

The Value of Debate:

Adapted from the Report of the Philodemic Debate Society,
Georgetown University, 1998
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What Debate Teaches

In 1908, Edwin Shurter wrote that "Perhaps no study equals debate in the acquirement of the power of logical thinking combined with clear expression" (Shurter, p11). More recently, the first national conference on forensics noted that debate is first and foremost an educational endeavor:

Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. An argumentative perspective on communication involves the study of reason giving by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values. From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences (McBath, p11).

Professor Hunt states unequivocally that "[f]orensics has an ancient and honorable twenty-five hundred year history as the heart of The Western Intellectual Tradition" (p5). The continuous operation of competitive debate in differing forms is easily traced to the Medieval university and the original Greek and Roman educational practices. The study of the rhetoric of argument was at the center all Greek and Roman philosophies of education (Braham).

The long honored position of debate in academia has been built around its functional purposes. Competitive debate teaches valuable skills. None of these benefits need be taken on faith. There is strong empirical evidence for the proposition that debate teaches crucial skills. After reviewing the research, Colbert and Biggers noted:

The literature suggests that debaters benefit in at least three areas. First, forensic competition improves the students' communication skills. Second, forensics provides a unique educational experience because of the way it promotes depth of study, complex analysis and focused critical thinking. Third, forensics offers excellent pre-professional preparation (p237).

A working group of the Quail Roost Conference on Assessment of Professional Activities of Directors of Debate recently reported:

A well established and supported debate program offers exceptional opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate education that are equaled by few other academic programs. Debate permits undergraduates to develop such humanistic capabilities as research, analysis, critical evaluation of claims, and the construction and judgment of argument on

important social issues. Debate introduces the intellectual excitement and rigor of research into the undergraduate curriculum in a manner characterized by both its intensity and interdisciplinary nature... The benefits derived from debate thus seem particularly appropriate for, and consistent with, the emerging concerns and trends in higher education (Quail Roost, p19).

In their monumental study of former debaters, Matlon and Keele conclude that "[t]here is an affirmative relationship between participation in competitive debate and the goals of higher education" (p 205). Colbert and Biggers agree, stating that "[t]raining in debate has long been considered a vital part of the educational process" (p237). They go on to note that "[t]he educational benefits of debate seem to be well documented..."(p238). Finally, Kruger argues that debate is perhaps the "most valuable" activity in a liberal arts curriculum (p. vii). In attempting to discover why these educational benefits are attributed to debate, several reasons are suggested. There is a close connection between the skills that debate teaches and the proclaimed goals of our educational institutions. Listen to Professor Hunt:

A forensics education is a microcosm of the Western Intellectual Tradition and of the liberal arts. The fundamental knowledge and skills potentially gleaned in forensics reads like a list taken from Mortimer Adler's *The Paideia Proposal*, the U.S. Department of Education's *A Nation at Risk*, or any of a number of recent documents about fundamentals and excellence in higher education. Forensics helps you learn how to learn, to be able to think clearly and adapt to rapid change (p9).

James McBath adds, "[a]t its essence, forensics is an educational activity which provides students with the opportunity to develop a high level of proficiency in writing, thinking, reading, speaking and listening"(p10). Debate is a uniquely beneficial educational tool in part because of the value of argumentation theory itself. The creation of an argument is one of the most complex cognitive acts that a person can engage in. Creating an argument requires the research of issues, organization of data, analysis of data, synthesis of different kinds of data, and an evaluation of information with respect to which conclusion it may point. After this process, the formulation of an argument requires the debater to consider differing methods of critiquing reason, the decision making formula, the audience and the criteria of decision making. In the end, arguments must be communicated to an audience clearly and succinctly - a difficult cognitive process requiring conversion between

thought, written rhetoric and oral rhetoric. At the end, the debate itself requires the processing of other's arguments and then the reformulation and defense of one's original position.

The close relationship between a debate coach and debate participants is another reason for the unique educational value of debate. "[F]ew student-teacher relationships are as close as that in forensics, and probably few are as personally and intellectually rewarding" (Faules and Rieke, p51). This unique attribute creates an intense educational experience as explained by Scott:

The combination of superior students, close student-teacher relationships, and high motivation all combine to...require the student to develop habits of sustained mental discipline and a commitment to excellence. Relatively few undergraduate students ever experience the intensity of intellectual concentration and production which become the common experience of the participant in forensics (p4).

