



Greetings. I mentioned in the CEDA fall newsletter than we had created an ad hoc committee to review debate curriculum. That committee has now been selected and we have shared a basic vision for this process. I would like to share the committee and the vision with you today and ask for your participation in this important process.

The Committee

I am honored to have been able to secure cooperation from so many leading members of our community. I was literally flooded with volunteers and I thank every person who has been so giving with their time. This committee is a group of esteemed individuals who may not have a lot in common, except for their commitment and passion to debate.

Gordon Stables – Director of Debate and Forensics, University of Southern California
Chair of the CEDA ad hoc Curriculum Committee
First Vice President, CEDA

Will Repko – Head Debate Coach, Michigan State University
Vice Chair of the CEDA ad hoc Curriculum Committee

Erwin Chemerinsky - Founding Dean of the UC Irvine School of Law
Alston & Bird Professor of Law and Professor of Political Science at Duke University
Sydney M. Irmas Professor of Public Interest Law, Legal Ethics, and Political Science, University of Southern California
Successful college debater at Northwestern University

Justin Green – Director of Debate, Kansas State University

Sarah Holbrook – Debate Coach, State University of West Georgia

Tim O'Donnell – Director of Debate, Mary Washington University
Chair – National Debate Tournament

Becky Opsata – Director of Forensics, Diablo Valley College

James Roland – Assistant Debate Coach at Emory University

Ross Smith – Director of Debate at Wake Forest University
Founder of the Open Source Debate Foundation and of DebateScoop

Tara Tate – Director of Debate Glenbrook South High School
President of the National Debate Coaches Association

Sarah Topp – Graduate student, teaching assistant and assistant debate coach, The University of Kansas



Our Challenge

Debate has a complex relationship to curriculum. We bring our own pedagogical perspectives to the ways we teach our students ways to compete. We select a topic each year but the ways that programs prepare to debate that season are as varied as the institutions we represent. I have asked for an ad hoc committee to allow us to collectively look at these matters because I fear that we don't have effective ways to discuss debate practice to each other, except in the form of how our students compete.

The events stemming from the CEDA Nationals incident, however, have given me an opportunity to discuss our craft with a number of individuals. I had my own observations and concerns, which I acknowledge may be part of the inevitable view of an older generation to new argument trends. I viewed a perceived decline in the depth with which we (as a community) would explore a topic as part of the effort to gain a more broadly based model of knowledge. I compared my debate experiences from the mid-90s and determined that my students today would likely have less debates about the specific nuances of the topic, but that they would benefit from a larger set of issues and perspectives. Regardless of my personal view on the subject, I appreciated this as part of the community's sense of what it wanted to debate.

Over the last few months I have had more conversations about debate and debate practice. We all talk about debate a great deal, but these conversations moved beyond much of the specifics of a particular topic or argument and they increasingly centered around larger questions, such as "what are the core educational principles that inform argument development and selection?"

Obviously not all of these conversations started from such a uniform perspective, but what was common was a concern that we seemed to have a hard time talking about arguments (except in a competitive sense) and even a more difficult time identifying ways in which educational goals could be expressed against that competitive perspective. In many ways I not only heard the idea that we had a free market approach to argument construction and development, but also that we had become quite adverse to even discussing how that market might best operate. In other words, is there any room for coaches and competitors to discuss the relative educational merits of arguments apart from a conversation about the most successful models of argument?

From my, admittedly limited, historical understandings of our activity there have often been a variety of means of influencing argument trends. The most prominent of these means was the academic products that helped more than a few debate coaches produce a healthy resume. Debate functioned as part of a discipline that allowed a written series of exchanges about prominent issues. Theories of debate could be contested by students in contest rounds, but it was also the terrain of coaches in journals like the Journal of American Forensics Associations.

Even as the field expanded beyond tenured professors, there were still written means of engagement. One of our panelists, Ross Smith, played an essential role in this process by publishing a series of theory articles at the beginning of the Wake Forest debate handbook, the Debaters Research Guide (DRG). For the majority of students who competed at programs without coaches highly versed in current arguments (like those of us at schools like Parsippany Hills High School in New Jersey) the DRG was a way to be coached by leading educators like Roger Solt even if never met them.



Outside of these publications, the debate community also ‘coached’ other students by the process of judging debates. The nearly unfettered discretion placed in the hands of those managing tournaments allowed tournaments to utilize what they felt were qualified judges. There were certainly a great deal of problems with a system of unlimited tournament discretion, but it also provided a means by which teams had to be able to debate in front of judges who held specific, and possibly contradictory, theories on better models of argument. The tremendous challenge of trying to convince certain judges to vote on topicality was a reality that teams would confront in those waning minutes before a debate, not a strategic consideration about your affirmative and your strike sheet days before a tournament began.

I hold none of these items to be romantic ideals of a ‘good old days.’ There have always been some trends in argumentation that might represent the values of academic debate and others that could be argued as less valuable. Our current moment has some promising trends, not the least of which is the renewed efforts to diversify our community. Debating about debate is not a new venture, but I think it is extremely important at our current moment. For me, our challenge has two relatively unique dimensions.

