



A Coaching Manual for Urban Debate League Coaches

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1. Starting The Team

In one sense, a teacher needs only two personal attributes to start and sustain a successful debate program: time and dedication. If she is willing to invest these assets into coaching, she will be able to provide her school's students with a valuable and enjoyable experience. Of course, there are a number of more concrete things she will need to use her time and dedication to acquire or accomplish, and these things are the topics of this chapter.

The Bare Necessities

The debate team will need a home – which is typically referred to as the “Team Room”. Often, the Team Room may be a classroom for after-school meetings. The Team Room should have a chalkboard or wipe-board and enough seats and desks for every member of the team. Ideally, there should be storage space in the Team Room as well. Policy debate teams quickly acquire a large amount of materials and information that they need to keep somewhere. If these materials end up in a closet or office that is not under the coach's control, it could easily disappear or be inaccessible when needed.

Computers and internet access are also very helpful. In the past ten years, internet-based research in debate has become a necessity. If there are no computers in the Team Room, the coach should attempt to secure access to a computer lab or a bank of computers in the library. Students may have access to computers at home and would be able to do some of their research there after school. The ability to find, process and evaluate information from the internet is one of the most valuable skills students will learn from debate. For this skill to be developed to the fullest, the coach should be on-hand at the start to guide her debaters.

Another essential resource is a printer. Students will need to print the documents and briefs they prepare from their research. The printer should be accessible in the same room as the computers, but this is not essential. If necessary, students could use the computers in a school lab or even at home, and then print in the Team Room. Storing the printer in the Team Room is the most convenient location.



Managing the Time Demands of Being a Coach

At a bare minimum, coaching requires the coach to stay after school at least once a week to hold a team meeting, and to attend a few weekend tournaments. Ambitious coaches may hold multiple practices per week, attend many tournaments, seek out other training opportunities, attend summer workshops, coordinate fundraisers, and host special events such as team dinners and public debates. Consider the following strategies for minimizing the time burden that their debate team imposes on them:

Limit student access. While a coach will want to be available to her debaters, she also needs to set limits. If she gives out your cell phone or home phone number, students will use it. They may also take it to mean that calling five minutes before a practice to say they aren't coming is acceptable. While there are worse problems to have than students who are so interested in debate that they want to stay after school every day to work on it, this is something that comes up on occasion. Communicate limits clearly and consistently to generate respect.

Seek assistance. Some leagues provide coaches with assistants from local university debate teams. Even in these leagues, many coaches still choose to recruit a fellow teacher to serve as an assistant coach. These assistants are a valuable resource, and the coach should learn to delegate some responsibilities to free up personal time.

Encourage student leadership. Encourage debaters do as much of the work as possible. Students who have been to summer debate institutes may well know more about debate than their coach, and if they are mature they can often be trusted to judge a JV practice round or take primary responsibility for teaching a given topic. While the coach should certainly play a role directing and coordinating the research and strategizing that her team does, it should not be her responsibility to cut evidence or write blocks. Instead, assign these tasks to students and offer guidance as necessary.

The individual debaters on the team will need to share evidence and briefs with each other. Therefore, one more useful resource for the debate team would be access to a photocopier. The photocopier does not have to be in the Team Room, but generally a successful debate team will need to use one frequently, so easy access is recommended. While some sharing may take place using the printer – printing multiple copies, one for each team – often a photocopier is a quicker and less expensive option.

Photocopiers, as well as printers, can require some additional supplies and maintenance. This means the coach must not only have access to a photocopier, but must know how to replace paper and toner/print cartridges and fix paper jams. Small, portable printers may be taken to tournaments and are often helpful in that role for last minute sharing and research. To keep photocopying costs down, coaches should make every effort to encourage students not to lose their evidence and other materials. That often means providing organizational supplies such as individual file folders, expanding file folders, and rubber storage bins. If students have multiple bins of evidence, carts or hand-trucks may be necessary to help them transport it.



Recruiting Team Members

Once the above structural resources are in place, the coach needs to find debaters to comprise their team. The first priority of building a debate team has to be recruitment. No other factor influences the long-term success of a debate team as much as student interest. Recruitment strategies have a direct bearing on the enthusiasm levels of your students.

The good news is there are several ways to recruit students to be on the debate team.

Most coaches hold an introductory meeting – we'll call it the Informational Meeting – that allows them to tell interested students about the debate team. At the Informational Meeting find out which students want to take on the challenge and opportunity of being a member. Attrition rates from these meetings can be well over 50%, which means that to end up with a core group of 8-10 committed students, a coach should try to get 25 or more to come to this first meeting.

Obvious recruitment choices include students who are considered 'talkative' or who have displayed an interest in government or politics. It is important, however, not to overlook students who are shy about speaking or who struggle with their class work. Although it may take a personalized and concerted effort to recruit these students, they are typically the ones who have the most to gain from an activity like debate. Other teachers at your school may be willing and able to help you identify potential team members based on these criteria.



Recruitment Strategies

Fliers. To attract a large number of students to the informational meeting hand out and post fliers around the school touting the various benefits of debate: college scholarships, opportunities to travel, improvement in reading and other academic skills, the thrill of competition, and the joy of arguing!

Class presentations. Other teachers, especially those in English or Social Studies departments, may allow the prospective coach to make a brief presentation during their classes to tell their students about the team. If available, distribute a photocopy of a news article about other Urban Debate Leagues. There is a video of a *60 Minutes* segment on an Urban Debate League that could be shown to prospective students.

Other students. Coaches who already have a team in place (or a few early committed new members) and are looking to recruit more debaters should have their veterans give presentations and otherwise assist with recruitment. They will most likely be more effective at appealing to their peers than a teacher. Many students have reported that the single most important factor in their decision to join a debate team was that their friends were involved.

Food. Free food, such as cookies or fruit, is often a very appealing incentive for high school students, especially at the end of the day. Once you get them in the door with the food you will have to convince them with your arguments, though.

Extra credit. If the debate coach teaches a class that is related to debating (such as government, speech or even history) she may offer extra school credit to students who show up and participate meaningfully on the debate team.

Other teachers. Take the time to inform their colleagues about the value of debate, and the initiation of the new debate program. These other teachers should be recruited to recommend specific students for the team. The coach and/or existing team members should follow up directly with these students.



The Informational Meeting

One goal of the Informational Meeting is to outline the benefits of participation on the debate team to the recruits. These benefits include competition, opportunities to travel, positive effects on grades, and enhancing opportunities for college scholarships. The critical thinking skills of reasoning, listening and speaking are also obvious points to highlight, as is the development of inter-personal qualities of self-confidence and communication. Don't forget to make the point that arguing can be fun! To demonstrate their potential travel destinations the coach could hand out a tentative tournament schedule to demonstrate their potential travel destinations. Once the coach feels she has made some inroads on a few students, encourage them to recruit their friends to join the team as well.

As with most other important extra-curricular activities, being on the debate team is not all fun and games. It takes hard work to succeed. The self-discipline and work habits the students learn from participating in debate are another compelling reason for their involvement, but are probably not the most persuasive reasons to tell them at the start.

From the beginning, students should have a realistic expectation of the time commitment it takes to be an effective debater – just like it is a substantial time commitment to be successful in the marching band, academic teams or athletic squads. An important purpose of the Informational Meeting, therefore, should be to communicate to students exactly what participation on the team will entail and what will be expected of them. Avoid the temptation to downplay the 'costs' of debate, that is, the time, effort, and dedication it will require. Students who join the team with false expectations will be more difficult to retain once the true costs in terms of time become evident.

Setting Expectations

Clear communication of expectations to students is essential. Here are a few of the issues to resolve before the coach holds the Informational Meeting with the prospective student recruits:

Practices. How many weekly practices will be held, and how many must they attend?

Tournaments. How many tournaments will each student have to attend?

Notice for Missing Events. What kind of notice will a student have to give if they are late for or absent from a practice or tournament?

Research. How much research or other work will they have to do on their own time?

Team Events. Will they be required to help with special events sponsored by the Debate Team, such as fundraisers, hosting a tournament or public debates?



Instead, while the coach should emphasize the many benefits of debate, the coach making clear that it takes hard work to achieve them. Students will get the message most clearly if they are presented with a list of concrete expectations: students must come to at least one team meeting a week, attend at least three tournaments, give adequate notice and a valid explanation for any practices they miss, etc. Even if the coach ultimately decides to be more lenient than this, it doesn't hurt to set the bar high at the beginning.

Of course, if the Informational Meeting is nothing more than a list of demands, few if any students will want to join the team. The best way to hook students on debating is to let them try their hand at it. At the Informational Meeting you can have the students engage in mini-debates. The topics for these debates should be ones they already know a lot about and would consider fun or interesting to argue about.

Give every student the opportunity to present one or two short speeches (one minute in length) on these topics. This activity can have as much or as little organization as the coach chooses to give it, as the primary goal is just to let the students do a little spontaneous debating and leave eager to do more. It is important that the topics concern issues the students know a lot about so they will not be as nervous speaking in public. Compliment their efforts speeches by pointing out strengths in their speeches.

Sample Mini-Debate Topics for the Informational Meeting

School policies: "Should our school have a dress code?"

Politics: "Is George Bush the worst President ever?"

Music: "Who is the most important rap musician today?"

Sports: "Who is a better quarterback, Vince Young or Tom Brady?"

Creative: "Should America have a King?"

Students will most likely be curious to know exactly what kind of debating they will be doing. A list of rules doesn't capture the spirit of the activity nearly as well as a live performance. Having veteran debaters from another school or even another UDL in a nearby city put on a short demonstration debate is a much better way of showing students what they'll be getting into. If there aren't any experienced debaters available, videotapes of demonstration debates could serve this purpose. Be sure to leave time at the end of the meeting to answer any questions that students may have.



Following Up with Potential Recruits

Tell them how to participate. Be prepared to tell students when and where the next Team Meeting will be. Distribute an informational flier or brochure that contains this information, along with other materials summarizing the benefits of being a member of the team.

Get commitments. Before students leave the Informational Meeting give them an opportunity to commit to coming to the next Team Meeting.

Track them down. Some student won't want to commit on the spot, but don't leave it up to them to report later that they are interested. Find other students who were at the Informational Meeting and use them to encourage the rest of the students to attend the Team Meeting.

Show confidence in them. Students who aren't confident that debate is right for them will often be persuaded to give it a try if a teacher makes clear that she believes it is. For students whose parents are frequently busy or largely absent from their life, the opportunity to connect with an adult who takes a meaningful interest in their personal development is a tempting and ultimately rewarding one.



Building Support in the School

While students are the most important part of the debate team, coaches should also try to build support among their fellow teachers, the parents of students at the school, and the school administration. These other supporters can assist in recruitment, advocacy for the team, securing access to school resources, and otherwise making the coach's job more manageable.

Teachers

Other teachers are often the easiest to enlist, as they will have the opportunity to see first-hand how debate is benefiting students in their classes. Take advantage of opportunities to tell them about the many benefits of debate and keep them abreast of the team's accomplishments.

The support of other teachers is valuable for many reasons, not least of which is that students may need to get permission to miss class on occasion to attend tournaments or other events. Teachers are much more likely to make this concession if they know the educational benefits of the activity. They may also recommend students from their classes whom they feel would make good debaters. Teachers who are especially taken by debate may even be willing to help out as judges or assistant coaches.