Debate is also a successful method of teaching because of its inherently interactive format. This methodology describes competitive debate, both in terms of how debates are formatted and in its reliance on "coaching" as a method of instruction. Research has demonstrated that interactive formats are the preferred method for achieving critical thinking, problem solving ability, higher level cognitive learning, attitude change, moral development, and communication skill development (Gall). Of the six recommended methods for active learning, debate utilizes five, they include writing, oral presentation, small group strategies, instructional games or role playing and field study methods (Nyquist and Wulff). Each of the educational attributes of this intense experience are worthy of individual examination. The next section takes a brief look at each.

Critical Thinking

The degree to which the debate program enhances the critical thinking ability of its participants is a crucial criterion against which to weigh the debate program. Across the United States, high schools, colleges and universities have placed increasing emphasis on the attainment of critical thinking skills. The issue has been the subject of nationally funded reports, graduation requirements and the subject of countless scholarly and educational journals (McMillan). Shroeder and Shroeder report that:

Almost every institution of education has, as a part of its mission, the preparation of articulate and critical thinking individuals who are able to speak intelligently about the issues of the day. Forensics, or competitive speech activities, clearly fit within this mission of the institution, and, indeed, may have a more integral relationship with the educational mission than many other activities (p13).

One of the most renowned professors of debate in the United States, concurs on page one of his treatise:

Competency in critical thinking is rightly viewed as a requisite intellectual skill for self-realization as an effective participant in human affairs, for the pursuit of higher education, and for successful participation in the highly competitive world of business and the professions. Debate is today, as it has been since classical times, one of the best methods of learning and applying the principles of critical thinking (Freely, 1990).

Many authors note that leadership in a changing world requires students to learn to critically analyze and evaluate ideas (Adler; Dressel & Mayhew; Young). Besides being an obvious and important goal of any educational institution, forensics directors have rated developing critical thinking ability as the highest educational goal of the activity (Rieke). Debaters themselves have suggested that it should be considered the most important goal (Matlon and Keele). A healthy ability to think critically about information is especially critical in a world overflowing with data. An old debater research adage holds that "you can prove anything if you look long enough." The shuddering growth in information and access to it has changed this sarcastic notion into a virtual truism. The ability and willingness to critically examine information is a highly prized skill among employees, managers and executives, lawyers, doctors and other professions. Society desperately needs training devices that can help people manage information in a trenchant fashion.

The empirical evidence demonstrating a connection between participation in debate and learning the skills of critical thinking is quite extensive. In a recent review of research on the subject, Colbert and Biggers noted that "50 years of research correlates debate training with critical thinking skills" (p212). Keefe, Harte and Norton reviewed the research and concluded that, "[m]any researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience" (p33-34). The most recent study concluded not only that participation in competitive debate enhances critical thinking skills, but that compared to academic pursuits of a similar time length, "competitive forensics demonstrates the largest gain in critical thinking skills" (Allen, p6).

The kind of oppositional thinking encouraged by debate clearly contributes to critical thinking skills for a variety of reasons. There is strong empirical evidence, for example, that utilizing devils advocacy helps improve the understanding of strategic problems. In fact, devils advocacy has been used successfully by a number of companies for this exact purpose (Schwenk, 1988). Such research mirrors what debate coaches have known for

decades. Debaters learn much more about critical thinking than the old adage "there are two sides to every coin." They learn how to spot errors in reasoning and proof. They gain a greater respect for the complexity of ideas and they learn how to criticize in a productive way based on facts and logic. Many former debaters have testified that participation in debate exposed them to complex ways of thinking which prepared them for what they would face in graduate school and their professional lives. James Greenwood, Chairperson in Communications at the University of Findlay noted that "debate was more important to my career than any single course on the undergraduate and graduate level. Debate develops skills in organization, clarity and depth of analysis that most students do not encounter until the master's thesis" (Shroeder and Shroeder, p16).

