

How to Create and Sustain an Intercollegiate
Parliamentary Debate Program

by

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Once one decides to offer a parliamentary debate program the essential question becomes "How"? How does one go about creating and sustaining a parliamentary debate program? This paper will attempt to answer this question by offering suggestions on how to recruit and prepare debaters. It will end with a few general hints about program orientation.

It should be noted at the outset that successful parliamentary debate programs should offer some sort of tournament focus. Competition with other schools provides incentives for students to achieve their highest levels of excellence in preparation and performance and it provides tremendous social opportunities by facilitating interaction with outstanding students from other schools. Of course, each school must decide for itself how much time and money it can devote to parliamentary tournaments, but some attention should be given to competitive events. Typically, my students will attend from two to five parliamentary tournaments a year. Incidentally, one of the primary purposes of the Western States Parliamentary Debate Association (WSPDA) is to make low cost tournaments available to college and university students in the Western United States. It is hoped that the WSPDA will encourage directors of forensic programs to attend parliamentary competitions without forcing them to make large financial outlays.

RECRUITMENT

Naturally, for a program to be successful it must have members. That means that program directors must attempt to recruit students. One advantage to recruiting for parliamentary debate is that students will theoretically be speaking to lay audiences; consequently, they will be able to begin debating rather quickly. If students are able to speak to their professors and in front of their classmates, then they should have the rudimentary skills to begin debating. If students are reluctant or unable to speak in front of others then they can still participate by being members of the audience. As audience members they can learn from the examples set by other debaters and they can participate by heckling. Since parliamentary debates tend to be light and interesting, many students will enjoy being members of the audience whereas, in other forms of intercollegiate debate, they would have a difficult time appreciating the debate because of the jargon and rapid delivery.

Another advantage of parliamentary debate, from the director's standpoint, is that students enjoy debating. Once they get started, many students find that parliamentary debate is fun. It also forces them to work on important skills which are related to success in nearly every endeavor in life. The hard part, of course, is getting started, but once underway, parliamentary programs can take on a momentum of their own.

Most of our recruitment efforts have been concentrated on getting current students to "come out" for the debate team rather

than locating and nurturing high school debaters who are prospective students. High school debaters will naturally come along and some will be interested in the program, but it is not necessary to have a high school forensic background to be successful in parliamentary debate. Some would argue, in fact, that competition in high school debate, particularly policy debate, can create dysfunctional parliamentary debaters. That is, students learn conventions in team debate such as rapid delivery, large numbers of arguments, and esoteric research topics which can be liabilities in parliamentary debate.

When recruiting high school students, the most fruitful choices would be individuals who participated in extemporaneous speaking, impromptu speaking, and/or Lincoln-Douglas debate. These students are especially promising if they chose the aforementioned activities because they disliked the delivery and research requirements of policy debate.

Similarly it is probably a mistake to attempt to convert NDT or CEDA debaters to parliamentary debate if they enjoy what they are currently doing. Some individuals will be exceptional and see how the activities are complementary, but most will have a strong preference for one format over the other. Concentrating on converting on-topic debaters who are happy with on-topic debate is likely to provide a poor return on investment. If the students do not embrace the audience-centered ethic of parliamentary debate then their presence on a squad may even prove to be counterproductive. If one is interested in converting current on-topic debaters then it is best to focus on

those individuals who have been marginally enthusiastic debaters. Students who are half-hearted in their work efforts in on-topic debate may be rebelling from the particular research and delivery requirements of on-topic debate and they may turn out to be excellent parliamentary debaters.

None of the above should be taken to suggest that parliamentary debate is the refuge of the lazy and uncommitted, although some people will surely draw that inference. My claim, which shall be substantiated in the next section of this paper, is that parliamentary debate requires hard work and can vastly improve the intellect. Yet, it does this in ways that are distinct from the work effort and intellectual burdens of on-topic debating. Rather than do research on specialized topics, parliamentary debaters are ideally required to study the issues that underpin a liberal arts education. Students should be encouraged to develop an understanding of important issues in philosophy, history, politics, and economics. Rather than practice reading briefs quickly, parliamentary debaters need to work on delivery skills which are conducive to persuading educated, but not expert, audiences. The work effort required of parliamentary debaters is great, but it seems less burdensome than on-topic debating because the work should translate directly into the coursework that a college or university student would otherwise be expected to pursue.