School Administration

The support of the school administration may be a little more difficult to win, but it is no less important. The principal is often overworked and forced to balance the interests of a large number of competing groups: students, teachers, parents, the community at large, and her bosses at the district and/or state level. Combine these pressures with short tenure, strict accountability regimes, and (in many areas) a trend towards loss of control over the hiring of school faculty, and the result is a principal who, no matter how well-intentioned, may not have much time, money, or interest to devote to the school debate team.

Nevertheless, the principal is an invaluable ally. She and other administrators may be able to provide financial assistance for special events, and often control access to school resources such as computers, photocopiers, and classrooms. Principals who understand the value of debate are more likely to agree to host a tournament, grant permission for debaters to miss class to travel to a tournament, provide a coach stipend, or introduce a debate class into the school.

As school administrators are less likely than other teachers to see the benefits of debate immediately, coaches should make a special effort to exhibit them. Announce team achievements over the school intercom and post them on your classroom door, display trophies and other awards prominently, and talk up the benefits of debate for students and the school. Of course, the students themselves are the best evidence. When possible, arrange for them to speak at faculty meetings or obtain permission for them to come to a meeting with the principal.



The Principal's Bottom Line

As undesirable as they may find this fact, school principals are frequently forced to think in terms of their own bottom line: standardized test scores. Fortunately, debate makes students better at reading, writing, critical thinking, and organizing their thoughts logically. A recent study by the University of Missouri's Linda Collier found that students participating in a UDL improve their standardized reading scores by 25% more than their non-debating peers over the course of a single year. Statistics like these, as well as anecdotes about 'success case' students, can be very persuasive to school administrators.

If she has time, the principal may accept an invitation to a tournament, awards dinner, public debate, or other special event, and even if she doesn't have time she will still appreciate the offer. Giving her an opportunity to participate genuinely in the formulation of the vision for the team is another way to entice interest and secure long-term support. Above all, be aware of the principal's situation and respect the many demands on her time.

Parents

Finally, informing parents of students about the debate team is very important. Even parents who don't generally take an active interest in their child's education have the power to forbid their son or daughter from attending a tournament or staying after school for practice. However, if these same parents understand that debate can help their child improve grades or be accepted to and pay for college, they may be more willing to permit her to participate. Some parents who are convinced about the value of debate may encourage their child to join and agree to serve as judges or assistant coaches.

Attempt speaking directly with the parent(s) of all students on the team in order to communicate what membership on the team will entail for their child. This means talking about the benefits of the activity as well as the expectations. The coach can reach a larger audience of parents by speaking (or having her debaters speak) about debate at a PTA meeting. The PTA can also be a source of funding for special events such as invitational tournaments or team parties.



Building Support Outside of the School

When the school looks good, the school administration looks good. That means as the team generates positive attention from the media, colleges and universities, local businesses, or educational organizations, the coach will likely earn the appreciation of the principal and the respect of higher-ups such as district superintendents and local politicians.

Special Events

Publicizing tournament results is one way to increase the team's visibility, but that may not be as 'newsworthy' as other events. Holding an awards banquet to celebrate the successes of the team's first year (making it through is success enough!), a public debate on an issue of local concern, or a public forum event with a local politician, policymaker, or academic are other ways to build alliances and attract positive attention. Invite parents, teachers, students who are not already members of the team, the principal, relevant school district administrators, local politicians, and anyone else who has supported the team or who might do so in the future. Even if these invitations are declined the invitation, their recipients have still been reminded about the team and its successes.

The Media

Events can be publicized with promotional flyers, an article in the school newspaper, or a press release sent to local news outlets. Media attention and the presence of local dignitaries are mutually reinforcing: the press is more likely to cover an event when public figures will be in attendance, and the promise of a good photo-op will attract politicians and administrators.

Some school districts may have rules that govern how and when their employees may interact with the media. Be familiar with these policies before planning a publicity strategy.

A Word of Caution in Dealing with the Media

When working with the media, think carefully about the message to communicate, and phrase press releases or responses during interviews appropriately. Some reporters will be tempted to portray a debate team at an urban high school as a 'diamond in the rough'. Their angle on the story may be about how nice it is that for once urban youth are settling disputes with words rather than weapons, or about how debate keeps kids occupied after school, when they would otherwise be dealing drugs, committing crimes, and becoming teenage parents. While debate is a real solution to real problems such as these, coaches must be cautious about allowing the media to reinforce negative stereotypes about their neighborhood or their school.



Politicians and Staff

When working with politicians, school administrators, and similar potential allies, the key to success is making simple, deliverable requests and following up on them as necessary. While it may not be possible to follow up with a high-profile supporter directly, assistants and secretaries may be more important targets for persuasion anyway, as they often guide their bosses' decisions or even make them outright. A state senator's chief of staff, for example, is more likely than the senator herself to handle a request for funding or schedule the senator to make an appearance at an event.

Even capturing the attention of the assistants of especially high-profile figures can be difficult, and having a personal 'in' is a huge advantage in these situations. By building a network of supporters among parents, teachers, and community activists, the coach creates a pool of people who know people who know people. Although the coach may not know the superintendent personally, a colleague's spouse's cousin may know his secretary, who could make an appointment and help to follow up on a request.

Requests are more likely to be approved when they allow for a meaningful partnership to develop over time. These partnerships help coaches navigate the often-complicated web of written and unwritten rules within the school system and to keep abreast of changes in the political climate.

Even once someone has made a commitment, it may be necessary to remind her or her staff several times to carry it out. Don't feel guilty about being a thorn in the side, however; it may be the only way to receive noticed in a busy office, and public figures that have made commitments understand that they will be held accountable for carrying them out.



2. Running The Team

Getting a team off the ground is often the most difficult part of coaching. Once the infrastructure for the team is in place, the coach has to keep the ball rolling while helping students get the most out of the activity, both competitively and educationally. While this may sound relatively simple, there are many aspects of actually running the team that takes thought and effort.

Recruitment and Retention

The first year's group of students is always the hardest to assemble. Once they are established as members of the team, they will attract friends and younger siblings in future years. Others will join the team as they observe the fun and success experienced by its current members.

Coaches also face a battle against attrition, however. High school students are often busy, and debate requires a serious commitment of time and energy that not all of them can or want to make. Some will join the team not realizing how much work it will be, and decide it is too much for them. Jobs, responsibilities at home, schoolwork, personal relationships, or other extracurricular activities will cut into time students once had for debate. Still others will simply lose interest and quit.

While some of these factors are unavoidable, there are many things a coach can do to keep students interested in the debate team. The most important principle is to keep participation fun. While no one enjoys losing, it's an inevitable part of competition of any kind. If the most successful members of the team are the only ones enjoying themselves and getting individualized attention from the coach, they will be the only ones who will stick around. Winning has only a very loose connection to the educational benefits of debate, and it is quite possible for a student never to win a round and still receive great benefits from participating.

Make sure the students understand the value they are receiving merely from participating. Winning isn't everything. Focus their attention on areas of improvement from one tournament to the next. Often, improvement can be measured in certain ways that do not involve the judge's bottom line on the ballot. Are the debaters more prepared? Do they use less preparation time in their rounds? Are they asking better questions in cross-examination? Are they completing solid



research assignments? These are examples of areas where students can gain a sense of accomplishment regardless of their record at a tournament. In the end, however, students who are not as successful as they want to be will need encouragement from their coach and from the other members of the team if they are going to stick it out through a long losing streak.

Student retention is one of the many benefits of team unity. When a debate team works as a family, practices and tournaments are more fun for everyone and members remain committed. A debater whose partner is also a friend is less likely to skip a tournament because she will not want to let her friend down. Ideally, debaters will enjoy participating on the team so much they will help with coaching and judging even after they have graduated.



Nuts and Bolts: Building Team Unity

Team unity doesn't just happen on its own; teams actively cultivate it by:

Working together. Conduct brainstorming sessions at the Team Meeting where everyone discusses a popular argument and collectively works out a strategy for answering it.

Sharing evidence. Photocopy or print multiple copies of research done by any member of the team and distribute it to everyone.

Celebrating together. If everyone on the team contributes to the work effort and shares evidence, then success by any member of the team is a victory for everyone and should be treated that way.

Practicing together. Assign everyone on the squad to watch an after-school practice debate between two teams on the squad. Discuss the round afterward. Emphasize fun and education over winning in these rounds so as not to cause intra-squad competition. Don't announce a winner of the practice round; just discuss what was good and bad about each team's performance.

Dressing alike. Team t-shirts or jackets with varsity letters can be a great way to build morale, celebrate successes, and reward students who stay on the team for several years. Students can dress alike at tournaments or during travel.

Watching and scouting elimination rounds. If one team from the squad is in elimination rounds, everyone else should lend their support by watching the round or scouting other elimination rounds.

Teaching each other. Build a team culture where older and more experienced students pass on their knowledge to younger members of the team. This is especially helpful when the coach is not an expert in debate herself, in which case varsity debaters may know more about the topic. Assigning older debaters to mentor younger debaters inspires and educates both parts of the working relationship.

Respecting each other. Insist that all members of the team cooperate constructively, resolve their differences peacefully, and generally get along. The role model provided by the coach in this regard is crucial by always treating students fairly and respectfully.]

It is necessary to provide a word of warning about team unity, though. It can go overboard, and become 'clique-y', which will turn off new recruits. Make an effort to recruit a variety of students rather than a pre-established group of friends. If the team is all men, make an effort to recruit women, and vice versa. The same idea is important for racial composition of the team in certain situations. Work diligently to keep the team atmosphere welcoming to newcomers. Participating in events other than tournaments, such as public debates or other forensics activities, can broaden the team's horizons.



Weekly Meetings

The team should meet after school at least once a week – we’ll call it the Team Meeting. For the sake of establishing a memorable routine it is best for the Team Meeting always to be at the same time and place, if possible. Even if the team moves quickly to the school library or computer lab, students should still begin the Team Meeting in their usual classroom and then leave to go to another location. This reinforces the idea that debate is a regular commitment to be kept and prevents students from forgetting to show up or showing up in the wrong place (intentionally or unintentionally). Team Meetings should also end at a standard time so that parents will know when to expect their children to be home.

Some coaches have separate Team Meetings for junior varsity and varsity debaters. This has the advantage of allowing targeted lessons based on student experience levels. A drawback of separate Team Meetings is the disruption of team unity and preventing younger students from learning from their more experienced counterparts. A better idea might be to have one meeting for everyone, and a second meeting, either on another day or for an extra hour afterwards, that is required for varsity students and optional for junior varsity debaters.

Setting the Agenda for Weekly Team Meetings

Debaters tend to be social by nature, even more so if the coach has done a good job of cultivating team unity. Although this should generally be encouraged, it can make Team Meetings slow, inefficient, unproductive, and annoying to everyone involved. Establish a clear agenda and objectives for each Team Meeting. This will focus the students’ energy.

Brainstorming. Especially at the beginning of a new season or after a long break, teams should discuss how arguments have changed and what they will need to be prepared to debate.

Strategizing. Lead a discussion of the pros and cons of different affirmative cases or develop strategies for answering a new affirmative case or negative off-case position being run in their league. Assign at least one member of the team to keep a list of the arguments you discuss. At subsequent meetings you can return to this list to check on progress.

Researching. The team might visit the computer lab or library in order to research a new argument. Or, they might settle down with scissors and tape to process and brief evidence.

Learning. Of course students should always be learning, but the coach might set aside an entire practice to teach a new skill, concept, or argument. This could include a lecture and a follow-up activity.

De-Briefing. After a tournament, the team should share their experiences to learn what worked, what didn’t, and what arguments are out there which hadn’t previously been considered.



