THE CASE FOR URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES
Melissa Macy Wade

Emory University supports expanding opportunities for debate competition for traditionally underserved populations such as women, people of color, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. The Berkeley Forum of Emory received grant support from the Phillips Petroleum Company and the National Federation in April 1991 to create the Emory Debate League program and the Summer Scholars program of the Emory National Debate Institute (ENDI). Both programs targeted high school participants. After six years of grant support it has become clear that policy debate programs targeting minority students and teachers benefit all involved. An examination of the underlying assumptions of these programs will hopefully encourage others in the debate community to consider ways in which they can help to augment the participation of traditionally underserved populations.

The U.S. education system needs to be reformed to meet the demands of the twenty-first century. This is true for several reasons. First, many public schools are inferior. The Supreme Court in Brown v. Topeka Board of Education ruled that education must be equal for all students, and not separated along racial lines. Over forty years after the Brown decision, United States public schools do not reflect this constitutional requirement: They are largely segregated and largely inadequate (Kozol 2001). The result is chilling: "Thus the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require quality, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory ineptness, perpetuated by state law, so frequently condemns our children to unequal lives" (Kozol 56). The extremities of such a policy, in addition to fundamental injustice, include a weakened economy as entrants to the labor force are of deeding quality, and the heightened risk of civil unrest as the education gap increases the income gap between the "haves" and the "have nots." Junior high school students are especially vulnerable because of the physical changes of adolescence and the increasing significance of peer approval. The academic tracking system affects the self-esteem of many junior high students. Those for whom traditional education is alienating are often tracked in remedial

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technology" ("Teuring Part I" A10). Students attending, schools with inadequate or non-existent computer resources are already being disenfranchised from the information age. Incentives need to be built into educational reform to ensure the skills necessary to use and apply computer-based information.

Fourth, the narrative character of education must be reformed. The predominating educational format is the lecture where the teacher narrates information to a listening student. The result is a lifeless, lifeless, or at least a partially unfulfilled educational experience, which creates an inadequately skilled, unskilled, or at least--an insufficiently informed student. The teacher's task is to "fill" the students "in" the contents of... narration... (which) becomes... alienating... (Peires 53-5)

Education is but one of many factors motivating adolescents. This is true, however, a justification to retain an inadequate system. While students do have the opportunity to become effective or competent in the things they desire... in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filled away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the press, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire 53)

The task of applying knowledge is critical to meaningful educational reform. Each student deserves and needs the opportunity for experiential education, for intellectual self-discovery, for a pedagogy that motivates authentic inquiry, for a pedagogy which allows students to "own" their learning. It is clear that the educational system needs reform if it is to prepare today's students for tomorrow's world. Debate competition is a rich source of opportunity for providing educational reform; for leveling the playing field of unequal education; for lowering the institutional barriers of exclusion; for motivating interest in information. How does one redress the inequality inherent in public education? Competition in debate teaches the communication skills vital to educational reform, which are critical to the success of living
teaching and mentoring opportunities for the younger participants, and offering an archive that counters the alienation encountered in their educational settings.

There is so much that the national debate community can do to further efforts to increase access to competitive debate. If there is a trade-off between verbal and physical aggression, the establishment of a nationwide program of Urban Debate Leagues might be a step toward reducing violence in the inner-cities of America. Tournament debate has offered profound skills for many who have used them to achieve national leadership roles in government, business, and education, among others. It is only fair that all have access to such a rich experiential education.

Works Cited

The entire thesis of Kozol’s Savage Inequalities demonstrates the point.