respect show in their actions. Professionals possess special knowledge and are trusted by society to use that knowledge responsibly. Thus, *Gracious Professionals* make a valued contribution in a manner pleasing to others and to themselves.

Understanding that *Gracious Professionalism* works is not rocket science. It is, however, missing in too many activities. At *FIRST*, it is alive and well. Please help us take care of it. In the long run, *Gracious Professionalism* is part of pursuing a meaningful life. If one becomes a professional, and uses knowledge in a gracious manner, everyone wins. One can add to society and enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that you have acted with integrity and sensitivity. “That’s good stuff!”

## 1.4 Coopertition®

*Coopertition* is displaying unqualified kindness and respect in the face of fierce competition. *Coopertition* is founded on the concept and a philosophy that teams can and should help and cooperate with each other even as they compete.

## 1.5 FIRST Core Values

We express the *FIRST* philosophies of *Gracious Professionalism* and *Coopertition* through our Core Values:

- **Discovery:** We explore new skills and ideas.
- **Innovation:** We use creativity and persistence to solve problems.
- **Impact:** We apply what we learn to improve our world.
- **Inclusion:** We respect each other and embrace our differences.
- **Teamwork:** We are stronger when we work together.
- **Fun:** We enjoy and celebrate what we do!

## 2 Overview of Document

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Mentoring is an integral part of the *FIRST* program and largely contributes to the program’s success. Every adult on a *FIRST* team is a mentor, simply because they lead through guidance and example. It is important to remember students need guidance, structure, encouragement, and most of all, a fun experience!

When done correctly, this learning process builds and expands team members’ self-confidence and knowledge. If the process has a strong foundation and works properly, mentors come away with as much as students do.

This document will focus on information to help lead mentor(s) successfully run a *FIRST* Robotics Competition team and help their students have the best experience. Be sure to also check out the [Mentor Guide](#) and share with other mentors on your team.

## 3 The Lead Mentor Role

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The role of the lead mentor(s) varies by teams. Each team will need at least two adults to act as lead mentors and be registered in the *FIRST* dashboard. Some teams have one person who does the majority of the role, others may have school administrators listed as the lead mentors but the work is done by other mentors, and some teams even have multiple mentors who share the workload. How you divide up the work is completely up to your team, but these are the main responsibilities of the lead mentor(s):

- Act as the primary point of contact for the team
- Register the team for the season
- Preference events for the team to attend
- Organize team meetings
- Assign team roles
- Delegate team tasks
- Manage team roster via the *FIRST* Dashboard; invite youth, ensure they register and complete Consent & Release forms
- Read team email blasts, read blog posts
- Ensure team meets deadlines for events and award submissions
- Assign designated question asker for the Q&A Forum
- Follow information related to the Game and Season, including Team Updates
- Utilize voucher codes to access software and other Kit of Parts elements for the team

### 3.1 Youth Protection Program

Part of your role as a mentor is to ensure safety for the students. *FIRST* strives to create an environment in which team members can grow, learn, and have fun with minimal risk of injury. The two lead mentors (for teams within the US & Canada) must be screened by our *FIRST* Youth Protection Program (YPP) but teams may choose to have all mentors screened. *FIRST* recommends screening non-lead mentors if they are present for 30% or more of the team's meeting time and/or activities. Lead mentors can request mentors complete the YPP screening by following these steps:

1. Log in to the [FIRST Dashboard](#)
2. Click on the blue "Primary Contacts" link located under the Team Contacts/Roster column
3. Locate the mentors contact card
4. Click options in the upper right-hand corner of contact role card
5. Select "Request Screening." The non-lead mentor will receive an email invitation to go directly to the screening vendor.

[FIRST Youth Protection Program](#) has clear guidelines regarding adult and student interaction. Adults working in *FIRST* programs must be knowledgeable of the standards set by the *FIRST* YPP, as well as those set by the school or organization hosting their team. As a lead mentor, you must understand these policies as well as how to enforce them and communicate these policies to every adult working with the team.

*FIRST* requires a minimum of two mentors to be with students at all times. If they are in different locations at the build site those two mentors should be within sight lines and be interruptible. The two adults do not always have to be the lead mentors. *FIRST* has put together this [Youth Protection Training](#) which is intended to enable adults working with *FIRST* teams to recognize situations that may pose a threat to team member safety and take the actions necessary to prevent and report injuries.