Establishing Partnerships

In policy debate, students compete in teams of two. A debater's partner is her closest ally and learning companion on the team, so it is important for the two of them to get along. They don't have to be best friends. Debating with someone you consider your best friend has both advantages and disadvantages. But whether or not debate partners are best friends they must be able to work together constructively.

There are several ways to assign debate partnerships on a squad. One method would be to allow the students to pair up on their own without interference from the coach. A second method would be for the coach to determine partnerships unilaterally. There are approaches in between these extremes. Debaters could be permitted to offer input, which the coach would accept unless there are unusual circumstances. A coach might have a policy to accept any mutual partner requests. Finally, a coach might allow debaters to indicate one or two members of the squad that they would essentially "veto" or prefer not to have as a partner. There is no right way to assign partners.

There are some factors to consider when evaluating partner decisions. Many students will join the activity knowing who they want their partner to be. There's nothing wrong with that. Debate is a voluntary activity that should be enjoyable, so there is often no need to force students to work with someone they don't want to work with.

While it is a good idea to give students input in their partner assignments, there are a few criteria to keep in mind about what makes a good partnership besides cooperation. The most obvious is ability level. If a varsity debater convinces her best friend to join the team as a novice, the two may want to debate together. While this could be an educational experience for the beginning debater, it could also be an intimidating one: she will have to start right off debating in the varsity division and will always feel like she is holding her partner back. Also, for competitive reasons, the coach might prefer to have her strongest debaters partnered with each other.

Another consideration is argument or style interest. If one debater likes debating disadvantages and counterplans and the other prefers critiques, they may frequently disagree about negative strategy. Then again, a coach may favor the notion that their abilities will complement each other well. As long as the coach helps them to negotiate their disagreements, this could well turn into a very productive partnership.

A final important factor to consider is the extent to which each student is invested in the activity. Debaters interested in attending every tournament and going to summer institutes should not be partnered with those who are doing the bare minimum. It isn't fair to the hard-working student, and it will quickly create a substantial ability gap and personality conflicts.

Generally partnerships are established at the start of the year based on input from debaters and a series of practice debates. During the early sessions the coach can listen to all the debaters to



determine compatibility. The coach may want to try different combinations in these practice sessions.

Once partnerships are determined at the start of the year a coach might have reasons to revisit their decisions. Debaters may grow apart in terms of their compatibility or interest in traveling to tournaments. Coaches should be willing to consider changing partnerships after a few tournaments. Often repairing teams might permit two debaters to attend a tournament they otherwise might not have been able to, if their original partners could not participate that weekend for some reason.



Nuts and Bolts: Troubleshooting Partner Assignments

Problems will inevitably arise among partners, but the coach should be hesitant to break up team assignments once they are established. The time that the debaters have spent getting to know each other and learning to work together will be wasted. Working through difficult relationships is an important life skill. Following are some common problems that may arise and solutions the coach should explore before breaking up a team:

Problem 1: Strategic disagreements. Partners frequently disagree about which arguments to make or extend during a round.

Solution: Help them make these decisions as much as possible before the round begins and then encourage them to stick with what they've decided. At the very least, discuss the criteria they should use so that they have some common ground to resort to when making these decisions. Finally, there should be a firm rule that in the event of a dispute that cannot be resolved quickly, the debater giving the last rebuttal has the final word, as she is the one who will have to sell the team's case at the end of the round. This works best when one partner is the last rebuttalist on the Affirmative and the other on the Negative, so that they will share this power equally.

Problem 2: Personality conflicts. The partners have had a fight or are otherwise angry with each other.

Solution: If the students cannot resolve the problem themselves, the coach or a mature member of the team can play the role of mediator. As a last resort, the coach could separate them for one tournament as a cooling off period.

Problem 3: Imbalanced Partnership. One partner feels like the other is holding her back or constantly making mistakes in the round.

Solutions: Watch the team debate together and talk to their judges. If there is some truth to this claim, discuss with the better debater methods for helping her partner to improve. Encourage her to focus on the skills that her partner does possess. Even if she is generally stronger than her partner, the partner may still surpass her in some ways. They should be encouraged to learn from each other. In the end, though, substantial differences in ability may be a valid reason to separate a team, especially if caused by one student working much harder than the other. If, on the other hand, the coach does

Nuts and Bolts: Troubleshooting Partner Assignments (cont.)

not feel that there is actually a noticeable ability gap, she should discuss the issue with the complaining debater. Debate tends to inflate egos, so it may be necessary to bring this student's



head out of the clouds by pointing out areas in which she needs improvement and emphasizing ways in which her partner makes valuable contributions to the team.

Problem 4: Romantic involvement. Debate partners spend a lot of time working closely together, and among high school students this can easily lead into romantic involvement. This isn't actually a problem in itself, but it can create some real headaches. Debate partners often spend a substantial amount of time alone together, and the coach must be able to trust that they will behave appropriately while they are on her watch. Break-ups, of course, are likely to lead to a host of problems.

Solution: As long as the coach makes her expectations concerning conduct clear and feels that she can trust the students she doesn't need to play a heavy-handed role here. Following a break-up, however, she will probably want to separate the debaters, at least temporarily. At least one of the two will probably be uncomfortable around the other, interfering with their ability to work together at best and creating opportunities for sexual harassment at worst.

Problem 5: Chronic absenteeism. One student routinely misses practices or competitions, leaving the partner hanging.

Solution: This may require breaking up the team. It is simply not fair to the student who works hard and shows up regularly to miss out on opportunities to compete because of an unreliable partner. Hopefully, coaches will nip this problem in the bud by communicating expectations about attendance early and often. Try making clear to the unreliable debater the impact that she is having on her partner, but if this doesn't work re-assign the debaters so that the harder-working student is not adversely affected any further. Students who are not meeting attendance expectations may need to be temporarily suspended or barred from further involvement with the team.



Student Leadership

There is a lot of work involved in running a debate team, and while the coach is ultimately responsible for all of it, she shouldn't try to handle every detail. Ultimately, the team exists to benefit the students, so there is every reason to expect members of the team to pitch in to help keep it running smoothly. Leadership roles are also potentially valuable additions to your students' in term of college or job applications.

Often, a team leadership structure will develop on its own. Students most taken by the activity will invest more time and energy into improving their skills and may naturally want to share their expertise with less experienced students who look up to them. As these students also have the most vested interest in the continuation of the team, they will probably be most willing to help out with less fun tasks such as fundraising and record-keeping. Coaches should keep an eye out for such a developing dynamic in order to nurture it in productive ways.

The coach may choose simply to appoint these natural leaders to positions of responsibility or to hold elections. The results will probably be similar. If the coach has noticed emerging leaders, the students most likely have as well, and will tend to formalize the roles that those students are already playing.

In the rare circumstance where a natural leadership structure does not emerge, if no students are willing to take on these extra responsibilities, or if a leadership-based system of sharing responsibilities proves divisive, the coach may choose instead to delegate responsibility on a case-by-case basis and require all team members to pitch in. On a large team, students might be assigned to committees for recruitment, fundraising, etc. Be upfront about these requirements when students are joining the team. They will be much more cooperative if they do not feel as though the coach has pulled a bait-and-switch on them.



Leadership Positions

If a coach chooses to assign formal leadership roles to students they should be well-defined to avoid conflicts and insure that the students know what is expected of them.

Captain. The Captain should generally be the most experienced or accomplished debater on the team. It is also vitally important that the Captain be hard-working and responsible. Honoring these qualities will cause other members to aspire towards them. The captain is the team's policy debate expert, and her responsibilities could include guiding team strategy and brainstorming sessions, recruiting and training new members, coordinating the team's research, and keeping track of information about judges and other teams.

Secretary. The Secretary must be a student that is mature and reliable. The Secretary is generally the organizational mastermind of the team. She could be responsible for keeping track of press clippings, competitive records, NFL points, and any other non-confidential data gathered about the team. She could also be assigned to record the results of team brainstorming sessions and any other activities requiring a written record.

Treasurer. The Treasurer must be a responsible student who is competent in math. Though she should not be given complete responsibility for team money, she could spearhead fundraising initiatives, track the team's budget, and handle the money at bake sales, car washes, or other events where students are taking in small sums of money and making change.

Community Liaison. The Community Liaison should be charismatic and outgoing, as she will be the public face of the team. She could announce team successes or meeting reminders over the school's intercom, lead recruitment drives, speak at public events, and forge relationships with coaches and debaters from other schools. She could also organize other public relations efforts such as flyers and school signs announcing team accomplishments.



Nuts and Bolts: Record Keeping

There is a large amount of information that coaches will need to keep track of for legal reasons, to make their jobs easier, and to help their teams improve.

Budget. Schools or leagues that provide teams with discretionary funds will want to know exactly how that money is spent. Save receipts, and keep a careful record of where the team's money comes from and where it goes. Some schools and leagues have very specific requirements concerning budgeting, so the coach should check on this at the beginning.

Student Contact Information. Coaches will need to be able to get in touch with students quickly, frequently, and through a variety of media. Collect all home and cell phone numbers, mailing addresses, e-mail addresses, and class schedules so it will be easier to find them during the day. It is also very important to know how to contact the students' parents or guardians, especially in an emergency, so collect that information as well.

Academic Data. Assuming that relevant privacy laws do not prohibit its collection, data concerning students' GPA, standardized test scores, etc. can be very valuable in tracking and demonstrating the educational value of debate. Coaches are advised to check with a supervisor or union representative before collecting this data. Consider asking students to waive their privacy rights so the academic data can be released, especially if the debate team has a GPA requirement for ongoing participation.

Debate History. Keep a record of which students were at which tournaments, who their partners were, who judged them, who they debated, and how they did. Saving old ballots will allow them to track student improvement and identify strengths and weaknesses. If the school is a member of the National Forensics League (NFL), there is a very specific way in which debaters' competitive records must be tracked and reported in order to earn NFL points. Details about how to do this are available from the NFL.

Nuts and Bolts: Record Keeping (cont.)

Backfiles. "Backfiles" are the files that your debate team has accumulated over time that they have used previously. Have a system where you save the backfiles from previous topics because the same arguments may resurface on later topics in slightly different form. This might be a good task to assign to your team Secretary. For example, even if Weapons of Mass Destruction is no longer the topic, nuclear terrorism may continue to be a popular disadvantage impact scenario, and old case attacks could become Affirmative answers. Backfiles also represent countless hours of work on the part of students, who may want to use it later in conjunction with a school research assignment or college application.



Permission Slips. The school will likely require that the debaters receive explicit permission from their parents and/or teachers concerning travel to debate tournaments. Coaches must find out when they are required to collect permission slips and then diligently save these documents.

Emergency Medical Forms. Any time they are off-campus together, the coach bears primary responsibility for the health and well-being of her team. She must know about any medical conditions and have the appropriate forms and medications on hand in case of an emergency. She should also have emergency contact forms for every student.

Supporter Information. The coach will also want to keep records concerning how to get in touch with alumni, community volunteers, judges available for hire, and all other supporters of the team. Keeping a notebook or computer database of this information will allow organized and easy access. In addition to knowing how to contact these people, the coach should maintain a record of what each person is interested in or qualified to do.



3. External Resources and Opportunities

The coach can both make her job easier and maximize debate's benefit to her students by helping them to take advantage of educational resources in their school, league, and community. In particular, the coach can use these resources to compensate for gaps in her own knowledge. For example, if she is not an expert in policy debate she can help her students seek out opportunities to learn from those who are.

