

# Debate as Preparation

by Nick J. Sciullo

Debate offers a wide variety of skills to students ranging from the obvious (public speaking, research skills, self confidence) to the not so obvious (time management, philosophical inquiry, relationship building). Debate is much more than an activity onto itself where one only develops on a singular trajectory, it is instead a foundational activity that may underlie much of a participant's life in the years to come. Students and coaches must realize that there is more to debate than the next practice or tournament and even more than NFL points or a high school state championship. Debate is a preparatory journey for the future.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate, in several scenarios, the power of debate to positively affect students and to argue for a preparatory model of understanding for policy debate.

**Scenario 1:** A long time debater and high school senior is busily completing the fall's college applications. Dates are approaching fast, essays are piling up, some schools are even asking for proposed majors or for additional materials for honors programs. With every new application that comes in via email or postal mail requested, more come in unsolicited. Originally, the debater had hoped for the honors program at her local state university and had as her "reach school" the neighboring state's private university. But now, with so many choices abounding, decisions were becoming increasingly hard.

As an avid debater with some success in her local high school tournament circuit and at regional invitationals, she had been privy to great research on topics that interested her: proliferation studies, gender studies, and monetary policy. She knew the leading authors, the best sources, and the various subtopics of her

interests. This made the college decision much easier. She was not sure that debate was something she wanted to stick with, but she knew that two of her favorite authors taught in the peace studies program at her local state university. She also knew that the university's program was one of the top programs in the nation. Because of her debate experience, she was able to make an informed decision about the next four or so years of her life and had the opportunity to meet and work with several authors for which she had much respect.

**Scenario 2:** An inner city youth who attends a large and decrepit inner city high school has trouble with grades. He works hard, participates in after school clubs and sports, is popular, and has a good head on his shoulders. Unfortunately, the baseball team has not made the playoffs in eight years, the National Honor Society has not successfully pulled off a program in months, and his friends are not too interested in entering college. The future looks dull at best. Through his involvement in the city's urban debate league, he's come into contact with many people. He's met some local college coaches, a few ex-debaters, and more than a few eccentric judges from the community. These interactions have helped him formulate a plan. Because of his relationship with a local college coach, he's been promised a small scholarship as long as he competes in two college tournaments a semester.

College did not look like an option before, but now the combination of in-state tuition and a modest scholarship has turned his dull skies bright with hope. Debate was the activity he least associated with success, but he met many more interesting people and made many more friends in debate than he did on his struggling baseball team. Now he's excited about college and

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though his friends give him a hard time about being a nerd, he knows he's got the potential to really go far in the future.

**Scenario 3:** A student has a goal, he wants to be a lawyer. He knows that good grades, activities, and hard classes will help him enter a challenging college. He knows that the same pattern will lead him to a greater chance of acceptance in law school. Yet again, he knows that this pattern will open up opportunities in law school and as he makes his way into "the real world." Debate runs in his blood. Whether it's arguing at home with his parents or always taking his friends to task on their latest college basketball picks, he knows he wants to debate. This debater succeeded in high school, went on to debate in college and coach a high school while there, and then even coached at the college level while in law school. He knew that his debate skills were providing him with the background to excel in an exciting community and to also excel as a law student and lawyer. His favorite professor asked him to be a research assistant and work on interesting law review articles, and that in turn got him to publish his own article in an outside law review.

Debate spurred his career as a writer and now he's changed his focus from becoming an attorney to one day becoming a professor.

Many of us in the debate community can relate to these examples. While these stories are fictional, they all contain piece material from events I've read about, seen take place, or experienced myself. Debate opens doors, although we hear this time and time again; it bears repeating.

Understanding debate using a preparatory model, places debate in a larger context. It almost seems like a radical concept. Interestingly, in policy debate rounds, we'll often hear intense debates about critical history, contextualization, and genealogies, but as

participants in the community we're often hesitant to apply the same sort of critical thinking to the activity itself. Where does debate fit into a student's personal trajectory? How does success in debate translate into success in life? What will the worst debater on my squad come away with and be able to apply to her next destination?

Coaches must embrace this model so that students can as well. I've seen many a debater, even those seemingly interested and successful, describe debate as a "resume padder." While debate does look great on a resume, it's the skills one learns in debate and the experiences one has that make debate look great across one's life. Coaches need to emphasize that debate has benefits beyond wins and points.

As a former high school coach, I always attempted to inspire my students to think beyond the debate round—to really make their advocacy important and to understand how their hard work mattered on a grander scale. Debate is enabling tomorrow's stars and it is a disservice to ignore the potential this activity has to make students and coaches better learners, more engaged citizens, and successful workers. To view debate as a preparatory activity is to recognize potential for continued growth. And *that* pursuit of potential growth ought to be why we became involved in debate in the first place.

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(**Nick J. Sciallo** is a former policy debater for Tallwood HS in Virginia Beach, VA where he won a Virginia High School League State Championship. He went on to debate at the University of Richmond and has coached at Midlothian HS in suburban Richmond, VA and West Virginia University. He graduated from West Virginia University College of Law and writes and speaks on race/class/gender issues.)