### 3.2 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I)

Part of your role as a mentor is to be an example and to welcome and include all team members. *FIRST* is committed to fostering, cultivating and preserving a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We embrace and encourage differences in race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity,



gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, income, language, learning difference, or any other characteristics that make our adult-force and students unique.

*FIRST* collaborated with the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE) to develop training for mentors, volunteers, partners and other key stakeholders who work directly with students and are committed to creating a sense of belonging for students on teams.

We ask that all mentors take our complimentary, three-part training module course titled [Strategies for Inspiring Success for All](#). These modules will equip mentors with specific strategies to support community outreach, student participation, motivation, engagement, and success through engaging and reflective activities on interactions with students. *FIRST* recommends mentors take this training when they first start engaging as a team mentor. It is also recommended that mentors retake this training on an annual basis to refresh on the tools and strategies provided to best work with all students.

We also recommend that all team members take the [Inspiring Youth Voice](#) training as it is designed for all *FIRST* students. It is designed to educate *FIRST* students about the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion while providing strategies and recommendations to help *FIRST* create a more inclusive and diverse environment.

*FIRST* teams should be mindful of being inclusive to all team members which includes being cognizant of their backgrounds including but not limited to: their pronouns, sexual orientation, cultural norms, and more. To learn more about understanding gender identity terms teams can check out [NPR's Guide to Gender Identity Terms](#).

For additional resources visit the [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Training & Resources webpage](#) to find links to other resources for increasing your knowledge and practice on creating inclusive environments for all.

### 3.3 Safety

Instilling a culture of safety is a value that every individual in the *FIRST* community must embrace as we pursue the mission and vision of *FIRST*. Safety is a vital part of the *FIRST* culture, having established the framework for safety leadership in all aspects of the programs. Teams should use the [FIRST Safety Manual](#) to understand and implement safe practices. *FIRST* has also worked with UL to establish online safety training for team members and mentors through the [Safety Learning Portal](#).

## 4 Team Recruitment

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### 4.1 Diversity in Team Recruitment

Exploring, developing and implementing strategies to become more inclusive and ensure access to our programs to all students (as well as access to key supports) is critical for *FIRST* to reach its goal and mission. ALL young people should have the opportunity to become science and technology leaders.

As a Lead Mentor, you have a vital role in ensuring that your team embodies this commitment.

### 4.2 Finding Team Members

When recruiting students for a team, it is important to understand the population of the school or local community and focus recruiting efforts on attracting a broad range of students. Make sure recruiting efforts reach a cross-section of the school or community by targeting the entire school and welcoming individuals with different skills and experience. Include and encourage a diverse range of individuals to help with recruiting. Students are more likely to be interested in participating if they see and hear from their peers.

## Suggestions for Recruiting Students:

- Utilize the [FIRST ED&I Student Recruitment Strategies Tip Sheet](#).
- Use [FIRST videos](#).
- Hang posters in the school, at the local library, in businesses, and in sponsor organizations.
- Include promotional materials in school newsletters or on school web sites.
- Hold a student assembly where there is a *FIRST* Robotics Competition video and demo.
- Have a local or previous year's team put on a demonstration at a school or community event.
- Give an overview of *FIRST* Robotics Competition in a series of classes where a variety of students are enrolled.
- Engage adults from local corporations, university students, and *FIRST* Alumni to speak about the value of participation.
- Enlist *FIRST* Alumni and participants on other *FIRST* teams to spread the word.
- Utilize [FIRST stories](#)

## Registration

All Youth Team Members are required to complete the online youth registration to participate in *FIRST* team meetings, events, or competitions. Learn more about the [youth registration system](#) and how to get started. If you have a student or parent who cannot complete youth registration electronically, please reach out to your [local Program Delivery Partner](#) to request an exception and obtain a hard copy of the Consent and Release Form.

For assistance in completing the youth registration please direct the parent/guardians and students to contact Team Support by phone at 1-800-871-8326, [via email](#), or via the chat feature on our [www.firstinspires.org](http://www.firstinspires.org) website.