Local Seminars

Many urban debate leagues, conscious of the fact that the majority of their coaches are not policy debate gurus, recruit prominent members of the debate community to offer lectures and seminars for the students in the league. Although these cannot substitute for the individualized attention of a trained and accredited educator (the coach), they are an excellent way for students to get exposure to in-depth policy debate theory and argument strategies that their coach cannot offer.

If possible, the coach should attend these seminars as well. This is likely to increase turnout among students both because she will be able to make sure that they go and because her willingness to spend her own valuable time at them communicates the importance of the seminar to the students.

Coaches could also consider offering extra credit to students who attend these optional seminars. After all, they generally entail several hours of learning about reading, speaking, critical thinking, and note taking skills.

Sometimes, leagues also offer seminars or conferences specifically designed for coaches who want to learn more about policy debate and how to teach it. Coaches may even be able to count the time they spend at these seminars towards in-service professional development required by their school, district, or union.



Web Resources

The internet is a valuable tool useful for more than just research. There are a growing number of websites offering educational material about debate and the current debate topic. Coaches can supplement their teaching with these resources:

National Association of Urban Debate Leagues (<http://www.urbandebate.org/>)

This is the only policy debate site on the internet dedicated exclusively to the needs of students, coaches, and administrators in urban debate leagues. The electronic resource center contains several fully researched files, dozens of research links, tools to help coaches with every aspect of managing a debate team, and information about college, summer institutes, and other opportunities for students.

NDCA Free Workshop Evidence Database (<http://ndca.debateteams.net/>)

The National Debate Coaches Association “NDCA” provides all debate coaches, regardless of type of debate, region or pedagogical style with avenues for professional development, including sample lesson plans. There is a small annual membership fee (\$25). Beginning in 2007 they also have a new comprehensive collection of files from 22 workshops from the past summer that can be downloaded *for free* by any member. This is a way for debate teams to access thousands of pages of evidence, organized by topic. This site also has a starter pack for new coaches, and a PR kit to help sell your program.

University of Vermont’s Debate Central (<http://debate.uvm.edu/default.html>)

Alfred “Tuna” Snider, perhaps the world’s most famous debate coach, has gathered a lifetime of debate wisdom here. His website includes educational resources for students and coaches, information about debate-related opportunities such as scholarships and summer institutes, details about many different kinds of debate, and recorded debates and lectures. Of special interest is his online book, *The Code of the Debater*, which is chock full of valuable advice for learning and improving debate skills.

Michigan States Online Debate Free Encyclopedia (<http://sdiencyclopedia.wikispaces.com/>)

One of the most difficult aspects of learning debate is confronting all the stylized jargon that has developed over many years. In 2007 the Michigan State debate program began the assembly of a comprehensive encyclopedia of debate jargon and concepts. It is free to access and organized alphabetically.



National Forensics League (<http://www.nflonline.org/Main/HomePage>)

Coaches can use this site to find out about upcoming tournaments, submit their team's NFL points online, and find helpful teaching resources. Also, back issues of the NFL's publication, *The Rostrum*, are archived here.

Planet Debate Free Debate Textbook (<http://www.planetdebate.com/>)

Planet Debate is a comprehensive debate website that includes materials about how to debate and a giant database of evidence. It offers a valuable free online textbook ("Policy Debate 101" - <http://planetdebate.com/book/book.asp>) that is available to anyone. The best content on this website, such as regularly updated evidence and recorded lectures from famous debate coaches, is available by subscription only. Available for free, however, are lists of arguments being used around the country, schedules of upcoming tournaments, research links, and more.

National Center for Policy Analysis' Debate Central (<http://www.debate-central.org>)

This is a great place to start a research project. It contains hundreds of links, grouped by topic and by Affirmative/Negative, to articles related to the current resolution. Forums and even a few pre-written briefs are available as well.

Cross-X.Com (<http://www.cross-x.com/>)

Although this is primarily a site that sells evidence, it also contains debate news, chat forums, and some research links. This site does provide information on various workshops from around the country including an opportunity to write questions for the camp directors to answer.

International Debate Education Association (<http://www.idebate.org/main/home.asp>)

IDEA's website contains information about and resources for different kinds of debate. Coaches will find their suggestions for debate exercises and their 'deatabase' of possible debate topics, complete with summaries of the arguments for each side, especially useful. IDEA also sponsors some debate-related educational opportunities such as contests and international seminars.



Summer Workshops for Students

For students interested in taking their involvement with debate to the next level, there is no better way than to attend a summer debate institute. Summer debate institutes, sometimes referred to as ‘debate boot camps,’ provide students with several weeks of intensive policy debate instruction.

Many urban debate leagues offer in-house institutes for their students at little or no cost. Coaches should urge all of their debaters to take advantage of these opportunities, as they are hands-down the most cost-effective way for students to improve their debating and get to know other students, coaches, judges, and administrators in the league.

Colleges and universities around the country offer more extensive (and expensive) residential programs where students spend two to seven weeks completely immersed in policy debate and the upcoming season’s debate topic. Students there work with some of that nation’s best college debaters and debate coaches to master debate skills and produce loads of evidence for use during the upcoming season. Attending a residential institute is almost a must for any debaters who want to start competing nationally.

The benefits of a residential debate institute are many: students work with top-notch instructors, receive many rounds of experience on the upcoming topic, and make valuable connections with debaters at other schools and with members of the debate community who may end up judging them. For some students, even the opportunity to leave the city where they live, and experience a college town, is a rare and exciting one.

The major drawback, of course, is the cost of these programs, which are generally in the thousands of dollars. Fortunately, the directors of residential summer debate institutes are often willing to offer financial aid, scholarships, or group rates for urban debaters. The league may have arrangements set up with nearby institutes, or the coach may need to contact the director of the institute herself to ask about scholarships and financial aid.

The NAUDL Online Guide to Summer Workshops

Beginning with Summer 2008 institutes, the NAUDL provides an Online Guide to summer debate workshops that catalogues up-to-date information from participating summer workshops. The Online Guide is accessible at the NAUDL website. It includes general information for each workshop – such as dates, student-faculty ratio, size, etc. It also identifies and highlights those workshops that offer special opportunities (scholarships, faculty, curriculum) for UDL debaters.



Nuts and Bolts: Choosing a Summer Debate Institute

Attending a summer debate institute is a substantial investment of time and money, but the payoff can be huge, too. The potential advantages are not only for the individual students who are able to attend, but also for their coaches and teammates who benefit from the instructional materials and strategies they bring home with them. Coaches, students, and parents should consider the following factors when thinking about summer institutes:

Is it Affordable? For the families of many urban debate league students, cost is the bottom line. Even with substantial scholarships and financial aid, an institute can cost hundreds of dollars. Plus, scholarships rarely cover travel expenses, which can be considerable. In addition to scholarship awards or discounts from the institute the student's league or school may have money available for educational summer programs.

Are there Additional Costs? A few institutes charge students lab fees, make them pay if they want to take evidence home with them, or expect them to pay out-of-pocket for research-related expenses. In many cases these costs are being reduced by the availability of electronic research and evidence processing. In any event costs won't be covered by scholarships or financial aid, so they'll have to be factored in to the consideration of affordability.

Are they UDL-friendly? Some institutes go out of their way to make UDL students feel welcome and appreciated. They understand that UDL students make valuable contributions to their program and they eagerly seek out UDL students for their programs. They often do this through their hiring practices, their curriculum, their scholarship assistance, and their track record of attracting UDL students. Find out if the workshops you are investigating have hired teachers with UDL experience. Learn how many UDL students have attended the workshop in the past.

Who else is Going? Getting to know the competition and the judging pool is a big benefit of summer institutes. For students who compete only in their UDL, the in-house institute is best for this purpose. Those who compete regionally should find out where the top teams at other nearby schools are going. Those UDL students that compete nationally will be best served by national institutes.



Nuts and Bolts: Choosing a Summer Debate Institute (cont.)

Where is it Located? Institutes in major cities can offer cultural excursions and chances to interact with real-world policymakers but often have to keep a tighter rein on students because of safety concerns. Those in more remote locations offer leisure activities akin to those at a traditional summer camp: swimming, sports, etc., but may be more expensive to get to.

When Will it Take Place? Students with a lot of time on their hands in the summer may want to attend a residential institute that won't conflict with the in-house one that their league offers.

Is it the Right Track? The largest summer institutes offer several tracks based on students' experience, ability level, and prior accomplishments. At some workshops the big name faculty may end up spending most of their time with the top track, so it is important to learn about the details of each track before making a decision.

What is the Focus? Different institutes focus on different skills. Some are known for the quality of research that they produce, others for having top-notch tournaments or renowned lab leaders. By reading between the lines in promotional literature such as brochures or information on the institute's website, savvy consumers can often determine how students will spend most of their time.



Other Leagues and Competitions

Some urban debate leagues are more insular than others. It may be possible for students to spend several years on a debate team and never compete against a team that is not from their league. This has its advantages: urban debate leagues provide a level playing field for schools without big debate budgets and larger coaching staffs to compete against each other.

On the other hand, debaters who participate only in their UDLs are exposed to a narrow variety of debate styles and arguments; they miss out on exciting opportunities to travel and meet new people; and they are unable to engage in great competition such as that found at various state and national championship tournaments. Moreover, debaters may learn more by losing to better teams than by winning against their peers. Finally, there is the danger that such insularity may be perceived as a statement of urban debaters' inability to compete with more affluent schools.

Those teams who have traveled beyond their UDL have often been pleasantly surprised. At other regional tournaments, the competition often is similar in caliber to what they are used to in their leagues. Plus, their school and their program gain prestige in the broader debate community, and their coach gets the chance to meet and swap ideas with more of her colleagues.

Stepping Outside Your League

Coaches interested in taking their teams to competitions outside of their league should consider these national opportunities:

National Forensics League (NFL). Membership in the NFL entails a small fee on the part of the school, but is free for all students at that school. The NFL awards points to students for competing in a variety of forensics activities and grants higher and higher distinctions to students as they accumulate NFL points. Best of all, the NFL sponsors regional tournaments through which debaters can qualify for a weeklong national championship tournament.

National Catholic Forensics League (NCFL). Although the NCFL is organized the diocese of the Catholic Church, it is open to all schools public and private. Membership in the NCFL is usually required to participate in the tournaments they sponsor, but is relatively inexpensive and makes students eligible to participate in regional and national championship tournaments.

Tournament of Champions National Circuit (TOC). The annual TOC held in Lexington, Kentucky is sponsored by the University of Kentucky. The TOC is the only debate circuit that is not organized regionally. Instead, debaters compete at the largest tournaments around the country and earn 'bids' to the TOC by placing highly at these tournaments. Of these leagues, the TOC national circuit is most similar in style to college policy debate, with an orientation towards rapid-fire delivery and complex argumentation. These tournaments attract difficult competition and may be intimidating to teams leaving their league for the first time.



Local Universities

Universities are often looking for ways in which they can have a positive effect on their host communities. While they can and do give back to these communities financially, they generally prefer projects that allow members of their faculty and students to play an active role. Working with a team in a local urban debate league is a great way for them to accomplish all of these goals. If your city has a college or university with a debate program you may want to look to them for helping after school or at tournaments.

UDL debaters can benefit from the involvement of a local university in a number of ways. Members of the college debate team (if there is one) or college students with high school policy debate experience may volunteer as assistant coaches for the school, providing students with another source of policy debate knowledge and the opportunity to learn more about college life. Professors from the university who are experts in the topic area might agree to speak with the team and help them gain a stronger understanding of the arguments they are debating. The school's community relations or public service department might sponsor the team or some of its events.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the university will probably want to recruit members of the high school debate team, especially if it has a team of its own. A debate team typically attracts some of the smartest, most dedicated, and hardest working students at a high school, making it a valuable resource for college recruiters.