Research Skills

No class or activity compares to debate as a means of teaching students methods of research. Since students in debate often engage in 20 hours or more a week of preparation, they gain more experience in research in one year than in all the rest of their studies combined. Hunt gives this advice to potential debaters:

...you will learn research methods as you learn to support your advocacy. You will learn to use the library and all its resources. You will learn to find books, articles, government documents, and special studies. You will learn to utilize every sort of index, both print indexes and computerized indexes. You will also learn both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies as you begin to examine and criticize the research you read. Good forensics students have to be familiar with humane, social scientific, and scientific methodologies and with case studies, surveys, and statistics. Without such knowledge, you cannot separate good logic, good reasoning, and good evidence from mediocre or poor logic, reasoning and evidence (p8).

All of the debaters interviewed who had obtained advanced degrees suggested that the research efforts that they engaged in for debate were many times more challenging than those required for a law degree, masters thesis or dissertation. Debaters will regularly use every conceivable resource available not only at The Meadows, but also all collegiate resources available in the metropolitan area. Debaters often conduct extensive research at law and medical schools, utilizing the Library of Congress, specialized libraries at the Agency for International Development, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Institute for Medicine, Middle East Institute and countless others. They collect material from a large diversity of think tanks and special interest groups. They access materials from the Congressional Research Service as well as committees and members of Congress. Debaters have become versed in the techniques of research on the Internet and are utilizing a plethora of

computerized research databases. The research skills of debaters are so well known that they have been prized employees and interns for a variety of private, governmental and international institutions. The most distinguished think tank studying international relations in the world, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has recently established a special internship to be rewarded exclusively to participants at the National Debate Tournament (Lennon).

Organization and Arrangement

Because debate is a form of structured argumentation - a great deal of emphasis is placed on the structure of individual arguments, cases, counterplans and other types of persuasive techniques. The skills of organizing arguments are transferable to nearly all other types of communication. In addition to nearly all types of oral communication, research has suggested that debate is beneficial in teaching writing skills (Matlon and Keele). The notion of structuring arguments is relevant throughout the lives of all students. They utilize these skills when answering and posing questions, writing letters and essays, in court, in committees and other small groups, for evaluations, to sell or in a myriad of other ways. Communication itself is heavily steeped in the notion of argument (McBath). In large part the centrality of argument in our lives was one of the reasons why the study of rhetoric became the center of the Western Intellectual Tradition (Hunt). Debate teaches students a great deal more about organization and arrangement than merely to have an introduction, body and conclusion. Debate teaches them how to construct arguments in a sophisticated manner, examining both the micro and macro perspective of argumentation theory.

Oral Communication Skills

The teaching of oral communication skills has been called "a vital part of humanistic education and democratic citizenship" (Lucas, p69). From Aristotle and Plato to Saint Augustine and Richard Whately, it has absorbed the energies of some of the greatest thinkers ever known (Lucas, p67). Oral Communication is amongst the most obvious and well supported values of academic debate. It has long been considered central to any program of speech communication:

The forensic program, which plays an important role in the total program of speech education in secondary schools and colleges, provides the student-participants with a variety of practical educational experiences that few other forms of education afford. It offers them an unparalleled opportunity to perfect the techniques of effective oral communication; in fact, campus and interscholastic speaking is the most potent contemporary force outside the classroom in the speech education of thousands of students. When ably coached, these

programs contribute significantly to the intellectual, social, and moral growth of participating students (Klopf, p1).

Every empirical study discoverable supports the proposition that debate enhances oral communication skills. Semlak and Shields concluded that "students with debate experience were significantly better at employing the three communication skills (analysis, delivery, and organization) utilized in this study than students without experience" (p194). Professor Pollock in his interesting study of debate and the communication abilities of leaders notes:

In speculating what role the forensic activity plays in the attainment or oral communication success in legislative halls, some positive conclusions can be inferred. For example, the correlation ran high in this survey that the very top debaters and floor speakers in the Florida House of Representatives were also those who had previous experience in scholastic debate or public speaking-type forensic activity (p17).