## 4.3 Recruiting Mentors

Anyone can be a *FIRST* Robotics Competition mentor. Time and interest are the only requirements. Having a diverse pool of mentors only benefits the team; some mentors bring business expertise, some technical expertise, and some are great at marketing. A *FIRST* team can use all these skills. Lots of adults may want to help but may be unable to commit to every meeting, so understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the mentors and the team's needs will help to identify the areas where additional support will be needed. Mentors may be parents, teachers, engineers, college students, Scout leaders, *FIRST* Alumni, or members of the local community. Make sure recruiting efforts reach a cross-section of the community. Team members may be more comfortable if there are mentors on the team with backgrounds and interests similar to their own. Students can also learn a great deal from individuals with varied life, work, and learning experiences.

Always start by identifying the help you need and the time commitment that assistance will require. It's important that you know your community. Start by polling your team's parents and families and see if there are any potential technical mentors in that group or if they know someone who may be able to help. Teams or mentors from your surrounding area (or even around the globe) might also be willing to video chat to help.

Some teams don't need technical help; they need support for administrative work, marketing, trip planning, driving to events, fundraising, etc. Or they might need help developing a Business Plan or learning about college and career preparation. As mentioned earlier, always start by identifying the help you need and the time commitment that assistance will require.

## The *FIRST* Mentor Network sponsored by NI

Another avenue to help with finding mentors is the [FIRST Mentor Network](#). It is an interactive platform allowing teams to find mentors to work with virtually or face to face, locally or across the country, for a few

hours or for a season. Lead Mentors can build a team profile highlighting successes, goals, and desired mentor skill sets and experience.

## 5 Setting your team up for success

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Building a robot is just one of the many elements involved in being a successful team. Teams require roles, time management and plans to ensure sustainability.

### 5.1 Develop Roles Within the Team

Develop roles so that team members feel as though they have a part in the process. Talk about skill sets, projects and subprojects, sub teams, enjoyment, time constraints, and rules set by the school or *FIRST*. Check out the [How To: Organize a Team](#) or the [How To: Effective Leadership](#) resources.

### 5.2 Meeting Schedule

Each team should decide on a meeting schedule that works for them. Some teams may decide to meet both in-person and remotely depending on the tasks. Remote collaboration has its positives and negatives so teams should evaluate what works best for each task. Teams can see the [How To: Conduct Online Meetings guide](#) for tips on how to structure remote meetings.

The number of meetings a team needs will vary depending on what the team is trying to accomplish. Many teams meet once or twice a week in the summer/fall but during build season will meet more frequently each week. Check out the [Typical Season Calendar](#) section for more details on when things occur to help with planning your team's meeting schedule.

### 5.3 Tasks, Strategies, and Stress

Help team members clarify tasks and develop strategic plans for individual jobs. Defining a task list that includes complexity and showing their relationship to the timeline may make it easier for team members to plan and work together toward successful job completion. Remember, you are not just building a robot, but also building a team. Fun tasks and team building activities should be incorporated for a change of pace.

Watch for signs of serious stress among team members. This may be a time to intervene and ask if they need help or suggest that they take a break. 17% of youth (6-17 years) experience a mental health disorder ([NAMI, 2020](#)) and it's important to ensure students can take a break. Additional resources on mental health can be found on the [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Training and Resources](#) webpage. (*coming soon!*)

### 5.4 Suggested Tools

One of the most important things you need in order to build a robot is tools. We worked with Team 3847, Spectrum, to create the [Tool Recommendations for FIRST Robotics Competition Teams document](#). This document is intended more for teams that are newer to *FIRST* and includes a list of beginner tools as well as suggestions for more expensive tools and machinery that teams may want to acquire.

### 5.5 Ensuring Sustainability

Sustainability is key to ensure the program's longevity within a school/community and the impact the program has on students. Ensuring sustainability means that a team is focused on team retention for both students and mentors.



Sustainability starts with the culture of the team, to be welcoming to new members and a home for veteran members. The size of the team is unique to each individual team's situation and depends on funding, resources, and space to meet. The size of the team may ebb and flow as seasons progress. Mentors should be aware of their graduating vs recruitment rate to ensure the team does not get too small or too big. Reference the [Team Recruitment](#) section for tips on how to recruit new students and/or Mentors.