High School Debate as a Path to College Admission

There is no doubt that actively participating on a debate team helps students get into college indirectly by improving crucial skills such as reading, critical thinking, oral and written communication, and organization. These skills generally produce higher GPA's and standardized test scores, which are the primary statistic evaluated by college admissions officers.

There are also some very direct ways in which involvement with the debate team can increase a student's chances of getting accepted to and paying for college.

First, debate experience looks good on a transcript. Many college admissions officers say that it is the number one extracurricular activity they look for. Extensive participation on a debate team says many positive things about the student. They chose an academic-oriented extra-curricular activity. They have learned how to research and formulate logical ideas. In short, they have the qualities that admissions departments see as important for likely success in college.

Second, debate experience often gives students the opportunity to interact with university students and faculty. In some cases, this can make college seem like a real possibility for a student who had always believed it wasn't for her. The connections that students make by attending a summer institute, working with a university debate team, or meeting college admissions officers can also be very valuable when is applying. A letter of recommendation from a faculty member or alumnus of a university can make a world of difference in the highly competitive admissions process.

Finally, there are some very well funded college debate teams that go to great lengths to recruit talented high school debaters. Some even make special efforts to recruit urban debate league students. The coaches of these programs can frequently offer scholarships to students who are admitted and may even be able to influence the admissions process.



Talking to Students about College Debate

Many universities with college debate teams offer scholarships that are designated for debaters. Some universities offer awards based on merit and need beyond that – ones that are not tied to the debate team. Participating on the high school debate team helps in being awarded either of these kinds.

Scholarships from university debate teams generally require the recipient to be an active member of the team. College debate can be very enjoyable, educational, and rewarding, but it is not for everyone. It can be very different from debating in an urban debate league, and no student wants to be in the position of being financially dependent on participation in an activity that she does not enjoy.

College debate is more difficult than high school debate in the same sense that college economics classes are more difficult than high school debate classes. College programs often offer full time directors and coaches, which can be a very supportive environment. In the same way that high school debaters tend to stand out in their classes, so do college debaters in their courses.

The most important consideration is that there is dramatic diversity in college debate programs. Students who are interested in a certain type of college program should investigate the characteristics carefully. Coaches should talk to students considering debating in college about the following things:

Time Commitment

Most urban debaters attend one or two practices every week, give up five or six weekends a year for tournaments, and spend two or three weeks at a summer institute. This schedule, though demanding, pales in comparison to that of a nationally competitive college debate team. Team meetings may be longer or more frequent than they were in high school and research assignments are generally more extensive. Tournaments often run Friday-Monday, requiring debaters to miss several days of class. This schedule can make it very difficult for students to participate in other extracurricular activities.

On the other hand, many college programs are sensitive to these demands and offer regional competition with lesser time commitments. The average college debater attends 8-9 tournaments per year, but many attend fewer than that. Most college teams have one weekly meeting in the evening that lasts for an hour or two. Research assignments are generally based on the experience level of the debater and tailored to the time available to the student. Keep in mind that a college student only spends about 15 hours per week actually in class, so there is more time available if the debater is self-disciplined.



Stylistic Differences

College debate is very similar to national circuit high school debate, but quite different from what goes on in many urban debate leagues. Again, there is wide variation in styles that different teams adopt. College debate does tend to be fast, and you will find teams that emphasize policy, teams that emphasize critical arguments, and programs that mix both.

Community Differences

Because all of the teams in an urban debate league tend to go to the same tournaments, summer institutes, and seminars, they often get to know each other very well. Moreover, students regularly encounter coaches and judges whose primary concern is their education. Students from UDLs will find similarities in these areas. The college debate circuit is small enough that you will become friends with debaters from other schools. You will have the same judges several times so you can benefit from that familiarity. College judges also tend to be more experienced so your interaction with them is very educational and supportive.

Members of racial or ethnic minority groups are often in the majority in their UDL. In this regard the college debate community is very much the opposite. Minority groups and women are underrepresented.



4. Professional Development

A coach should view her debate teams not as a hobby or as charity work but as an extension of her career as a teacher. A coach applies the knowledge and skills that she has acquired through her experience as an educator when working with her debaters, and conversely she learns how to employ the methods of debate in the traditional classroom. This chapter will discuss opportunities to develop as a coach, ways in which teachers can professionalize the role of debate coach within their school community, and applications of debate in the classroom.

Learning to Be a Debate Coach

In one sense, it may seem as though there is little to learn about teaching debate. After all, most coaches are already trained as teachers, and who doesn't know how to argue? There is something to this perspective: many teachers become very fine debate coaches despite having little or no formal training.

On the other hand, the profession of debate coach has been around for over one hundred years, and in that time many standards, conventions, and best practices have been developed and shared. New debate coaches who do not pursue opportunities to learn more about the activity and how to teach it are forcing themselves to reinvent the wheel. Even coaches who debated in high school or college years ago will find that much has changed in recent years, leaving them out of touch with the newest developments in debate theory.

The bottom line is that even experienced debate coaches commit themselves to constant education, and this should be doubly true for newcomers to the activity. At the same time, coaches must accept not only that they will they never be experts in debate, but that it will not be long before their students begin surpassing them in terms of knowledge of the topic and experience in debate rounds. Debaters who truly enjoy the activity immerse themselves in it. They spend free time researching, reading files, and thinking about debate. Many give up several weeks of their summer to study at institutes with some of the finest debate minds in the country. Most of all, though, they have the benefit of the best teacher out there: experience.

When it comes to learning about debate, there is simply no substitute for the experience of crafting arguments, testing them out in a round, and learning from one's mistakes. The



excitement of competition drives students to investigate the activity at a depth that a coach generally has neither the time nor the inclination to achieve.

This is nothing to worry about. In fact, it is very healthy. Some of the most successful debate programs in the country rely heavily on experienced students passing on their knowledge to beginners. The coach will have more than enough to do in handling the logistics of the program: running practices, getting the team to tournaments, etc.

Still, coaches do need to learn something about the activity to do their jobs effectively, and fortunately there are a variety of resources available to assist them in this task.

Coaching Colleagues

From the perspective of the coach, one of the most valuable things about an urban debate league is that there is a built-in support network for them. In addition to her league administrators, who make it their business to stay up-to-date on the latest methods of teaching debate, a teacher can also turn to any of the other coaches in the league for help, knowing that they are all educators in similar situations. They all come from the same school system, face similar budget constraints, and work with students who present the common challenges. Chances are good that if one coach is having a problem with something, another coach somewhere else in the league has already had to deal with the same thing and will be ready to share advice and ideas.

Thus, coaches should take advantage of any opportunities for community support that their league makes available. This includes not only official events like coaches' meetings, conferences or training seminars but also informal get-togethers, and particularly in the downtime between rounds at tournaments.

It is in every coach's interest to get to know as many other coaches as possible, but it may prove particularly valuable to seek out an experienced coach with whom one has especially good rapport in order to build a mentoring relationship. Anyone who has been around debate long enough to earn the designation 'experienced' probably loves the activity and will be more than happy to welcome new coaches into the fold. As an added benefit, students on a relatively new team will probably welcome the opportunity to meet and learn from experienced debaters who have been trained by an experienced coach.



Manuals and Textbooks

Because debate has been around for such a long time, a number of works have been published over the years for use by coaches and teachers. These manuals can be very helpful – offering advice, lesson plans, practical suggestions and principles for how to operate your team. You may want to read through several sources of information and choose the parts from each that make the most sense.

Like any other area of academic materials, these vary in quality. They also deal with a vast array of debate formats. Styles and methods for teaching the same format vary greatly with time and location. Most likely, the administration of a coach’s urban debate league will provide her with some instructional materials that are most relevant to way things are done in her league. Once again, consulting with other coaches will usually turn up valuable suggestions as well.

The NAUDL Policy Debate Manual

The NAUDL has newly revised its manual titled: “Policy Debate: An Introduction for Urban Debate League Students and Coaches.” It can be accessed on the NAUDL website and you can also receive paper copies from your league director. The manual explains the basics of policy debate, details strategies for affirmative and negative debating, and describes the responsibilities and techniques for speaker positions.

University Assistants

Most major cities that are home to urban debate leagues also support one or more university debate teams. In some cities, college programs may even have been the impetus for the league’s formation. In any event, there are most likely members of those teams who would be more than willing to assist new coaches with policy debate instruction. Even in cities where there are no college debate programs, there are typically many former debaters who attend local universities. These students may be particularly interested with local high school teams since they do not have college debate program to join. In either case, these assistants can provide valuable expertise on current policy debate practices that not even an experienced coach can rival. Plus, because they are close in age to the students, they can form valuable friendship and mentoring relationships, even serving as role models for students who never thought of themselves as ‘college material’ before.



Nuts and Bolts: The Limits of University Assistants

The assistance of a current college debater can be invaluable, especially to a beginning coach who does not have any debate experience of her own. Coaches should consider limits to what these assistants can or should be allowed to do, however. Coaches should discuss with the assistant exactly her role and commitment to the team, and then keep an eye out for potential problems.

Lack of Teaching Experience. No matter how good they are at debating, most university assistants have little or no experience as educators. Thus, they may present information too quickly or in ways that is over the heads of or just not relevant to their audiences. Coaches should make sure they are frequently present whenever their university assistant is working with students, both to help her develop more effective teaching practices and to help the students comprehend the material they are learning.

Different Styles. College debate is in many ways very different from the activity as it is practiced in many UDL's, even though the rules are largely the same. University assistants should be helping students to succeed at the style of debate that is used in their UDL, not encouraging them to debate like a college debater. This problem can be nipped in the bud if the coach and the assistant have a conversation about stylistic differences and reach an understanding about what students need to learn.

Busy Schedules. University debaters must balance the usual demands of college coursework with the demands of their own debate careers. If they are frequently traveling to compete on the weekends, they probably spend most of their days catching up on schoolwork. The result is that they may not have as much time as they would like to help out with a high school debate team. Coaches should talk with their assistants at the beginning of the year to work out a reasonable level of commitment that does not interfere with the assistant's schoolwork or debate career. Even with careful planning it is important to note that this schedule may occasionally be disrupted by semester changes and college breaks.

Inappropriate Behavior. Although university assistant may be closer in age to the students than to the coach, they are still bound by the ethical and legal obligations of adult faculty members. They should try to form friendships with members of the team, but this cannot come at the expense of responsible behavior. Romantic or sexual relationships are off-limits, as is the use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs with, in front of, or around the students. It is also important that they understand that they are obligated to report such behavior on the part of the students if they witness it and to report physical or sexual abuse if a student mentions it to them. Be sure that assistants are clear on these ground rules BEFORE they begin working with students; school policy may even require it.



Summer Workshops for Coaches

Many summer institutes that train students in debate also offer programs for coaches. Summer workshops teach the substance matter of the new national topic. They also teach students how to research and conduct practice sessions. In addition to directly learning methods of debate coaching from experienced instructors, these workshops offer a valuable opportunity for coaches to tap into a much wider network of other coaches beyond those in their league. Coaches can learn an incredible amount of information concerning both debate and how to teach it more effectively.

Defraying Costs to Summer Coaching Workshops

Unfortunately, travel, tuition, and lodging at these institutes can be expensive, although those costs vary greatly from location to location. Both the National Forensic League and the National Debate Coaches Association provide financial aid to coaches to attend these workshops. Often if you contact the workshops directly they might be willing to waive all or part of the local costs. Most workshops are eager to have coaches observe their programs, so they will do what they can to work out arrangements. Sometimes, visiting coaches are allowed to earn their keep by assisting the directors of the institute as chaperones or in some other capacity.

