

HOW TO BE RECRUITED INTO COLLEGE DEBATE PROGRAMS

by
David M. Cheshier

Of the many thousands of students who participate in high school speech and debate events, only a small percentage end up continuing their competitive career in college. I suppose many reasons account for this fact: some students fulfill their competitive ambitions in high school, others conclude they have gained all the benefits available from forensics after a few years of dedicated involvement, and more simply move on, ready to try other things. On behalf of my colleagues who coach in the college ranks, permit me to say how much regret this dropoff causes. True, not all college programs actively recruit students out of high school programs, and some even prefer to concentrate their energies on training totally new participants who come out of their college classrooms and on-campus novice recruitment. But the vast majority eagerly welcome students with high school experience of any kind. And too often, a simple lack of contact between interested debaters and college coaches discourages high school students from seriously thinking about college-level debate.

What follows is some advice on how to make successful contact with college debate programs, but before getting there, some preliminaries. First, my experience is mainly connected with the college debate world, and so too is the advice I offer. Although I actively participated in both speech and debate events in high school, in college I only debated and since then have never coached college-level individual events. The following advice is, I suspect, largely true for the whole forensics world, but I don't know that with certainty. I am confident this advice pertains to the full range of university policy debate programs, since I've had coaching experience in programs from small liberal arts schools urban and rural (Georgetown and Dartmouth) to large public universities urban and rural (Georgia State, North Carolina, and Iowa.)

It is important to keep in mind the diversity of debate programs available at the college level. The old distinctions between the "CEDA" (Cross Examination Debate Association) and "NDT" (National Debate Tournament) debate circuits have largely

faded since the two organizations agreed to debate a common resolution a couple of years ago. Thankfully, this has produced an almost complete merger of circuits and styles, and the argumentation occurring at all the major college policy debate tournaments would be fully recognizable to any student with experience in regional-or-national-level varsity debate. But there are alternatives to policy debate. While not connected for the most part to the policy tournaments, Lincoln-Douglas debate is offered as an event at a growing number of individual events competitions. In some parts of the country there are active parliamentary, mock trial, model U.N., and student congress circuits. And in the western United States so-called "NEDA" debate, which strongly emphasizes the development of speaking skills while de-emphasizing evidence use, has gained in popularity. Wherever your interest lies, you can find debate programs that match them, and in the sort of college or university environment you seek.

Why Debate in College?

You may have already decided to continue debating in college. But more likely you're unsure, uncertain of the extent of your continuing interest, concerned about handling debate successfully while juggling other important school and financial obligations, maybe unsure that continuing will advance your educational objectives. The senior spring is an especially hard time to sort out one's thinking on debate since students are racing around like crazy and understandably a bit burned out on debate. The idea of signing on for more years of involvement may not seem attractive.

But if debate has become important to you, keep the debate option open by considering schools with viable programs. Even if you feel burned out on debate now, a summer absence may make you feel quite different by the fall, and it would be a tragedy to have locked yourself into a college choice that does not even permit debating. And regardless of what kind of university you want to attend, some of them will offer strong debate opportunities. If you want to study in one of the nation's premier private

colleges, you'll find great programs at Dartmouth, Emory, Harvard, Northwestern, Wake Forest, Southern California, and others. If you prefer to immerse yourself in the large state university life, the Universities of Kansas, Iowa, Michigan, Texas, Kentucky, and Michigan State, and many others run outstanding programs. If you prefer debate in an urban setting, think about Berkeley, Wayne State, Georgia State, Pace, or the University of Missouri at Kansas City. If you plan to start out at a community or junior college, Johnson County CC and the College of Eastern Utah are only two of the many available quality programs. If you want to study at a Christian school, universities like Pepperdine, Georgetown, Baylor, or Liberty run nationally prominent programs. If you want to stay close to home you are likely to find a university in your state with a debate program, or one nearby. And if marginal grades are likely to keep you out of the most elite universities, you'll find that many of the best debate programs are run at schools a bit off the beaten path.

The benefits of continued debate participation are considerable. Most programs offer scholarships of some kind, sometimes explicitly connected to the debate program, sometimes reflecting a university commitment to support debate excellence. Many state universities can offer out-of-state tuition waivers for debaters. Thus continuing active participation can be a tangible way to reduce the heavy financial burden on families required to pay high tuition. College debate participation, well integrated into the overall college experience, will noticeably strengthen your academic preparation. Your continued participation in intensive research activity will support your academic work in countless classes. And the quality of argumentation tends to be higher in college, reflecting both the fact that college students are older and generally more experienced than high school students, and that the college circuit is more wholly national (more regional and national than state and local).

Students are sometimes surprised and relieved to discover that the entire national high school circuit does not participate in

college debate. In fact, while some of the most successful college debaters were high school superstars most were not, and college success does not always correspond to high school preparation. The hungriest students, those who are still ambitious for success, will quickly outpace their high school rivals. The advanced elimination rounds of the college national tournaments are full of bright students who, either because they lacked high school opportunities or simply blossomed in college in a new or different debate environment, never saw major high school national circuit success.

If you genuinely love debate, and can manage your participation in a healthy way (that is, in a way that does not completely overwhelm other important parts of your life), you should consider continuing your involvement, or at least trying it out to see if you like it.