There is a good group of students on many college and university campuses who make excellent potential converts to a parliamentary program, namely, competitors in individual events,

particularly extemporaneous and impromptu speakers. These students are already nurturing the attributes that are essential in parliamentary debate: familiarity with the issues of the day, strong organizational skills, quick thinking on one's feet, and persuasion. It is often worthwhile to attempt to induce these students to add parliamentary debating to their repertoire of evening events.

Another group of potential debaters not to be overlooked is students enrolled in speech communication classes. As has been noted, parliamentary debate provides an outstanding entry level event because it is so easy to begin to participate. Becoming an active member of the debate society is an excellent way for students to practice and hone the principles taught in classes such as public speaking, argumentation, and persuasion.

Besides these students, there are undoubtedly others who would be interested in a parliamentary program but who might not know how to join or begin to get involved. These students can often be reached by hosting public debates on campus. Public debates can be very exciting and they enhance the visibility of the debate squad on campus. We have had a number of public debates that have been attended by as many as one-fourth of the total number of students enrolled on campus.

These public debates can be particularly interesting if they involve high-profile speakers in addition to members of the hosting debate team. For example, students are often interested to hear their favorite professors trade remarks in an adversarial format. They are also eager to have the home team debate outside

groups from other colleges and universities. We have found a great deal of enthusiasm for debates with foreign teams sponsored by the Speech Communication Association Committee on International Discussion and Debate. Our debates with the British and Japanese national teams as well as scrimmages with local colleges and universities and schools with outstanding national reputations have been very well attended. Our program received a publicity boost when we debated and outpointed a team from Yale, one member of which was a member of the reigning World Student Parliamentary Debate championship team.

We have also had successful public debates by inviting rival on-campus groups to debate each other. A notable example occurred in 1988 when we had a series of three debates between the campus Republican and Democrat clubs two weeks before the Presidential election. By having the groups debate each other we were assured that they would each bring a crowd to help cheer for their group.

If public debates are well-conceived and publicized they will draw good crowds. Inevitably, some "rookies" will volunteer to give floor speeches and, at the end of these debates, some students will linger to discuss issues with the participants. Interested students can be invited to attend a debate meeting and continue their contentious ways. These interactions can be fostered by having a reception at the conclusion of the debate.

The final group of individuals to be considered is alumni of programs. These people, being past participants, are not so much recruited as nurtured. Their presence at public debates and

other squad activities can be very important to boosting attention and interest and raising the level of performance. At public debates current students can see outstanding examples of extemporaneous debate skills by observing successful alumni.

All of these approaches can be used alone or in combination to promote a parliamentary debate squad. Not to be overlooked is the ability of students, through interpersonal interactions, to induce interested students to join the squad. A powerful form of proof of the value of debate for college students is found in observing one's peers enjoying themselves and learning important skills in the activity. Members of debate squads should be encouraged to bring their friends to squad activities. Some large and successful debate programs rely almost exclusively on student contacts to recruit debaters.

PREPARATION

One of the assumptions that some students hold is that parliamentary debate is difficult for one to be successful at because its skills are largely a knack. That is, some people have the ability to "wing it" and sway an audience with amazing rhetorical flourishes. Other people are less able to call upon such skills because they lack some internal quality or qualities which are conducive to the ability to persuade others. Another assumption which some people have is the opposite of the first one. They believe that extemporaneous debate is easy, especially compared to the rigors of on-topic debating. These people hold that they could persuade lay judges if they wanted to, therefore

they see no value in attempting to systematically practice or prepare for parliamentary debates. I have heard a number of on-topic debaters say in essence that they could be successful at parliamentary debate simply because they are successful at the other forms of debate. Both of these views are erroneous.

It is the case that individuals have differing combinations of abilities, skills, strategies, tactics, etc., at their disposal. Some of these traits do translate into varying levels of persuasiveness. Yet, that claim ignores the idea that although people may have different initial levels of particular qualities these attributes can be enhanced or minimized and new qualities can be exemplified. I contend that there are desirable qualities of parliamentary debaters and that there are tools and processes which may be employed to enhance one's success in parliamentary debate. If parliamentary debate skill is a knack then, to a certain extent, it is a learnable knack.