Many UDL's offer free training seminars for their coaches and are sometimes able to recruit the same top-notch instructors who are billing out at top-dollar to for-profit summer institutes.

In the end, though, such seminars are valuable professional development opportunities that will benefit both the teacher and her school's debate team, and the school should really be willing to assist with the cost as they would for any other professional development activity. The next section of this chapter will discuss strategies for seeking such professional support from one's school administration.



School Support

Both common sense and a large body of research support the notion that a school is only as strong as its community of teachers. Thus, school administrators have a vested interest in supporting the professional development of the teachers who work for them. This means enhancing the ability of teachers to use the tools and methods already available to them and expanding the range of tools and methods at their disposal. Coaching the debate team can do both of these.

Unfortunately, too many administrators treat the debate team like just another extracurricular activity rather than as an educationally valuable part of the school community. Consequently, many coaches do not receive the support and compensation that they deserve as professional educators.

Ways that Schools Can Support Their Coaches

Providing Stipends. Some leagues provide stipends for their coaches, others leave this up to each school to provide. Coaches who are not being paid for their efforts should begin lobbying the school administration for compensation based on the extra hours she is putting into a school activity. Sports coaches get compensated, as do teachers in summer school and other educational programs that take place outside of the regular school day. Debate is a little of both, so why shouldn't debate coaches get paid?

The local teachers' union may be helpful; teachers' contracts often specify compensation for teachers who work in recognized after-school activities. One strategy in this area would be to get the debate team 'recognized'.

Hiring Assistants. Even if the league provides the coach stipend, it may not provide additional funding for an assistant coach. Funding a stipend for an assistant can be a less expensive way for the school to make a contribution. The school may also be more willing to support the assistant when outside funds support the coach. Most likely, the assistant will need to be another teacher at the school, but sometimes schools will pay others like a local college student who is helping out.

Creating a Debate Class. If a school is not willing or does not have to pay its debate coach, the school may be able to support the coach by allowing the time she spends working with the debate team replace some of her previous teaching duties. For example, the creation of a debate class gives her extra time to accomplish debate teamwork that she otherwise has to do in her free time. A debate class can also broaden the impact and appeal of participating on the debate team to a larger audience of students, which is good for both the school and the team. Plus, when debate is taught as a class, coaches have new leverage to get students to come to practice, compete in tournaments, etc. Some of these may be graded course requirements and other commitments to the team can be rewarded with extra academic credit.



Allowing for a Planning Period. The provision by the school of an extra planning period, during which the coach is not responsible for teaching a class, can give her time to keep up with administrative duties such as tournament registration and support building that she would otherwise have to do after hours.

Paying for Incidentals. Urban debate leagues cut down on the costs of operating a debate team by eliminating the need for tournament registration fees and overnight stays. However, other costs still arise. There are transportation expenses, photocopies and printed briefs to be made, and supplies to buy. These costs can add up when they come out of the coach's pocket. A school that won't contribute money to the team directly may still be able to offset these costs by providing access to school resources such as buses, photocopiers, computers, printers and even the building itself so that the team can host a tournament.

Granting Professional Leave. Schools can minimize the demands that coaching places on a teacher's time and money by giving her paid leave and a reliable substitute teacher for debate-related activities that occur during a regular school day. This would include the time missed to attend tournaments or workshops.

Supporting Professional Development. When coaches invest time and effort into becoming better teachers, the school benefits. The school should support the time commitment by covering the cost and/or counting the time toward professional development requirements of the school district.

Winning support from a school doesn't happen overnight. The coach must develop an advocacy strategy and be persistent, perhaps starting with some of the smaller requests. The most important thing is to keep the successes and benefits of the debate team visible, and to explain how school support is necessary for this great program to be sustainable. The coach's willingness to invest her own time and energy to begin the team should be proof of its value and makes the case for giving her the professional support she deserves.



5. Tournaments

Debate teams typically participate in a variety of events such as public debates, civics education, and community activism. Attending tournaments is the driving force of what it means to be on a debate team. Tournaments bring together all of the students in an urban debate league for friendly competition, community building, and fun. The excitement and intensity of competing at tournaments and the thrill of victory is what motivates most debaters to do the hard work necessary to prepare -- read and re-read their evidence, research new arguments, and practice, practice, practice!

The coach's preparation for tournaments minimizes the stress of participating at the tournament, thereby increasing everyone's enjoyment and education. It will also familiarize coaches with the things that they need to do to keep track of their students at the tournament and to help the tournament administrators keep everything running smoothly.

Tournaments vary greatly with regard both to their length and to the number of teams competing. Some begin and end in a single day, while others span two, three, or even four days. The NFL National Championship tournament lasts an entire week.

Regardless of their size and length, however, most tournaments share common features.

Preliminary Rounds

Debaters compete in teams of two. All teams compete in a set number of preliminary rounds, of which there could be anywhere from three to eight. Teams debate an equal number of rounds on the affirmative side and the negative side. Occasionally a tournament will have an odd number of preliminary rounds, in which case a coin is flipped to randomly assign the side for the last debate. If there are an odd number of teams entered at the tournament, one team each round will get a "Bye". During preliminary rounds, a team cannot be paired against another team from their own school or against a team they have debated in a prior preliminary round.

A judge will be assigned to each preliminary round. She will determine which team wins the round, and she will also give each individual debater speaker points on a scale of 0-30 and rank



the debaters from best to worst. Most points are assigned in the range of 25-30. At the end of the debate the judge records this information on a ballot and returns it to the Tabulation Room (Tab Room), where the tournament administrators keep track of it. Usually, the judge will also talk to the debaters after the round and offer them suggestions for improvement. Depending on the rules of the tournament and her personal preferences, she may or may not disclose her decision.

Pairings in the early preliminary rounds are usually made randomly. These debates are referred to as “preset” rounds. As the tournament progresses the Tab Room begins to match up teams with similar win-loss records. This is referred to as “power matching.” Power matched rounds may either be “high-high” where teams with similar speaker points are paired together, or they may be “high-low” where teams with the highest speaker points (but still with a common win loss record) are paired against those with the lowest.

Elimination Rounds

After the tournament’s preliminary rounds are over, the teams are ranked (“seeded”) in order based on their win loss record. Win-loss ties are broken by consideration of speaker points and possibly speaker ranks. Tournaments vary in the way they break ties and seed teams. After the teams are ranked, a set number of teams advance to the elimination rounds. This is referred to as “clearing” to elimination rounds. Elimination rounds are generally seeded, much like the NCAA basketball tournament. The elimination round team with the best record is paired against the elimination round team with the worst record. These elimination rounds begin a single-elimination part of the tournament.

In elimination rounds, some constraints are dropped. Teams may debate teams they previously faced during preliminary rounds, in which case they will switch sides from the first time they debated at the tournament. Teams can also be paired against other teams from their school. In this circumstance the common practice is that they do not actually debate against each other. Instead, the coach chooses which team advances to the next round. Elimination rounds are usually adjudicated by three-judge panels.

Tournaments conclude with an awards ceremony that recognizes the winning teams and also the individual debaters with the most speaker points.



Nuts and Bolts: A Sample Tournament

Shawn and Terrell from JFK High School attend a two-day tournament with other schools from their league. The tournament begins with two preliminary rounds on Friday afternoon where Shawn and Terrell are randomly paired against two teams from other schools. They cannot debate another team from JFK in preliminary rounds. In their first round, they are on the affirmative and they win. Since they were affirmative in the first round, they are negative in the second, and this time they lose. That night the tournament director recorded the win-loss records, speaker points, and ranks of each team and used this seeding to pair Round 3.

On Saturday, Shawn and Terrell have three more preliminary rounds starting with Round 3, which is power matched high-high. Shawn and Terrell debate the team in the 1-1 bracket with combined speaker points closest to their own. They are randomly assigned to be negative, and they win the round. So they now have a record of 2-1.

Round 4 is power matched high-low, and for the sake of saving time the tournament has decided that results from Round 3 will not be taken into consideration. Round 4 is paired on the results from just the first two rounds. This is called “lag pairing”. Shawn and Terrell debate another team that, after the first two preliminary rounds, had the same record as they did, which was 1-1, but this time the team had speaker points opposite to those of Shawn and Terrell. Since they were negative in Round 3, they are affirmative in Round 4. Once again, they win.

Round 5 is power matched high-low, but again for the sake of time the round is lag paired. Shawn and Terrell were 2-1 after their first three rounds, so they will debate another team that was also 2-1 then. Because Shawn and Terrell have the highest speaker points of any team in the 2-1 bracket they debate the team with the lowest speaker points and were 2-1. As this is the last preliminary round, the teams flip a coin for sides. Shawn and Terrell win the flip, and choose to be affirmative. Unfortunately, they lose the debate.

Now, Shawn and Terrell are 3-2 and they have very high speaker points. There are 22 teams in the tournament, and 8 will advance to the Quarterfinal elimination rounds. There are two teams with a 5-0 record, both of whom advance, as do all 4 of the teams with a 4-1 record from the preliminary rounds. That makes six teams for the 8 elimination round slots. There are 7 teams with 3-2 records and only two of them will advance to the elimination rounds. Those two are chosen based on their speaker points, and Shawn and Terrell have the most points.

Nuts and Bolts: A Sample Tournament (cont.)

Their win-loss record makes them the 7th seeded team, which means they debate the 2nd seeded team in their Quarterfinal round. It turns out this is the same team they lost to in their second preliminary round. Since they were negative in that round, they have to be affirmative this round. Shawn and Terrell pull off an upset against the higher seeded team and therefore advance to the Semifinals. Their opponents are eliminated.



In the Semifinals, they face the 3rd seeded team, who won their Quarterfinal round against the 6th seeded team. This turns out to be another team from JFK, so no debate takes place. Instead, the coach decides that since the other JFK team was seeded 3rd while Shawn and Terrell were seeded 7th, the other team will be the ones to advance. This means that the tournament is over for Shawn and Terrell.

At the awards ceremony they receive a trophy for being a Semifinalist team. Even though they didn't win the tournament, their speaker points were good enough to earn them 3rd and 5th place Speaker Awards – a great showing.



Logistics for Attending a Local Tournament

In addition to everything that must be done to help students prepare their arguments for competition, there are a number of logistical tasks that the coach must complete if the team's tournament experience is to go smoothly:

Arranging for Judging

Most tournaments require a school to provide one judge for every two teams from that school who will be competing. If a school has an odd number of teams, they usually must provide enough additional rounds of judging to cover half of the preliminary rounds at the tournament. In other words, a school registering five teams at a five round tournament would need to provide thirteen rounds of judging: ten to cover their first four teams, and three more to cover their fifth team. If the coach brought two other judges, she might judge three rounds while each of them judged five for a total of thirteen rounds.

Finding Judges

Generally, schools should attempt to provide judges who have some level of knowledge of debate and the topic. Often, though, it is impossible to find enough judges who meet that qualification. Meeting judging obligations can be difficult, especially for large squads. When short on judges, coaches should consider the following options:

Hiring from Tournaments. Some tournaments have a limited pool of judges available for hire by attending schools. However, hired judges get taken up quickly, so coaches should notify the tournament directors immediately - even before they submit their registration - if they desire to hire judges from the tournament. Judges hired through the tournament also tend to be more expensive than those that a coach is able to procure on her own.