First, there are significant and growing differences in terms of the educational perspectives that inform our member schools. We have not been a community dominated by of tenured argumentation and rhetoric professors for some time, but we are increasingly experiencing a wide range of ideological and intellectual perspectives that guide our colleagues. We have returned to some of the inherent debates about the wisdom of switch-side debating as well to the basic idea of policy (as opposed to individual) advocacy. There are sub-groups of consensus in our community but the process of engaging these disputes is a very contentious process. I know this isn’t the first time policy debate has undergone serious cultural revision, but the intersection of preference judging and ideological divisions has produced some difficult disputes.

Second, and most importantly, the community willingness to collectively engage these issues has dramatically withered. I suspect some of the hesitation of folks on this committee comes from the perceived unwillingness to ‘manage’ debate content. There is no doubt that one of the most enduring community beliefs is a deeply held conviction about intellectual freedom. This is a tremendous testament to our community and I have no interest in undermining this principle.

At the same time, however, I have to believe that we as professional educators can have conversations, in a variety of forms, which, could serve to guide community practice. We may disagree with what constitutes the curriculum of debate, but I believe we need to be able to discuss what we agree about debate, even as we engage the disagreements. Much like the presence of theory articles in the DRG’s influenced practice our conversations could likewise serve to highlight contemporary practices and promote consensus around those deemed ‘best.’ This worked because these conversations provided a nexus of research, teaching and practice.



We as a community have, for the most, part only one means of identifying the best practices in debate – competitive success. Obviously each coach influences the argument culture of their program, but the process of argument evolution across programs is influenced a great deal by perceptions of what arguments ‘work.’ This process can be very subjective and is often driven by perceptions that may or not be valid. Has the decision to deploy fundamental critical (i.e., non-fiat based affirmatives) benefitted ‘smaller’ programs? Many possible perspectives are possible to this question, but it is difficult to dispute that this perception has gained substantial currency in the community. At one level this may not be different than the historical practice of teams using ‘squirrel’ or tiny policy affirmatives to dodge the majority of negative arguments, but there may be deeper questions involved when the process of affirmative selection moves further and further away from the body of literature that constitutes our annual controversies.

I am very sensitive to the community’s fears about regulating content. It is for this reason that I asked for this committee to be formed as an ad hoc committee. We hold no direct legislative authority. We must promote and further community dialogue in an area where our historical practices have withered.

My vision of our task is to utilize a range of formats (both digital and in-person) to begin asking the questions that can identify and promote the best practices of our community. The basic theory of best practices, as borrowed from management theories, is to identify valuable and innovative techniques and then promote them to broader audiences. I see our final report, produced after a year of conversations, as a means of collecting some of these best practices into a useable document.

I intentionally tried to be somewhat vague about what constitutes these best practices. I have personal views about debate practice could be improved, but I want that perspective to emerge alongside that of other coaches and competitors. There are value claims I feel comfortable advancing at the outset of this process, such as the emphasis on topic-specific research and strategies, but I do not pretend to the keeper of any unique wisdom in this area.

In short, I believe that we have a pressing need to initiate a professional dialogue about how debate (through our argument culture) should be taught and practiced as a complimentary voice to competitive perspectives. Because we can only be focused on normative assessments of what makes debate practice ‘better’ this cannot develop with community input.

At this point we have two means of moving forward, and are certainly open to other ideas.

First, I would like to begin a series of conversations about specific practices using the forums section of the new CEDA website. In this way we can begin a moderated and professional dialogue among serious voices without the clutter and incendiary perspectives found on edebate. Jeff Jarman has created a section devoted to our committee and we can launch as many threads as interest warrants. We can open concurrent threads about scope of topics, types of evidence, generic practices, and performative trends. This also allows us to keep these conversations organized; a tool that I believe will be most useful as we work forward in this process.

The new website is <http://cedadebate.org/> and we are posting this opening comment under the ‘forums’ section. I would encourage folks to share their perspectives on this site. This can allow the conversations to develop and for new threads to emerge. Please also share this note with others who might be interested. Our conversation works best when we have the broadest participation. I very much expect that there will be a great deal to share the site is well-positioned for such an exchange. If you don’t yet have a login id or password, email me at stables@usc.edu or Jeff Jarman at jeffrey.jarman@wichita.edu



Second, at the completion of this academic year I will be leading the committee to produce a report based on a compilation and review of our community conversation. It is my goal that this report can be used to allow our community to consider how we move forward. The report isn't solely the province of the committee. I will be opening the process to all members of the community to submit amicus curiae style briefs for the final document to ensure that all voices are heard. This committee will, however, need to help organize the conversation into items that can guide future practice.

It is my deeply held perspective that we are experiencing an important moment in the history of intercollegiate policy debate. The ties that bind us together are fraying even as economic pressures will continue to demand adjustments in our practices. We also have an opportunity to revisit what about policy debate is of such tremendous value to each of us and to clearly articulate those perspectives. Identifying those values and holding our practices to those ideals is a potentially valuable way at renewing our craft. This is especially important as other college forensics organizations are undergoing their own internal challenges. A healthy policy debate community might find really opportunities in the coming years to expand its membership.

I do not believe that this committee can, or should, try to radically change debate. I do firmly believe that we need to remind the community of the possibilities of collective deliberation and to seriously reflect on how we teach and coach.

Thanks again for reading.

Gordon Stables
Chair of the CEDA ad hoc Curriculum Committee

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