Arnold examined 94 Pennsylvania lawyers with forensic experience and concluded that the oral communication skills learned were so extensive that forensics educators should encourage pre-law students to join forensics teams (Arnold, p26). Pollock's research also showed that "persons with oral communication skills honed by varied forensic events were also regarded highly by their colleagues in group discussion activity. Virtually every legislator accorded high ratings in the basic category of interpersonal communication listed forensic experiences a student" (p17). After reviewing the research, Colbert and Biggers conclude bluntly, "[t]he conclusion seems fairly simple, debate training is an excellent way of improving many communication skills" (p239).

There are many apparent reasons for the success of debate as a method of teaching oral communication. A few are briefly noted:

Practice

While typical students might give as few as two or as many as ten oral presentations during an academic year, the typical debater would conservatively give 128. In each debate, the student gives two speeches, their [sic] are eight preliminary debates at major tournaments and a typical student would attend at least 8 tournaments. This figure does not include speeches given during practice, elimination rounds or public exhibitions. The more accurate figure is probably over 200 (Interviews).

Subjecting Oral Communication to Rigorous Academic Techniques

While oral presentations given during the normal course of academic life are no doubt valuable and important aspects of a student's education, they certainly cannot compare to the academic rigor applied to speeches given during interscholastic competition. First, the debater has

access to a trained and experienced communication professional (coach) in preparing their speeches. Second, each speech that he or she gives is (hopefully) judged by a communication professional in the forensics community. The student receives extensive criticism and feedback and is measured against established educational standards.

Explanation Power

Debates invariably require arguers to build certain foundations for their audience. As the level of argument advances, debaters learn to explain complex ideas in a quick and efficient manner. This skill serves them well throughout their involvement with complex decision making organizations.

Selling Power

Debaters learn to package arguments in a way that increases their appeal. They learn to adapt to their audience and are taught to craft a message which accomplishes specific objectives. Debaters are taught that it's not just what you say it's how you say it.

Listening and Note Taking Skills

Listening is an important criteria for evaluation because of its centrality to the process of debate and because of the potential gains academic institutions can make in this area. The debater by definition must listen carefully to her opponent in order to achieve the objective of refutation. Careful listening is rewarded in debate by the discovery of flaws in the opponent's language, thinking or evidence. The preparation and anticipation of arguments for a debate also places the participants in a better position to comprehend the various arguments and information being presented in a debate or discussion. Extensive empirical work has established that the typical human beings listen at only 25% of their actual capability (Kramar, p16; Myers; Verderber; Wolf). Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching called speaking and listening so central to education that they deserve specialized training (Scully). This implies that devices which can increase the listening skills of our students should be highly valued because the potential benefits are extraordinary.

A debate by its very nature is filled with conflicting viewpoints. The participants are forced to deal with a plethora of oppositional facts, research, arguments, perspectives and assumptions. Involvement in debate therefore serves as a perfect training device for aiding individuals in the processing of information. Debaters almost universally agree that debate has helped them to listen more efficiently, speak and write more clearly and to see relationships between information and ideas more readily (Matlon; Interviews). Debaters as a group have a superior ability to crystallize large sums of information

both mentally and in terms of summarizing that information for a listener (Semlak and Shields).

How Debate Enhances Listening Skills

Getting Ready To Listen

Debate teaches individuals the importance of being prepared to listen in two ways. First, it trains people in the mental preparation of listening - having a listening plan. During a debate you listen for specific things, points you want to answer, weakness in logic, supporting material and key points. Second, debaters also learn to concentrate on what is being said. To listen properly you must eliminate distraction and concentrate on the speaker and the implications of her words.

Active Listening

Listening during a debate is almost by definition active listening and every text book on communication in the world suggests that the key to listening is active listening. The mind can think much faster than any human being can talk. If you listen passively then the mind inevitably wanders. Debate teaches people to think about what is being said. Such active listening enhances both retention and understanding.

Ignoring Red Flags

One of the biggest causes of poor listening is simply ignoring what is being received. This often occurs when the speaker says something that triggers an emotional switch with the listener. Debaters learn that arguments are tools and that a critical step in responding to even the most emotional of triggers is to fully understand and listen to it.

Practice Makes Perfect

Because a debate requires the listener to be very active in analyzing what is being said and because a debater must also think about what he is going to say, it is the perfect listening practice. Just like any other skill, good listeners are made not born, they work at it.

