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Debating a Debate

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Professor Alfred "Tuna" Snider (middle) watches the vice presidential debate on Oct. 5 with members of the Lawrence Debate Union who he coaches. (Photo: Jon Reidel)

If the Oct. 5 vice presidential debate were held in the same format as a college debate, both candidates would have been soundly beaten if not disqualified, say members of the Lawrence Debate Union, UVM's nationally ranked debate team, who gathered to watch the event amid the pennants and trophies of their Main Street headquarters.

"The difference between our debates and this one is that we have to

actually answer the questions," says Zoe Anderson, an LDU member. "We lose if we don't answer the question. [This is] a different kind of debating. They're going more for mass appeal. We have to present facts to a judge who checks them during the debate."

Sitting around a boardroom table scattered with notebooks, pizza, soda and chips, members of the university's nationally ranked debate team listened to the candidates with well-trained ears and an appreciation for argument. Some took notes, while others let out an occasional "ouch" or "nice jab" in response to a candidate's answer. The students repeatedly emphasized that the debate format used at college competitions is vastly different from the kind of political debates seen on television. "They have to win over the American people. We only have a judge to win over. But the judge is very knowledgeable of the subject," says debater Nathan Gagnon.

Students described college debates as being much faster, almost rushed, with students reeling off as many facts and figures as possible to show their knowledge. Like a presidential-style debate, things like demeanor, delivery and clarity count, but not as much as one's actual knowledge of a subject.

"In college, if you're wrong, you lose the debate," says Brady Fletcher. "A political debate is the exact opposite because winning isn't based on facts. It's kind of academic bizzaro world debate."

Undebatable success

Intercollegiate debate at UVM has been around since 1899, when Edwin Lawrence, a 1901 UVM graduate, started a [debate](#) team. The team rose to national prominence in the 1950s and 60s, including national titles at all levels. After a brief period of decline, the program was rejuvenated with the help of Alfred "Tuna" Snider, Lawrence Professor of forensics.

Snider, who has hosted the World Debate Institute, a series of educational programs, for the past 20 years, also teaches a UVM course on presidential campaign rhetoric. His students, many of whom are on the debate team, learn about theories of rhetoric, style, construction, and the criticism and evaluation of rhetoric as applied to the presidential campaign.

"These students use more of a critical eye. They're hungry for discussion of

issues. My students are more content-oriented when it comes to debating," says Snider.

In his analysis of the vice presidential debate, Snider thought Cheney underperformed and came across as angry, often looking downward when he spoke. Edwards appeared more dynamic and gave more substantive answers, despite losing steam at the end. "I thought Edwards scored some potent body blows with his arguments. I was surprised, though, at how much Edwards moved towards the middle on a number of issues."

And the winner is...

Most of the students had Edwards winning the debate by a slim margin. "Because Cheney was under fire, I thought he tried hard to keep a poker face," said one student. "Edwards let more emotion come through, which I thought was good. Overall, it was better than the presidential debate."

With candidates saddled by dozens of pages of rules hashed out by both camps prior to the debate, including not being allowed to address each other, some LDU members questioned whether the event even fell under the heading of a debate.

"It's almost an illusion of a confrontation," says debater Jake Meany. "It's the intellectual fallacy of the red herring. In academic debate you directly clash with your opponent. In these debates they build up their own argument, which allows for more information, instead of trying to take down the argument of their opponent. It's a game they play."

Other students said the visual presentation and style of delivery of political debates often trumps content. "If Cheney showed up in a pair of jeans it would undermine everything he said," said one student. "Unfortunately, there's a lack of caring about substantive issues."

But of course, even content-oriented academic debaters enjoy shouting frivolous comments at the television. This point was brought home by quips thrown out throughout the evening, including, "he's going to smack him on that one," "quit sucking up" and "this is relevant to what?"



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