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Increasing Access to Debate

Eliminating Barriers

by
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Debaters often argue in round that inequality and discrimination are basic harms that we should confront. Judges are told that voting a certain way on a resolution will mitigate these harms, and coaches encourage students to use arguments like these because they are persuasive and legitimate concerns. However, all too often our debate community ignores these principles of equal opportunity discussed in a resolitional context by propagating discriminatory policies and attitudes within the community itself.

While this problem occurs at a number of different levels, this article will focus on what we believe is one version of discrimination in our community that can be readily fixed. While the problem has been around for years, our desire to write this article was sparked by the Lincoln Douglas Education Project (LDEP) release of its suggestions for tournament policies, which included this recommendation:

“3. Do not admit unaffiliated entries, and require that each student be accompanied by an adult (over 21) chaperone. Even if liability were not a major concern, unsupervised students are literally unaccountable to coaches, administrations, or other adult authority figures. When concerns arise about a student’s practices or her influence on other competitors, it is essential that judges and coaches be able to discuss the situation with a responsible, educationally committed adult.”

Our argument is that denying entry to tournaments by unaffiliated students and creating requirements for either a parent or

minimum age chaperone erects unnecessary barriers to participation. Rather than propagate exclusive barriers, leaders in our community should adopt policies that increase access to debate while providing for student safety.

We’ll begin by discussing the issue of school sponsorship. Students travel unaffiliated for many reasons: their school may not have a debate team, their team may not travel beyond the local circuit, their school may not be able to afford to pay for their travel, their coach may not prioritize national tournaments or attending tournaments more than once a topic, or perhaps the school does not want to take liability for the student using its name. Unaffiliated status says nothing about the student herself, her character, her training or her professionalism. In most states, public schools are not able to deny a student’s competition in debate tournaments. However, they are under no obligation to allow students to compete under the school’s name. For those not lucky enough to have supportive school districts, the choice is often between debating unaffiliated or not debating at all.

But even students permitted to debate under their school’s name may still have problems bringing a chaperone over the age of 21. A rigid chaperone requirement creates a difficult barrier to debate that only the financial fortunate can afford. For example, a parent would have to miss a day of work, purchase food, finance their own transportation and find a place to stay during the tournament, since (some) tournaments only house competitors. This can easily inflate the cost of attending a tournament by hundreds of dollars. While tournaments may provide fee-waivers for entry fees, they certainly don’t pay chaperones’

hotel fees or transportation expenses. The added stress of judging at a high school debate tournament provides a further disincentive for parents to chaperone their students as their introduction to the debate world can be both overwhelming and intimidating. Advantaging students who come from families with greater financial resources is certainly not the intent of the LDEP or any tournament director advocating this policy, but it is a direct consequence of its implementation. Only those students who can hire the college coaches and pay for the extra plane ticket to Texas even get to compete. The resulting message is that if a debater can’t afford to bring another person to a tournament, they don’t deserve to be there.

The standard justification for extensive chaperone requirements is that students without such chaperones are liability concerns or represent safety risks. However, bearing in mind that there is no historical precedent where any tournament has been sued by a student without a 21 year old chaperone, we have several reasons why directors should not dwell on this, though. First, there are many informal checks by others. Parents are much more protective than any tournament director. They would doubtfully let their child travel to a tournament and stay in a foreign city unless they were confident in their child’s maturity and the safety of her surroundings. But more so, if liability were so important, tournaments could create waivers of liability, which are standard practice in most activities nowadays and turn informal checks into formal ones.

Second, students who travel without a coach have immense personal responsibility and accountability, to a degree we would say is greater than students from



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organized teams. Independent students who take it upon themselves to make their own travel arrangements, register for tournaments, hire a judge, and manage themselves show that they are not only educationally-driven, but also deeply financially invested. As such, there are strong disincentives for independent students to attend tournaments and then waste away their debate futures on childish or illegal behavior. In fact, we would be willing to go so far as to say that most instances of improper behavior have come from students on well-established teams with a plethora of examples readily available in every competitor's mind, coach's memory and even *Rostrum's*¹ publication. Even at the educational level, students are continually accountable without a coach. They are accountable to judges who can deny them the ballot, to the norms of the community and their reputation for any truly inappropriate tactics, and if need be to the tournament they are at that is capable of disqualifying them if necessary. They care about what others think and listen to the concerns of other coaches. Any unaccountability is a universal problem rather than unique flaw of students who cannot bring a chaperone with them.

Finally, we would like to posit several alternatives that are more inclusive of those unable to spare hundreds of extra dollars each weekend while guaranteeing their safety and responsibility. Tournament directors do not need to propagate such rigid chaperone requirements. Simple requirements that the chaperone is over 18 or in the city area rather than attend the tournament with the student can accomplish the goal of a safe tournament environment. Consider allowing independent students to bring recently graduated students as chaperones, since these former debaters can not only house the debater for free, but also can provide discounted judging services and help the student out. And finally, consider not requiring a chaperone. Be willing to evaluate a student's individual case based on their circumstances from sources you trust. Waivers of liability would be a welcome development if used to help students attend tour-

naments. This is subjective and will require more work on the directors' parts. But it promotes education, strengthens our community, and helps students in ways one may not appreciate or even conceive.

If such chaperone requirements persist, though, coaches can help students from other schools by letting the students to list them as chaperones to be able to attend. In traveling to tournaments, we often used other school coaches as our chaperones. Other teams would in a sense adopt us for a tournament and make us feel welcome and accepted to help us compete. We readily thank those coaches who let us put their names down on registrations to save us the expense of bringing someone else, thereby letting us attend tournaments. They understood the value of debate and supported us when our own schools either could not or did not.

All we ask of the members of our community is to not harm students who do not deserve it. It is unnecessary to make it more difficult than it already is for students without teams or resources to engage in debate. We have founded a non-profit organization called Perspectives to help students access debate who don't have the financial or school support to be actively involved, by providing students with low-cost summer instruction and travel scholarships to attend tournaments. Chaperone regulations would hinder our ability to give meaningful scholarships for determined students to gain exposure and compete.

In this article, we have outlined our case to eliminate barriers to participation, while also suggesting alternatives to chaperone and affiliation requirements that maintain student safety. We encourage the community to consider how particular policies and attitudes affect not just the small segment of independent students, but how it reflects upon the debate community as a whole. To help improve our community's accessibility and dedication to education, we need to consider the most supportive means for independent students.

¹ Figliola, Tony. "Hotel Etiquette." *Rostrum*. March, 2002.

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