Ethics of Advocacy

Learning the ethics of advocacy has been referred to as an important educational benefit of debate (Hunt). The debate participant learns how to correctly and ethically cite material. They learn the rules of context and those governing ellipses. Students learn the rules of the AFA Code and the American Debate Association which govern the ethics of advocacy as well as debate programs as a whole. Students receive feedback directly after each debate, which focuses on the quality of the evidence they have cited and the connection between the evidence they have presented and the claims they have asserted. On

occasion the student may even have the opportunity to engage in formal debate about the propriety of utilizing certain material. Over recent years, the ethics of properly utilizing material gained from cyber sources has become a significant controversy in the debate community. In many cases, students have had the opportunity themselves to engage in debates which are defining the ethics of "cyber research." Unlike research in other academic arenas, the debater works very closely with the debate coach on all aspects of her preparation. The result is an unparalleled opportunity for students to gain theoretical and practical experience in the ethics of advocacy.

No doubt this training in the ethics of communication is an important achievement. Examination of the ethical issues of communication occupied Plato who criticized the sophists (Plato). Examination of the argumentative tactics of the Nazis' serves as an incredible tool for an inquiry into the fundamental nature of all unethical and inhumane behavior. Because "[e]thical perspectives dominate public discussion of advertising, politics, and corporate messages" (Gronbeck, p97), the ethics of communication has a powerful link to student's everyday lives. The relationship between the ethics of communication and the larger world of ethical decision making is obvious in that "many ethical decisions are tied to communication activity, including ends sought and means employed" (Anderson, p459).

Career Skills

A survey by Hobbs and Chandler showed that debate alumni overwhelmingly agreed that debate experience had aided them significantly in their professional careers (p5). In discussing their results, they report:

In general, it seems that training in debate provides students with a positive experience which helps them to develop skills which will be needed in their professions. Several respondents, in response to the open-ended questions, reported that debate was the most valuable educational experience they received. One minister wrote, "The most useful training I received in college for the ministry came from my experience in debate. Period." A lawyer wrote, "personally, debate was the single most useful experience I had in 19 years of education." Another respondent indicated "The lessons learned and the experience gained have been more valuable to me than any other aspect of my formal education (p6).

Hobbs and Chandler conclude that "this survey overwhelmingly supports the idea that participation in policy debate provides significant benefits for those entering the professions of law, management, ministry and teaching (p6)." Sheckels quotes a survey in which Midwest business hiring managers "listed debate first among twenty other activities and academic specializations that an applicant might present on a resume." In the same survey, debate was overwhelming the first choice of

recruiting directors at major law firms (p 2). Surveys in the communication field indicate that many Department Chairs give credit to participation in debate/forensics for their success (Shroeder and Shroeder, p16). Specifically, Bill Hill, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; John Olsen, Everett Community College; Timothy Hegstrom, San Jose State; and Don Boileau, George Mason University cite participation in competitive forensics as an important source of their success (Shroeder and Shroeder, p16).

It appears that debate is an especially excellent pre-professional activity for future law students. "The data suggesting that forensics is valuable to the pre-law student is overwhelming" (Colbert and Biggers p238). Swanson found that 70.3% of law school deans recommended participation in intercollegiate debate. In fact, support from lawyers and law school administrators ranges from a strong endorsement of debate for all pre-law students to a suggestion that it be required. The reason for such support may be the professional success of former debaters (Colbert and Biggers, p238).

This is an important discovery since survey data indicate that a third of top level competitive debaters go on to law school (Matlon). Explaining this data is not a difficult task. Debate is valuable as pre-professional education because the skills that are learned by a competitive debater parallel those required for success in many of the professions. Most obvious among these skills are those of critical thinking, examination of evidence, rational decision making, organization, oral communication and listening. The Chronicle of Higher education summarized the value of debate when reporting that "debate, perhaps more than any other extra-curricular activity, successfully bridges the gap between academics and careers, without skimping on either" (Muir). "In a time when many of our students ask us how educational activities will help them get a job, the answer seems to be unequivocal. Debate experience is highly valued by the business world" (Colbert and Biggers p239).