This leads to the question of whether these skills are garnered through competition in on-topic debate. In some ways, on-topic debate prepares students for parliamentary debate. On-topic debate encourages analytical skills, promotes knowledge gained from research, stresses organization, and emphasizes note taking—all of which are helpful in parliamentary debating. Nonetheless, the essential difference between preparation for on-topic versus parliamentary debate is also the essential quality that distinguishes these debate forms from each other: parliamentary debate practices must necessarily be informed by the use of lay as opposed to expert judges.

Because of the nature of the audience, a number of qualities which lead to success in on-topic debate leave students ill prepared for parliamentary debate competition. Generally, lay audiences prefer conversational rates of speed, the absence of jargon and over-blown organization, intuitively plausible arguments, and informal modes of proof such as metaphors and analogies. These attributes are not encouraged in on-topic debate. Parliamentary debaters must also be spontaneous and quick-witted in order to adapt to the extemporaneous and impromptu elements of debates. In sum, to be effective, parliamentary debaters need to be good at certain skills involved with on-topic debate, but they must modify those skills in light of the audiences they encounter. They must also develop additional skills which are not emphasized in on-topic debate and they must take a completely different approach to research of the topics used.

Parliamentary debaters must adapt to different audiences. Audiences differ and they will require different treatment at different times. Therefore, it may be a mistake to suggest that there are a given set of universal skills that one must master to be successful. Rather, there are a range of skills that one would like to have at one's disposal which provide a repertoire of alternatives to be employed in various situations.

Additionally, these skills must be particularized not only for the audience but also in light of the debater's own abilities and the skills of one's opponents. It does not make sense to require a student to "say something funny." Some people are not

comfortable expressing their sense of humor but they may be exceptionally good at expressing a serious idea. Other individuals may be reluctant or unable to gesture forcefully but they may be outstanding in their use of the language to express an idea. Debaters must understand their own strengths and capitalize on them as well as attempt to learn new techniques and modify unacceptable habits.

One must also evaluate one's approach to a given debate in light of the opposition. If the opponent is adept at analysis of issues then one may choose to argue conservative themes that are very well-grounded. If an opponent tends to be extremely serious in its argumentation then one may deliberately attempt to inject humor into the round for a contrast effect.

Because students must modify their presentations in light of the audience, their own skills, and the opposition, no single set of skills will always be successful. To be effective, one must develop a range of skills that provide alternatives which can be employed in a debate round. This repertoire may best be developed by employing certain processes that will yield insights and experiences that students can draw upon in their debates. I suggest that three ongoing processes can provide a basis for skill building: critical analysis, information gathering, and practice. I will examine each of these in turn with the intention of explaining how program directors can facilitate these processes.

Critical analysis implies a commitment to thinking. Debaters must, at a process level, engage in activities which

sharpen the intellect, and, at a content level, generate the ideas which become the substance for debates. A systematic approach to the generation and critique of fundamental ideas helps guard against the random nature of debating on new topics every round. In the same way that good hitters in baseball can adjust to almost any pitcher, a well prepared debater can be ready for almost any potential topic. I have discovered that there are particular areas of analysis which engage students in fruitful processes of inquiry and which yield ideas that are essential to information that is particularly helpful to debaters.

The first area is human values. In a debate there are often predictable points of disagreement centering around the values that uphold or undergird one's position. A debate about legalization of marijuana can easily be distilled to a discussion of the role of government in our lives. That is, is governmental paternalism justified or is personal freedom a more important concern? Hence, one can debate the issue of marijuana legalization at the values level of freedom vs. paternalism. One can also anticipate that debates will frequently center on such issues as federal vs. state or international action, governmental vs. private action, individual freedom vs. the rights of society, etc. Less predictable, but still important are questions such as what is beauty, what is justice, and is there a purpose to our existence?

A second area for analysis concerns governmental institutions. Because debates will frequently center around

issues of public policy, students need to be informed about the various types of governments as well as their advantages and disadvantages. Since there are a limited number of forms of government this should not be an overwhelming task. Also, governments are created and sustained to uphold certain values held by citizens. Democracy, for example, is dedicated to a great extent to preserving individual freedom. Totalitarianism is less concerned with individual freedom, stressing efficiency and predictability. Understanding not only the nature of governmental structures but also how these structures uphold or impede the values they are designed to protect can provide fertile ground for argumentation.