Lead Mentors are critical to guide the teams through the seasons, but teams should also be able to run if that Lead Mentor ever needs to step down or take a break. The team should have a plan in place to transition Lead Mentors and Mentors as needed

## 6 Typical Season Calendar

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Here's a high-level view describing major events during the season. View the [FIRST Robotics Competition Calendar](#) for exact dates of these events each season.

### May – September

- Register your team
- Lead Mentor 1 and 2 Youth Protection Screening
- Pre-Season

### September

- Event Preferences – Round 1
- Kit & Kickoff Sign Ups begin
- Drive Base Opt Out (Veterans only)

### October

- Event Preferences – Round 2
- Additional Event Registration
- Safety Animation Award opens
- *FIRST* Championship Waitlist Registration opens

### November

- Chairman's, Woodie Flowers, and Dean's List submissions open
- Event Registration Closes
- Initial Event Payment Deadline
- Kit & Kickoff Sign Ups end
- Pre-Kickoff Vouchers

### December

- *FIRST* Choice Round 1
- Safety Animation Award closes

### January

- Kickoff
- Replacement Parts
- Kickoff Vouchers
- Game Q&A
- *FIRST* Choice Round 2
- Build Season Begins
- Additional Event Payment Deadline

### February

- Chairman's, Woodie Flowers, and Dean's List submissions due

## March/April

- *FIRST* Championship Waitlist Registration closes
- Local Events
- *FIRST* Championship

## 7 Budgets & Finances

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Running a *FIRST* Robotics Competition team is like running a small business so it's important to set a budget. Each team's budget will vary depending on what they are trying to accomplish and the resources in their area.

Develop a team mission statement and business plan, and decide what your team goals are. These will help you develop a budget and determine fundraising targets. Things to include are: the registration fee, travel costs, robot and field construction items, publicity and sponsorship materials, and any other expenses you think you may have.

Check out our [Fundraising Toolkit](#) or our [Fundraising 101](#) for ideas on fundraising and check out our [Sponsor Relations](#) guide for ideas on how to structure sponsorship opportunities.

### 7.1 Grants

*FIRST* has a variety of grants to help teams. To see what grants your team may qualify for, please visit our [Grants page](#). The grants page is updated regularly, so check back often to see new team grant opportunities. In addition to *FIRST* grants, teams should consider checking for grants offered by companies in their area and/or checking with their [local Program Delivery Partner](#).

## 8 Kit of Parts

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Each season, *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams receive Kits of Parts (KoP). The KoP is not designed to be a "bolt together" solution to play the game, but is a starting point, containing mostly donated components from Suppliers across multiple industries. The Kit of Parts System consists of three parts available to teams through a variety of sources:

- Kickoff Kit – A box of parts delivered to teams at the start of the season
- *FIRST* Choice – Items available via an online menu in exchange for credits issued to all teams
- Virtual Kit – products available directly from the Supplier either via download or custom order.

For more information about the Kit of Parts, including deadlines, check out the [Kit of Parts webpage](#).

## 9 Kickoff

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Kickoff is the event that ignites the start of the *FIRST* Robotics Competition season and is when the new game is revealed! Kickoff is an event that is livestreamed from Manchester, NH (where *FIRST* Headquarters is located) and is the only Kickoff to have a real field. During the broadcast, teams will hear from special guests and the season's game is revealed.

Local areas may host Kickoff events to allow teams to come together to watch the broadcast. Local Kickoffs are most important because this is typically where teams receive their Kickoff Kit. These events may also choose to host workshops to help teams. Teams may choose to have their whole team attend a Kickoff event or they may send a few people to pick up their Kickoff Kit or they may choose to not attend a Kickoff and instead have their Kickoff Kit shipped directly to them but fees may apply. Local Kickoffs are typically publicized in September/October and teams should sign up to the event that works best for them.

## 10 How to approach Build Season

Build season is the time teams work on designing, building, and programming their robot. It begins immediately after kickoff and goes through the first event the team attends.