Enhancing the Value of the Classroom Experience

A commonly reported educational advantage offered by participation in debate is that it allows students to get more out of their classroom educational experiences. McCrosky argues that students trained in competitive speech do better academically and that most of the skills learned are transferred to other academic subjects. This appears to occur for several reasons. First, debaters appear to be more capable of processing information effectively. Their experience with debate enhances their listening and note taking skills. It also improves their ability to grasp complex information quickly and efficiently. Students involved in competitive debate programs are better

equipped to participate in stimulating class discussion (Hanson). A student might also be more capable of connecting with their classroom experience, having actually debated the application of various theories to real world situations. The analytical skills taught by debate are central to the evaluation of ideas which occur in all other disciplines (Sprague; Boyer; Hopper and Daly; Modaff and Hopper). Undisputedly, debaters are better prepared to research papers and presentations for classes because of the skills they learn in debate (see above).

Increasing Student Knowledge about the World

The knowledge gained by students about the subject of the debate topic has been compared to masters research (Shroeder and Shroeder, p16), dissertation research (Interviews) and the knowledge of experts themselves (Brigance, p17-19). The educational value of the content of debater's studies would justify the existence of the debate program as an educational exercise even if one were to completely ignore each of the process values we have already discussed. Debaters spend an average of between 10 and 30 hours a week preparing to debate. They begin preparation in July with the announcement of the topic and finish in April when the national tournament is concluded. By the end of the season, one two person debate team will carry 4-7 large filing tubs (1.5' by 2.5') filled with briefs on the various issues covered by the debate topic.

The depth in which students examine the issues under the debate topic are unmatched by any other academic endeavor. A common research goal of a debate team is to examine every piece of published material in existence on a given topic (Interviews). Debate students often report having read entirely or major portions of 250-300 books in a debate season (Interviews). Students study a debate question from every conceivable disciplinary angle. It is not uncommon for a single competitive debate to include argument and evidence relating to political science, sociology, metaphysical philosophy, history, hard sciences and law. Debaters have thoroughly studied such questions in recent years as:

- When does life begin?
- What are the cultural and historical roots of the Arab/Israeli conflict?
- What would be the physiological effect of a limited nuclear war?
- Is sentencing law gender neutral? Should it be?
- How does U.S. trade policy interact with programs to preserve the genetic diversity of critical crops?
- Does empiricism accurately describe the universe?
- How does language effect human perception of reality?
- What are the implications of various interpretations of

the 5th amendment on societal equality?

- Should the U.S. place troops on the Golan Heights to secure peace between Israel and Syria?
- What will be the strategic effect of selling 32 F-16s to Jordan?
- What will be the effect of releasing greenhouse gases on global temperature over the next 4 decades?
- What are the implications of recent discoveries in quantum physics on accurate policy predication?
- Do feminine principles hold the key to preservation of a livable environment?
- What are the costs and benefits of biological weapons research?
- What are the prospects for democracy in post-soviet Russia?
- What are the implications of determinate sentencing for inner city communities?
- How will the increased rate of deforestation affect the mutation and release of new diseases?

These questions are, of course, an infinitesimal portion of what students have studied, but it does represent the depth and diversity of thought that has been required of competitive debaters.

Conclusion

On the whole, support for the proposition that debate is a worthy educational activity is more than extensive. I share Colbert and Biggers conclusion that "[i]t would seem difficult to imagine stronger support for any educational activity"(p239). Somewhat surprising is the difficulty in discovering not only any negative research relating to participation in debate programs, but the lack of any negative comments at all. Colbert and Biggers in their review confirmed this in saying "[t]he evidence is overwhelming, no negative evidence can be found" (p239). The only possible conclusion to be drawn from a survey of the research is that competitive debate is an extremely valuable educational activity, unmatched not only by any other student activity, but unmatched by any other academic activity that a student might engage in.

Leadership

Does competitive debate serve to educate future leaders?