Advice for Handling the Recruitment Scene

Once you and your family have discussed college preferences and your financial circumstances, investigate whether your top college choices offer debate, and then make contact with the debate coach. For the most part college programs are run either out of the university's academic department of communication or affiliated with the student programs office, although there are exceptions. If you reach the campus Student Programs Office they will almost always be able to provide you with contact information. Many debate programs make information available at their institution's website. Make contact as early as you know you're interested. Here are some other factors to consider:

1. *Don't let debate drive your college decision.* Having just promoted the merits of the college debate experience, this may seem curious advice, but it's essential. Debate, no matter how great your commitment to it, will never be more than a part of your overall college experience. And in the grand scheme of life the education you receive in the classroom and from sustained contact with other academic mentors, the opportunities your school makes available in areas other than debate, matter more than any single extracurricular. Students may learn more from debate than any one of their classes, but employers, graduate schools and others care more about your grades, and rightly so.

As tragic as it is to attend a college that doesn't offer debate, inducing desperate debate withdrawal, is to attend a mis-

match school, find debate unsatisfying and be trapped with no other suitable options (*Cheshier from Page 25*)

for college life involvement. Visit the school, look carefully at its course offerings and opportunities for other extracurriculars, and make sure you can live happily on their campus. Debate is offered at all sorts of institutions, including the kind you favor and your family prefers to support.

2. *If you're unsure, plan to start out debating, as opposed to joining later.* Many students don't fully investigate the debate program at the college of their choice because they are unsure about whether they want to participate. I believe you should plan to debate from the outset, for several important reasons.

You will almost certainly hear this advice, perhaps from your parents or from other mentors: "Don't do anything but schoolwork your first semester of college. You know how debate can take over your life, so give it a rest. College is a hard enough transition, and you must not risk screwing up early." As reasonable as this advice sounds, I think it is exactly wrong. Debate eases the college transition by immersing students in an intellectual activity, immediately surrounding them with a healthy circle of overachieving peers and University academic support. It is much easier to benefit from debate at the start of the season than it is to join midway or later, when one must play catchup to students who've been working all fall. And the time to experiment with college debate by attending the first couple tournaments is early on: if you find that you cannot handle everything, the lesson will have been learned early enough in the semester to fully recover (the first two or three tournaments happen at most schools before the first tests are given). If you discover you don't want to stay with debate, you'll have gotten it out of the way early enough to take advantage of other programs on campus; if you discover you are challenged by it and still love it, you'll have started on a footing equal with your peers. In my experience, the concerns about distraction and overcommitment are overstated: the college overachievers and superstars are the ones who involve themselves in diverse activities from the beginning, in the process discovering their true capacities for intellectual life.

A less important point to consider is that many college programs run pre-season workshops in the days leading up to the start of the fall semester. Students who join

late miss out on these occasions for forensics instruction, which don't conflict in any way with the burdens of academic work.

3. *Be assertive about your interest.* College program directors are as busy as you, maybe busier. They're usually on the road as much or more than even you are, and many also carry full teaching, research, and service responsibilities on their campuses. Don't interpret their delay in responding to inquiries as evidence of hatred or disinterest. Be persistent, make sure your questions are answered, and stay in contact with them over the course of the spring. There are important self-interested reasons to stay in continuing contact. College program directors can help you navigate their university bureaucracies (including housing, financial aid, and admissions offices). They can serve as good contacts when you have questions about university programs, and are eager to do so.

Feel free to ask college directors all the questions you and your family have. It can seem awkward to interrogate a college coach, and they may laugh about it even while the conversation is happening, but it never hurts to ask. Some directors will feel uncomfortable divulging the precise details of their budgets (although at public institutions this information is available to anyone who asks), but no one will object to questions about travel schedule, scholarship opportunities, partnership policies, work load, and the nature of the program on-and-off-campus.

4. *Tell the truth.* That sounds odd, doesn't it? Presumably students of high character would never consider compromising their integrity for the sake of advancing their admissions interest, but you might be surprised at the obvious games some students play. Some try to play off programs against each other, looking to take advantage of the highest scholarship bid. Others, afraid to admit a particular program is not their actual first choice, delay pulling out their applications until they find out the results of their first application.

One of the potentially awkward moments comes after a student has decided to go elsewhere. There is the understandable concern that the rejected coach has been "let down," and may even resent a student's refusal to attend their school. But if a student has been honest, no coach I know resents student decisions. Everyone knows that smart debaters have multiple choices, and no one expects to recruit every student successfully. There is, in short, simply no

reason to feel you need to feel awkward about turning down a program.

The concerns that give rise to games-playing are understandable, even reasonable, but the world of college debate is too small for such games to succeed. Here as in all places, honesty is truly the best policy. No director is offended that you have multiple applications on file, or to know they may not be your first choice; in fact, they'll appreciate your honesty, and knowing the full truth of your circumstances will help them make their best case to your family.

Honesty also means keeping everyone informed about your thinking along the way. Minds change, questions arise, circumstances evolve over the course of the year. Your efforts to keep potential directors informed of all this will only strengthen their regard for you as a potential student/debater, and as a person.

Good luck to those of you who are thinking about debating in college--it presents wonderful opportunities for your continued intellectual development, as well as a potential way to better manage the cost of attending college.

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