A third area for critical analysis is economic systems. Economic systems, like political institutions, are designed to uphold certain values. Capitalism, for example, is theoretically supportive of individual initiative. There are a limited number of systems to consider: capitalism, communism, and socialism. Yet there are a number of important nuances because most economic systems are mixtures of these basic systems.

Understanding the nature of economic systems and their underlying values can yield a number of insights into particular policies with economic implications. For example, one can question the compatibility of capitalism and socialism in this country as well as how well the economic system upholds social values when debating topics related to environmental policies, employment practices, and social welfare. It is wise to examine

international or global economic policies and implications given the international focus of parliamentary debate.

Finally, one can examine current events. In general, debaters need to understand not only the values and institutions of society but also how these are related to the issues of everyday life. Students also need to keep abreast of what is happening in the world because that will be the substance of many debates.

One can prepare to debate these issues by encouraging students to brainstorm about these ideas. Brainstorming should begin with little or no evaluation of ideas presented. The focus is on being creative. Next, one may wish to examine the issues in a more critical fashion. Directors may want to create an on-going discussion of values by assigning certain values and framing juxtapositions of competing values as topics for weekly discussions. The discussions can center on the nature of certain values, the likely conflicts with other values, and the type of debate situations where such a conflict may occur. For example, the issue of individual freedom vs. the rights of society would naturally arise in debates about limiting free speech, regulating pornography, and legalizing drugs, prostitution, and/or gambling but it would also be viable in debates about requiring helmets on motorcycle riders, mandatory AIDS testing, mandatory retirement, the right to die, and funding the National Endowment for the Arts. This discussion should lead to a number of excellent ideas not only about values and institutions but also about how to

express one's views, how to prove an idea to an audience, and which proofs are most persuasive.

On occasion, students can be assigned to give oral reports on topics. These reports are accompanied by an outline so that other students can readily build on the ideas of their fellow squad members. This is especially useful for current events and areas of analysis which are novel to most of the debaters on the squad. We have had excellent reports on art history, religion, and Eastern culture because we knew little about them. On topics where many people are conversant a discussion may be more fruitful than a report.

One possible consequence of a commitment to systematically analyze important issues is that one may generate a meta-view of debate. By this I mean that students may be encouraged to discuss the underlying principles of debate and the particular practices debaters engage in. Such an approach may help instill the view that debate is primarily an educational activity. By recognizing that the purpose of debate is not simply to be contentious but to learn through clash, students may take a reasonable view of their own argumentation and the worth of the ideas of others.

Audiences are persuaded by reasonableness. They like debaters who appear to be fair and are aware of their limitations, yet who can take a strong stand when they are in the right. Discussions about the nature of debate may help students approach debate with humility, recognizing that they have much to learn, not only on their own but also from their competitors and

judges. Such a view may in turn translate into greater credibility with audiences for debaters and help maintain an educational focus for the activity. Additionally, this view breeds a healthy view of competition, motivating learning while allowing one to appreciate the worth of an opponent's ideas. Most importantly, it instills an ethical basis for competitive practices that will transcend one's tenure in debate.

Program directors can foster meta-views of debate by encouraging discussions of the purposes of debate, the values that should inhere in the activity, and whether practices conform to principles. A reasonable view of competition can be encouraged in a program with a tournament focus by occasionally having debates where no decision is given, providing critiques which focus on the valuable insights provided by both teams, and stressing education rather than competition in strategy sessions.

At tournaments, directors can require that judges write out their reasons for decisions, and return all ballots to participants. At some tournaments no cumulative result sheets are given so that students can only look at their own results but are unable to compare their scores with those of others. Another tournament practice which discourages inappropriate competition is to allow a very small number of teams to advance to the elimination rounds. If many good teams are unable to break into elimination rounds then the onus of losing is minimized for the weak teams who also did not break.

Despite the fact that parliamentary debate is largely impromptu and extemporaneous there is a great deal one can do to

prepare in advance for the event. Clearly, it is important to think about the values held in our society, their philosophical and practical importance, and how they relate to the controversial issues of the day. Critical analysis will generate ideas about how to debate, what to debate, and why, but this is insufficient for success. These ideas, of course, have been discussed, in one form or another, for thousands of years. The implication is that critical analysis, or thinking, must be supplemented with reading and writing.