Debate and argumentation are at the center of nearly all American political, social and economic decision-making. In many ways, it was a faith in debate itself that was at the root of the formation of American democracy and capitalism. The construction of our democratic institutions was founded on the notion that decision makers presented with a diversity of ideas, freely advocated and freely defended, could rationally choose different courses of action based upon the facts and arguments at hand. It

would not be surprising if those trained in the principles of debate were most capable of succeeding within such institutions. Evidence for this proposition begins with the very origins of the nation, as our founding fathers were trained in the great traditions of argument and rhetoric:

Forensics disputations came through the Western Intellectual Tradition, from Greece and Rome, through the Catholic Church, through Great Britain and its schools, to the United States. Disputations were an essential part of the basic education at such universities as Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, and the University of Virginia from their earliest days. Seniors did not write a thesis, rather they gave a senior speech. Besides formal work in classes on rhetoric, students formed literary and debating societies. The Spy Club at Harvard and the Linonian Society at Yale, among others, debated issues, studied controversial current events, and invited speakers to their activities. This kind of education was essential in developing the minds of American Founding Fathers like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton. The kind of thinking and rhetorical skills this type of education produced can be seen in the expressions of the Federalist papers, The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution (Hunt, p3).

British debating societies have a similarly impressive historical record. The oldest debating society in the world, at Oxford, has produced "many, many members of Parliament and six British prime ministers, from William Gladstone to Edward Heath" (Chicago Tribune, p1).

More modern data confirms this relationship between debate and leadership. The most extensive survey of former debaters reported:

The specific positions held by former NDT debaters reads like a "Who's Who" in leadership. Here is a sample of positions currently or once held by competitive debate alumni: A Cabinet member; Congresspersons; presidents of bar associations, colleges and universities; educational leaders; ambassadors; commanding officers in the military; numerous state and federal government elected and appointed positions; publishers; bankers; corporate board chair persons; and judicial positions at all levels including law school deans and attorney generals (195).

"It is doubtful that many other activities can boast of so many successful alumni" (Colbert and Biggers, p239). Freedom and Union, a magazine, surveyed leaders in politics, business and various professions in 1960 to find out how many of these leaders, who represented success in their field, had debated. One hundred of the 160 respondents had debated, and 90 of the 100 believed that debate experience had been extremely valuable in their careers (Klopf, p7). Survey data from 1926 reported that debaters went on to become bishops, congressmen, college presidents, senators, and governors (Brigance, p22).

Survey data also demonstrates that debaters go on to leadership positions in a variety of fields. The Matlon data

reveals that of competitive collegiate debaters, 30% became university educators, 15% were top corporate executives and 10% were working in the executive or legislative branches of government. Others entered the clergy, started their own businesses or became writers and publishers. A closer examination of data regarding political figures reveals interesting numbers and names. One survey showed that "over 80% of all current members of congress were on their schools forensics team" (Swanson, p2). Two lists can be found at the end of this section, one lists notable figures who were debaters and the other contains the remarks of notable leaders about the importance of competitive debate. Other scholarly material demonstrate the relevance of debate to leadership training. In a Chronicle of Higher Education article, Kaye (1991) argues that schools must educate the next generation of public intellectuals. The primary responsibility for this lofty goal is given to competitive forensics because of their unique value in teaching critical thinking, public debate, training in argumentation, and the foundation of argument in history, humanities and social sciences.

The reason for this correlation lies in part in the skills that debate teaches. Debate programs typically draw some of the finest students in a school. The arguments stated elsewhere are clearly relevant here: Debate teaches students critical thinking, communication skills, research techniques, and listening skills. It educates them in the ethics of communication and engulfs them in debate about values and society. Debate also gives students a taste of policy and value-based decision making. It allows them to engage in role playing which models argumentation which occurs at the highest levels of many fields. The learning occurs in a way that facilitates confidence and eliminates the communication apprehension that can block bright minds from participating in the great decisions of the day (Sprague; Bartanen). Debate training empowers students by allowing them to influence policy choices. Debaters learn not to be intimidated by the rhetoric of policy debate (Dauber, 2005). Moreover, participants in debate are some of those most qualified to take on leadership in our society. The Matlon survey reveals some astounding figures. Of 703 former debaters surveyed, 633 had at least 1 advanced degree, and 209 had more than one. Additionally, four in ten had law degrees, four in ten had masters degrees and two in ten had a Ph.D. or other doctoral degree.

[**Note: Two sections were omitted from this article: "Notable Former Debaters from Various Fields" and "Comments from Noted Leaders About Competitive Debate".]

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