Here is one very high-level schedule for how to approach the Build Season. Many factors affect this schedule including years of experience, number of students/mentors, machining resources, actual time between kickoff and your first event, etc. Teams should feel free to modify this timeline to what works best for your team. There is no single right way to how a team should approach Build Season, it's up to your team to figure out what may work best for you.

Table 10-1: Build Season Timeline

ACTIVITY	Week							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Initial Strategy (~First 2-3 days)	█							
Mechanism Brainstorming + Choosing prototype concepts (~2 days)	█							
Prototyping		█	█					
Detailed Design		█	█	█				
Mechanism Fabrication			█	█	█			
Assembly (includes wiring)				█	█	█		
Initial Programming		█	█	█	█			
Test and Finalize Programming					█	█	█	
Practice/Testing						█	█	█
Minor iterations						█	█	█

Some resources you may find helpful to guide specific aspects of the robot design process include:

- [Design 101](#)
- [Prototyping 101](#)
- [Programming 101](#)

If your team is attending multiple events, you may decide to make improvements to your robot between events. Using what you've learned from testing (i.e. your event) to iterate and make improvements is a crucial part of the engineering process!

### 10.1 Post – Event

One of the best ways to create and sustain team morale is to host a team debrief after an event. This debrief should be used to celebrate your team's successes and get feedback on what aspects you could improve. Use this as an opportunity to change the narrative if an event did not go as planned. This could include everything from the robot to logistics to interview with judges. If your team is going to multiple events, the debrief may help your team decide what areas to improve prior to that event. Teams may choose to do one debrief after each event, or one at the end of the season but it's highly recommended to hold at least one debrief to let all members voice their opinions.

## 11 Events

Going to an event is one of the highlights of being on a *FIRST* Robotics Competition team. All teams are expected to follow the [Event Rules](#) at all official *FIRST* events. Teams should make sure they are prepared for the event and can do so by reading the [District and Regional webpage](#) for more information

on how to preference events, what to expect including judging, scouting, robot inspection, what to bring to events, and more.

Some events may be day trips for your team whereas others may require an overnight trip. Check out the [How To: Arrange Team and Robot Transportation](#) guide for tips on organizing travel to events.

## 11.1 **FIRST Championship**

*FIRST* Championship is the culmination of the season's *FIRST* programs, bringing together tens of thousands of students, mentors, and volunteers of all ages for the ultimate celebration of science and technology. Teams from around the world earn spots at *FIRST* Championship by participating in District or Regional Events. For more information check out the [FIRST Championship website](#).

## 12 **Off-Season**

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Some teams may take a break during the summer and/or fall whereas some teams choose to meet year-round. If your team decides to meet year-round, here are some ideas for your team to focus on:

- New student recruitment
- Fundraising for the next season
- Training – this could be machining, CAD, wiring, presentation skills, etc.
- Outreach to your local community
- Off-Season Events – Off-season Events are gatherings that utilize *FIRST* program content for which there is a participation fee or sponsorship funding. Many local teams or local Program Delivery Organizations may choose to hold Off-Season Events. For more information check out the [Off-Season Events webpage](#).
- And more!

## 13 **Resources**

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This guide is intended to be a starting point for mentors. Mentors should also consider looking at the following additional resources:

- [FIRST Robotics Competition Email Blasts](#) – Archive of *FIRST* Robotics Competition team email blasts.
- [FIRST Robotics Competition Blog](#) – Blog posts from the director of *FIRST* Robotics Competition and guests.
- [WPI Lib](#) – Control System and Programming documentation to help with wiring and programming your robot.
- [Technical Resources](#) – A collection of both mechanical and software/electrical resources to aid teams.
- [Supplemental Resources](#) – A collection of resources put together with the help of “The Compass Alliance.”
- [FIRST Robotics Competition Awards Page](#) – A page that shows all of the current *FIRST* Robotics Competition Awards, award deadlines, and links to the guidelines for the awards.
- [Find Local Support](#) – A page to find your local Program Deliver Organizations that partner with *FIRST* in each community that include Program Delivery Partners (PDPs), *FIRST* Senior Mentors, and *FIRST* AmeriCorps VISTA members
- *FIRST* Robotics Competition Social Media: [FIRST Robotics Competition Twitter](#) and [FIRST Robotics Competition Facebook](#)

Teams can contact [Team Support](#) for any additional questions.