Parents of Your Debaters. Parents of team members are not likely to know much about policy debate, and even less about the topic, but they do tend to be ethical and reliable, making them valuable in a pinch. Coaches may be able to convince parents to volunteer their time as a judge by explaining that judging is an essential aspect of the activity their children love so much.

Alumni from Your Team. Former members of the team make excellent judges. Coaches will generally need to compensate them for their time, but they already know something about debate and are often willing to serve double duty as assistant coaches while at the tournament.

Teachers from Your School. A coach may be able to entice a few of her colleagues to come see what a debate tournament is all about and to help out with judging while they're at it. This can also be a good way to get teachers more aware of and involved in the debate team at their school, so that eventually they can help out as assistant coaches or in some other capacity.



Despite great efforts, sometimes the only way for a school to cover their judging commitment is for the coach to judge. Some coaches find judging to be a chore. While judging may not always be the most pleasant use of time, it is a necessary one, however, to help stay up-to-date on the current topic and the latest trends in argumentation. While a coach should try to leave herself some rounds off to watch her debaters, she should also try to judge a few rounds at every tournament in order to develop and maintain her debate skills.

Registering Entries

The coach must provide the tournament directors with all necessary entry information before the registration deadline. Generally, this will include the coach's name and contact information, the name of the school, the full names of both students on each team, and the names of the team's judges.

Many tournaments offer multiple divisions in which students may compete, such as Novice, Junior Varsity, Open, and/or Varsity. The eligibility requirements for these divisions vary by tournament, so coaches should check with the tournament administration about this. For tournaments with multiple divisions coaches must indicate the divisions in which they are registering each team and judge.

Notification of Parents and School

The main office and the parents or guardians of all students who will be competing need to know details about the tournament: where it is, what days it will take place, and how long students will be there. If students have to miss classes, they will also need to get permission from their teachers. The coach should collect and file away all permission slips from parents or guardians and from teachers.

Transportation to the Tournament

If the size of the team warrants, chartering a bus is the easiest way to transport students. Two coaches from neighboring schools might want to cut costs by sharing a bus if their teams are attending the same tournament. Be familiar with the school's policy on transportation before taking students on public transportation or private vehicles.

Coaches are advised to have their teams travel as a group. This may entail having everyone meet at the school or another central location before leaving, but it avoids the confusion and unreliability of requiring students to arrange their own transportation. Coaches who do allow students to travel separately should be sure they are able to communicate by cell phone in case of lateness, emergency, etc.



Feeding the Debaters

Not all tournaments provide all meals for competitors, so coaches may need to make arrangements to get food for the debaters and judges from their school. Tournaments will schedule a lunch break during the day, and most tournaments will at provide a list of nearby restaurants that offer takeout, delivery, etc. You may want to assign an Assistant coach or parent to go bring lunch back for the debaters.

Expectations for Debater Behavior at Tournaments

Expectations should be established before the first tournament, but they are valuable enough to review frequently. Discuss appropriate tournament conduct with their debaters. This includes arriving on time for rounds; treating teammates, partners, opponents and judges with respect; dressing appropriately; taking notes and politely asking questions during judge critiques; and checking in with the coach at pre-arranged times and places during the day, lunch, for instance. Reinforce other expectations as well, for example that debaters will try their best in every round no matter how overwhelmed or helpless they feel.

Confirmation of Entry

Check-in with the debaters the day before the tournament to remind them about their commitment, the time and logistics of departure, and to confirm that they are still able to attend. This also gives the students an opportunity to ask any last-minute questions they may have. If a student and/or team drops out of the tournament, notify the tournament immediately so they can change the pairings and adjust other planning.

Make Changes to Registration

Upon arriving at the tournament, confirm that all of the debaters are present. If anyone is missing, advise the Tab Room immediately so that they can alter the registration and pairings accordingly. Depending on the tournament, additions of new debaters and reconfigurations of teams may or may not be allowed. If they are, the coach should advise the Tab Room of these changes immediately as well.



Nuts and Bolts: Choosing Among Teams on the Squad

Occasionally, coaches are forced to make very difficult decisions that will award a privilege or opportunity to one of their teams at the expense of another one. For instance, tournament policy, budget limitations, or a lack of judges may limit the number of teams that each school can register. Or, a coach might be required to choose which debaters will advance when two of the school's teams hit each other in an elimination round. Consider the following criteria when making these agonizing decisions:

Attendance and Effort. Students who regularly attend practices, show up for optional seminars, and otherwise invest a lot of time and energy into debate ought to be rewarded above those who have made less of a commitment. Such a policy may disadvantage debaters with competing work or family obligations, commitments that occasionally cause them to miss team events. These students may nonetheless be putting their best effort into the activity.

Seniority. Some coaches feel that students who have been on the team the longest have earned the first chance at competitive opportunities. Seniors in particular will not have a chance to go to the same tournament next year. The criterion of seniority has the advantage of contributing to a team culture that values perseverance and being 'in it for the long haul'. On the other hand, if younger students consistently miss out on opportunities they may grow dissatisfied with the activity or be less competitive when it is finally their turn.

Competitiveness. Some coaches may choose to maximize the school's chances of bringing home awards by entering or advancing the team with the best record to or the one that she simply feels has the best shot at winning that round or tournament. Coaches should be careful of encouraging an ultra-competitive win-at-all-costs mentality on their teams and of denying less experienced debaters opportunities to improve so that the team will remain strong.

Equal Opportunity. On some squads, every debater gets the chance to compete in the same number of tournaments. This has the advantage of minimizing team rivalries and emphasizing the fun and educational value of debate over the competitive element. But it may be the case that students who regularly skip practice do not deserve the same opportunities as those who exhibit uncommon dedication and reliability.

In any event, coaches should always keep an eye out for ways in which whatever criteria they use may inadvertently discriminate based on gender, culture, income or some other factor. For example, religious obligations may occasionally cause students to miss practice or other events, and this should of course not be held against them.

Whichever criteria the coach ultimately chooses to employ, she should make the policy clear to her debaters ahead of time and apply it consistently otherwise the coach will be accused of favoritism. If the rule is established ahead of time and well known to everyone, then the decision will be accepted as legitimate and there will be no hard feelings.



Networking

Tournaments are in many ways a coach's best opportunity to meet and build relationships with other members of her local debate community. Most UDL's have occasional coaches meetings, but tournaments are often the best chance a coach has to meet debaters and judges from schools other than her own, and there are several reasons why she will want to make these connections.

Establishing good relationships with judges who appear at tournaments regularly is valuable for both competitive and educational reasons. A coach who knows the local judging pool can help her students adapt their arguments and strategies to their judge each round. Perhaps more importantly, a coach who is friendly with the judge will have an easier time discussing with her after the round about how the debaters performed and how they can improve.

Meeting other coaches and debaters is helpful, too. Teams that are strapped for resources may be able to share evidence, transportation, or scouting information about other teams and judges. Coaches with a good working relationship might want to bring their teams together for some informal scrimmaging. Finally, coaches can share ideas and more experienced coaches can serve as mentors for new arrivals.



Observing Rounds

Sometimes, a school is so short on judges that the coach must judge every round to meet the team's obligations. Other times, other schools will be short on judges and the tournament directors may ask the coach to help out by judging so that other schools will not have to drop teams. Be willing to cooperate in these circumstances because it keeps the tournament running smoothly, and would most likely expect reciprocal action from other coaches were the circumstances reversed.

When possible, however, try to arrange to have a few rounds off to watch the teams from their own schools compete. This will help in receiving the most accurate assessment of their students' abilities, as debaters may behave very differently in high-pressure situations than they do during practice rounds.

Proper Etiquette for Observing

Coaches should always check with the judge and the other team in the round to be sure that neither objects to having an observer. They shouldn't, but if they do that is their prerogative and the coach must respect it. The coach should also be sure that she is not making her own team too nervous or uncomfortable by observing them. The pedagogical value of observing their rounds is high enough that the coach can expect the debaters to get over a small amount of insecurity, but in circumstances where she is truly disrupting their ability to focus on the round, she should respect their wishes.

When observing rounds, coaches should not under any circumstances help or give the appearance of helping their debaters, as this could lead to their being asked to leave or their team being forced to forfeit. Make a conscious effort not to communicate anything to students via body language (i.e. not making faces at bad arguments or gesturing when the speaker has spent too long on one point), and do not speak to the students, even if it is during the other team's prep time and completely unrelated to the round.

Finally, the coach should model appropriate behavior for her students during the judge's oral critique. This means listening carefully and taking notes, asking politely for constructive criticism, and NEVER arguing. No matter how wrong it may seem the judge might be, she is not going to change her decision once she has made it. It is also impossible to learn from the judge and the shared experience of the debate if the goal is to convince the judge is wrong. It is exactly in those debates where it is most inconceivable why the judge voted the other way that one needs to understand why the judge perceived the round so differently.

Through observing the round, coaches will no doubt accumulate a number of comments they want to make to their students. Resist the temptation to share them immediately. This is when debaters are least receptive to criticism. Rather, instruct them to save their flows so that they can



discuss both her comments and the judge's at their next meeting or later in the tournament. For example, if the coach has some comments about the team's performance on the affirmative, hold off until the next time the team is affirmative and work the comments in as constructive suggestions for how the team should approach the next debate.

Keeping Things Running Smoothly at Tournaments

Always know where the students are during a tournament, both for piece of mind and also to be able to find them to inform them of a room or judge change or just to be sure that the team arrives to their rounds on time. Of course, keeping track of ten or more students spread out across a school is no simple task. The trick is to make sure students always know where they are supposed to be.

Most of the debaters' time at a tournament will be spent in their rounds. The coach can always figure out which room their teams are in by checking the tournament pairings. As soon as pairings come out, students should go to their assigned rooms to prepare. This way, they will never be late, and their coach will be able to find them if she needs to give them important last minute information or just wants to discuss their strategy for the upcoming round.

Upon arriving at a tournament, coaches should discuss with their students a place where everyone will meet between rounds, at the end of the day, etc. Generally, tournament hosts will provide a common room for students to assemble, and this is the best place for teams to plan to meet up. When a team has a bye, they should also go to this central meeting place. Typically they will not be allowed to watch other rounds while they are still entered in the tournament.

If some teams are in elimination rounds and others are not, the coach should take a few minutes to assign a task to each of her debaters who are finished competing. They should either watch one of their teammates' rounds in order to lend their support. This should be moral support only, of course - debaters should not help or give even the appearance of actual assistance to their teammates during a round.

Non-clearing debaters could be assigned to scout another round to gather intelligence about a school that their teammates might hit in their next elimination round or at a subsequent tournament. In addition to helping teammates who are still competing, watching rounds also improves the skills of the observing students. Require your scouts to flow debates and debrief them about these rounds later, asking questions about what they saw – ex. discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the teams they observed. Teams in elimination rounds are generally the best ones at the tournament, so debaters can learn a lot by studying them.

After the Tournament



Debaters who win awards will probably want to take them home to share with family and friends. Coaches should encourage this, as it both motivates the students and demonstrates the value of the debate team to their families. However, coaches may want to ask students to bring their trophies to the next meeting so that they can be displayed prominently in the school. They should be returned at the end of the year or when the debater graduates, but until then they can serve as important promotional tools for the team. A full trophy case is a great way to attract positive attention from teachers, students, and administrators at the school.

Collect the ballots that judges write from the previous tournament and read through them. Take notes of any comments you want to discuss with the debaters. While coaches can and should share these with students, who will be eager to see how they did and why in each round, it is important that the debaters return them so that they can be kept on file. The first team meeting after the tournament should be a debriefing session where the team discusses comments from judges, the coach's observations if she got the chance to watch any rounds, and new arguments that were heard.