Information gathering refers to the process of collecting and preparing information for use in debates. The question to consider initially is what information should one be collecting and preparing? Students should not ignore the great thinkers in history who have devoted attention to important issues in economics, philosophy, history, and politics. Hopefully, at least some portion of one's undergraduate studies will be devoted to such an undertaking. If normal classroom work proves insufficient, then students may supplement their reading by consulting various works containing discussions of important ideas. Not to be overlooked is contemporary sources of information including journals and periodicals. Primarily for the purpose of gaining information on current events, students should read a major daily newspaper and consult weekly periodicals. My recommendation on resources a squad should minimally subscribe to on a regular basis would be The Christian Science Monitor, The Economist, The Utne Reader, and at least one

of the major news magazines—Time, Newsweek, or United States News and World Report.

In addition to reading, students should be encouraged to write briefs or outlines of the ideas they are collecting. A useful tool is to begin to collect outlines of the major reasons supporting or denying the importance of certain values. For example, one could have a list of proofs for the idea that individual freedom is more important than social rights or that privacy is more important than safety. Finally, one can begin to collect anecdotes and quips which may prove useful in debate situations. The key to success is to be systematic and thorough while remembering how much information lay audiences can digest and what form of proof the audience will prefer. One must also bear in mind that most parliamentary debate associations prohibit the introduction of expert knowledge into debates. Collecting quotes from "experts" is not as effective as finding interesting examples and analogies to prove a point.

The final element involved in preparation for parliamentary debate is to practice using the insights and information that have been generated in work sessions. The purpose of practice is to involve students in speaking. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. The most useful method is to hold practice debates. This gives students opportunities to translate their classroom work into practical experiences. Initially, directors might want to structure debates so that students have a day or so to prepare. Once students have mastered the fundamentals of debating they can work on doing it in a more extemporaneous

fashion. Debates should be critiqued so that students receive the greatest potential learning experience. It is also helpful to have students re-do some of their speeches to give them an opportunity to benefit from their critique by applying the feedback they receive to the next debate experience. Another useful form of preparation is to have students participate in forensic tournaments in events such as extemporaneous and impromptu speaking. This sharpens analytical and speaking skills in a competitive setting.

These approaches to parliamentary debate help insure that it will be a useful supplement to a liberal arts education. Students are engaged in thinking, reading, writing, and speaking about the issues which are important historically and contemporaneously. Another advantage of parliamentary debate is that it fits nicely into and reinforces a speech communication curriculum. Critical analysis, information gathering, and practice can be facilitated through a number of core speech communication courses. In particular, parliamentary debaters can learn much from coursework in public speaking, argumentation, and persuasion.

Public speaking classes provide outstanding preparation in the presentation of ideas. In addition, many students will learn a great deal about audience analysis, organization, and language use. Courses in argumentation are helpful in teaching debaters the basics of topic definition and analysis, reasoning, organization, refutation, case building, and flowsheeting. Students should be encouraged to master argument forms such as

metaphor, analogy, and dilemma. Persuasion courses will assist debaters in understanding audience analysis, ethos, and message/speaker variables related to influence. Taken together, there is probably no better set of preparation tools for parliamentary debate than coursework in the liberal arts, with an emphasis on classes in speech communication. This work can be enhanced by rigorous programs which engage students in brainstorming, reading programs, the written compilation of information which is generated, and practice in speaking and debating.

SUGGESTIONS

I would like to conclude by offering to program directors a few small suggestions about the orientation and operation of a parliamentary debate squad. First, attempt to make learning the focus of the program. Competitive success will follow as a natural consequence of skill mastery. Making learning the focus helps to ensure that debate will provide a more complete education for our students. In conjunction with this, I suggest secondly that programs offer both on-campus and tournament debating. Competition can motivate students to do their best. On-campus debating is a natural component of recruiting; more importantly, it helps to educate audiences. I believe that if we can offer an activity which, at some level, is of interest to all students then there is a potential for training audiences to be better consumers of the information they receive. Third, try to make it fun to be a member of the debate team. This should not

simply be hard work but it can also provide important opportunities for gaining social skills and interacting with interesting and diverse people. Students will be more willing participants if they enjoy their work. Finally, allow students to participate in directing the program. When students feel that the debate program is "theirs" they are likely to put more effort into it and the program will benefit by the input they provide.

Parliamentary debate can be educational and fun for students and program directors. Systematic application of the principles outlined in this paper will help to insure that programs can be successful.