



To The Chronicle of Higher Education,

We appreciate the interest that your publication has shown in intercollegiate policy debate, but we have to disagree with the fundamental thesis of your recent article, "Colleges Call Debate Contests Out of Order."

Intercollegiate policy debate is a vibrant activity that includes over 100 universities and colleges. It attempts to foster critical thinking by immersing students in a competitive environment that is rich with academic context. Each year we select a single public policy proposition and students spend the entire academic year learning about that subject. The value is not solely determined by the topic, but instead the method of engaging a topic and being challenged to take positions on both sides of that question. This year alone, CEDA sanctioned tournaments will provide upwards of 13,000 debates, involving thousands of students engaged in detailed, research-based discussions about federal support for US agriculture. In a global moment of rapidly rising food prices and increasingly dysfunctional federal budgets, we are proud to have our students engage these questions.

In this laboratory environment, students are the primary investigators and advocates of these topics. When your article references a lack of rules, it is important to have this context in mind. Our activity allows students to identify a broad range of research materials and to craft their own arguments. Our commitment to an academic enterprise is built on a foundation of the free exercise of thought and is demonstrated in the ability of students to argue for the best policy option or position. The few rules that do exist are designed to create fairness and educational value without stunting intellectual creativity and growth. We consider collegiate debate competitions to be a place to test ideas and advocacies against rigorous opposition.

It is this fusion of dialogic method and intensive research that provides our debaters with such a unique and rewarding experience. This method has trained thousands of students who today perform important roles in all manners of service to public and private corporations and foundations, educational organizations large and small from primary schools through universities, as well as the non-profit sector.

Your article contends that policy debate is insular. It would be hard to contend that a public organization that has memberships spanning all ranges of institutions, from community colleges to Ivy League institutions, is some form of private club. Our members host over fifty competitions each year all over the nation. Each of these events is open to the public as your reporter experienced. The article's overriding tone, as well as that in prior *Chronicle* pieces on the events in March in Wichita, KS, suggests strongly an element of spectacle and fails to provide any material context or frame of reference for the hundreds of other debates that went on in Kansas last spring or Maryland last month. If the article's aim and author's intent was to identify an example of students employing innovative delivery or drawing upon different resources to support their arguments, it was accomplished. However, the inattention to the many other debates and our institutional dialogue suggests an inattention to the totality of the available evidence. In choosing to include a video of only one debate in your article, you neglect to spotlight or even mention dozens of other debate rounds happening at this same competition where discussions of US subsidies and their effects on our foreign relations, the US and global economy, the survival of small farmers in the US, the Presidential race and Congressional races were also being discussed. Your decision to exclude any coverage of these other debates in favor of including only one example of demonstrative advocacy paints an incomplete and distorted picture of collegiate debate.



As many other non-revenue earning intercollegiate events can validate, there is a tremendous challenge in providing competitive formats that also enjoy wide public interest. In the midst of this national debate season, where scholars, media and public alike decry the inability of national debates to advance matters of policy, we must always remember that argumentative environments built solely to emphasize stylistic conventions are weak forms of national discourse. Our organization is one that is founded on student learning and participation in that process. As the culture and climates of college and university campuses have changed, so too has the culture and climate of academic debate. The commitment to learning, in a research-driven, student-centered process, however, has not. Our members see this tension when they host public events on their campuses. These events, like the overwhelming majority of our competitions throughout the year fail to receive substantial public or media attention, even when utilizing audience-centered formats and methods. While professionals who work with CEDA, and the students in the programs they direct, annually dedicate thousands of hours of service through hosting campus and community forums, sponsoring civic engagement projects, and teaching and mentoring to high school and middle school debate programs and students, the challenge of attracting broad public and media attention to these venues also exists.

Your article also attempts to contend this insular approach had something to do with the handling of the recent public controversy. As the organization's public statements attest, we are not in any way condoning or promoting the events of last March and were engaged in an administrative discussion about it amongst the organization's elected representatives and leaders. The events of March were a "teaching moment" both for those of us intimately involved in the organization, and the teaching and development of the student-scholar-leaders promoted by this activity. We should be wary, however, to conflate disagreement with incivility. CEDA opposes the use of personal attacks and profane language in debates and in our sanctioned events. At the same time, discussions of the nation's and world's most challenging issues, such as poverty, racism, sexism, and war often provoke disquieting and difficult reactions. It is because issues like these are important issues that they provoke strong reactions.

In many ways, intercollegiate debate is dealing with the same challenges facing an increasingly diverse society. As new voices and traditionally marginalized groups struggle to carve out a space in our public sphere, conflicts about communication styles and argumentation norms are inevitable. Debate is engaged in a mutual learning process where diverse groups are learning to live, work, and compete with one another. The comity, fellowship, and sense of mutual purpose that characterizes the vast majority of competitive debates are a testament to the value of dialogue and free expression in addressing our nation's problems. The fact that this dialogue can sometimes break down is not an indictment of debate's educational mission, but rather is a reminder that we all still have a ways to go in learning to work for each other.

In our litigation-centered society, college debate, like all organizations, must carefully develop policies that promote the best form of our activity and also respect our member institutions. Historically all forms of college forensics have been heavily decentralized and deferred much of the authority for administrative and disciplinary measures back to home institutions. Your article fails to mention that our organization does not hire or fund any of our debate professionals. Every single organizational member is a paid employee of some other institution or organization. We at CEDA take our responsibility to our members quite seriously and we are proud to be at the forefront of considering measures that allow our organization to have more effective means of promoting our best practices throughout our membership. We have a new initiative related to improving these procedures that is available for public comment at [www.cedatopic.org](http://www.cedatopic.org)



Our members take the craft of teaching argumentation to students very seriously. We appreciate the perspectives of those institutions who might be interested in joining our organization and we are thrilled to have a number of new members this year. We look forward to future ways in which your publication might be interested in more completely covering our activity.

Thank you.

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