This conversation is more valuable a few days after a tournament rather than a immediately afterward because the increased distance will make students more receptive to criticisms about their performances. Immediately after competing, debaters are still in 'debate mode' and accustomed to fending off criticisms of their arguments, as this is what they have been doing all day. Team Meetings offer an appropriate forum for constructive criticism.



Logistics for Attending Out of Town Tournaments

Urban debate leagues provide a very valuable service by creating numerous opportunities for relatively nearby competition in their city. This makes it cheap and easy to attend tournaments and develop a broad-based program. There are other debate tournaments, however, that draw a regional or national audience. Examples of this are national circuit tournaments, UDL regional championships, or state and national championships. At these events the debaters will face their stiffest competition and be eligible to win significant accolades. Overnight travel is a greater challenge for coaches as well who will face stricter school regulations and greater responsibility.

Registration

Registration is often due considerably further in advance for large tournaments, and accuracy is more important. Whereas a UDL tournament will probably have the flexibility to allow coaches to drop teams on the day of the tournament without penalty, larger tournaments may keep a substantial portion of the team's registration as a drop fee. Many of the larger tournaments to which UDL teams travel require students to qualify, as for a national championship event, or be invited, as for the Barkley Forum at Emory University.

Finding Judging

Meeting judge obligations for large tournaments can be extra difficult for a variety of reasons. For one thing, national circuit tournaments will generally require judges with more experience with policy debate than is possessed by parents or community volunteers the coach can draw from for local tournaments. National championship tournaments often have panels of judges even in preliminary rounds, which means that the judging obligation may be one or one and a half judges per team rather than the usual one. Finally, the coach must find judges willing to travel and give up an extended weekend in order to help out. At the very least, this will probably require a much larger stipend.

School and Parent Notification

Parents, teachers, and the school administration will need to be informed well in advance of out of town events, and their permission may be harder to obtain. In addition to the usual information, they will also need to know how the team will be traveling and the phone number of the hotel where the team will be staying. Additionally, coaches or students should remain in touch with parents throughout the trip. Coaches should make sure they have emergency medical information, medicines, etc.

Transportation

Schools and school districts will likely have strict requirements concerning how students may travel out of town. The coach will need to be familiar with these guidelines. When traveling by



plane, it is wise to arrive at the airport at least two hours in advance of the scheduled departure time as it generally takes longer to get a large group checked in for a flight and through security. One other unique aspect of flying to a tournament is the luggage limitation. Typically airlines only allow two pieces of luggage per person. Bins of evidence must be securely packaged so that they will not come open on the plane as they are being loaded. When traveling to an unfamiliar locale, coaches should be sure to have directions and maps and to leave extra time for getting lost.

Housing

Hosts of some national circuit tournaments provide a limited amount of housing for out of town competitors looking to cut costs. Generally, this involves staying with the family of a member of that school's debate team. The coach will still need a place to sleep, and if her debaters are at another location she will need to know how to get in touch with them. If the entire team is staying in the hotel, students should never share a room with adult chaperones, including the coach, nor should male and female students share rooms. Consider blocking student rooms from ordering movies, room service, etc. Setting an alarm and a wake-up call is the best way to avoid oversleeping - nothing ruins a travel tournament like going through all that effort just to sleep through an important round.

Chaperones

Check with their principal to find out what the school's policy concerning chaperones is. Even if she is able to cover the team's judging obligations herself, a coach may still be required to bring along a teacher or parent to assist with chaperoning. Extra supervision is necessary to ensure that no unauthorized room sharing is going on. The coach's goal should be to return from the trip with as many people as she left with: no less, and no more!

Food

Advise students to bring spending money with them to cover incidental expenses such as food. Some tournaments provide food during the tournament and this should be factored in to the suggested amount for students to bring with them.

Behavior Expectations

Coaches must be crystal clear about appropriate behavior during the trip. These rules may be provided by the school, but will most likely include staying with a chaperone at all times, not leaving their rooms after a certain hour, avoiding alcohol or drug consumption etc.



6. Public Debates

The policy debate rounds that your students participate in at tournaments are often highly technical and complex, which makes them fun, interesting, and educational for properly trained participants. Unfortunately, these qualities make them not very inviting or even coherent to the uninitiated. Parents, principals, and other supporters of the team are likely to be very interested in seeing students engaged in debate, but may find the average tournament round to be overwhelming.

Public debates are a way for students to showcase their skills in an audience-friendly forum and discuss issues of immediate importance to them and their communities. They can be a valuable tool for forging partnerships with new organizations, exposing the benefits of debate to a wider audience, recruiting new team members, and maybe even effecting political change.

The best way to plan, organize, and execute a public debate depends on which of these goals it is intended to advance. The one thing that all public debates have in common, however, is that it takes time and energy to produce a success. Allowing plenty of time to prepare for them and sharing responsibilities across a wide spectrum of individuals (coaches, students, parents, partner organizations, etc.) is the best way to make the many necessary tasks manageable.

This chapter will discuss how the goal or goals of a public debate determine its elements: structure, time, location, topic, participants, and audience.



Public Debates Designed to Forge Partnerships

Supporters of a debate program will most likely want to be involved in some way. Unfortunately, if they aren't qualified or available to judge, a schedule dominated by debate tournaments doesn't give them many opportunities to offer their help in a meaningful way. If a debate squad hosts a public debate supporters can be invited to participate as moderators, speakers, hosts, or audience members. By partnering with a local interest group, debaters get the chance to meet, interact, and learn from real world policy advocates. Plus, these partners are more likely to become vocal supporters of the team if they feel they have played an active role in the team's activities.

Structure and Format

If the main purpose of the public debate is to give partner organizations an opportunity to interact with students, then the debate should be structured to maximize their involvement. This could be accomplished in a number of debate formats:

Students vs. Experts. Students pit their superior debating skills against members of a local interest group who will most likely have superior knowledge of the topic.

Students/Experts vs. Students/Experts. Members of two interest groups with opposing agendas, for example pro-immigration and anti-immigration, team up with students. Generally, the experts from each team should present the first speech that lays out their team's basic case, and the last speech that ties up everything that has happened in the round and makes a final appeal. The students can best showcase their debating skills by refuting each other's arguments in the speeches in the middle of the round, relying on the facts presented by their expert partners to support their claims.

Experts vs. Experts (Student Panel). Two or more guest speakers with opposing views present opening arguments, are questioned by a panel of students, and then present closing arguments. The audience could be encouraged to ask questions as well.

Students vs. Students (Expert Panel). Students present opening arguments, are questioned by a panel of experts, and then present closing arguments. Again, audience questions could be solicited as well. This format works best when the partnership organization or debate co-sponsors are not an advocacy organization. Instead, they use their knowledge of the topic to focus the arguments of the student debaters and encourage them to delve more deeply into the issues.



Time and Location

This should be determined largely by the organization(s) the team is working with. The more high profile the guest speakers, the further in advance they will need to be booked. Given the amount of preparation students may need to do for this sort of event, it may be best to schedule it before or after the team's competitive season so that it won't conflict with time they spend preparing for tournaments.

Topic

When the primary purpose of the public debate is to work with a particular organization, the broad topic area (i.e. crime, education, immigration, etc.) should be one with which that group is concerned.

While they should certainly be invited to assist in narrowing the topic to a specific resolution, there are other things to consider as well. A controversial question will probably attract a larger audience, but if it is too personal or emotional it could actually turn people off to the team. The debate will have more of an impact if the topic is one on which audience members are not likely to hold immutable opinions. For example, the question of whether abortion ought to be legal is one on which very few people are open to persuasion. A public debate could explore the same themes by discussing stem cell research, another controversial topic but one on which people are generally less informed and hence less intractable. A more complex topic also gives the guest experts from the co-sponsoring organization a chance to play a more critical role, as the information and evidence they can share will be of heightened importance.

Participants

Members of the partner organization(s) should be as involved as possible at all levels of the debate. Depending on their interest, they could assist students in researching the topic and preparing their arguments or questions, give an informational talk before or after the debate, participate as speakers in the actual debate, or serve as moderators, panel members or judges.

Student participants should be chosen for how well they will reflect on the team. Anyone willing to put in the time and effort to prepare adequately would be a good candidate, but those who take a special interest in learning about the topic will probably be most appealing to the partner organization, as they will appreciate the opportunity to educate high school students about the issues that are important to them.



Audience

Having a co-sponsor provides something of a built-in audience for a public debate. Most likely, the partner organization(s) will have mailing lists and other organized ways of communicating with their members and supporters that they can use to publicize their involvement with a debate team.

This audience can be supplemented by the debate team's supporters, who will likely be very impressed by the sight of students debating alongside public policy professionals. Coaches should extend personal invitations to principals, school administrators, and others to whom she wants to dramatize the educational value of debate. This is especially true for supporters who have expressed an interest in seeing a debate, as a public debate may be much more interesting and accessible to them than a round at a tournament.

This format of public debate is not the best for recruitment, however. While some students might be intrigued by the prospect of interacting with adult professionals, especially if they have name recognition, this format could actually reinforce stereotypes about debate that are keeping students away, for example that debate is only for especially smart students or that one must possess extensive knowledge of the topic area to join the team.



Public Debates Designed to Widen Audiences

Highly competitive and technical debate tournaments are not for everyone. Those who enjoy the activity enough to learn its ins and outs reap considerable rewards, but this is rarely more than a small fraction of the school community. Few parents, teachers, school administrators, and community supporters have the time or interest to learn enough about debate to truly appreciate its benefits. As their name suggests, public debates are designed for a wider audience than the relatively small number of people who can appreciate the average debate round. A debate team can organize and host a public debate to show off their skills in a highly audience-friendly format. This can be a great way to attract interest from supporters who might be confused by a traditional debate round.

Structure and Format

The key here is simplicity. Each speech and the round as a whole should be relatively short, so that supporters with busy schedules will be able to see the entire thing from beginning to end, and those without debate experience will be able to follow the progression of the round with ease.

More important than the length and number of speeches, however, is their style. Debaters must avoid jargon, speed-talking, heavy reliance on evidence, and other conventions of policy debate that do not translate well into a public forum. This event should have a feel similar to televised presidential debates, which are geared towards a highly diverse audience, many of whom have only limited knowledge of the topics being discussed.

A portion of the debate can be reserved at the end for audience comments and questions.

Time and Location

The event should be scheduled for a time and place that will be most convenient for the intended audience. If the debate is intended primarily for teachers, students, and administrators in the school community, then scheduling it immediately after school or even an assembly during regular hours would be most appropriate. If it is designed to appeal to parents and community supporters, then weekends and evenings are usually a better time.

Topic

The topic, like the structure, must be something simple to understand and of interest to a variety of people who are not debate experts. This could be a pressing national controversy such as the death penalty or an issue of local concern. When appealing primarily to the school community, a debate topic concerning a new school policy could be appropriate. However, if the architect of the policy (such as the principal) is going to be present, she may not appreciate a debate in which students voice strong criticisms of it.



Participants

Students should practice debating for a lay audience several times in order to get used to speaking at a conversational pace, avoiding jargon, and making use of the flowery rhetoric that many people expect from a public speaker.

Carefully consider using this event to give a variety of members of the team a chance to shine. Those who have not yet mastered the technicalities of policy debate necessary for success at tournaments won't have to worry about unlearning them and may appreciate a forum where their more natural style will be appreciated. This is an especially valuable opportunity to involve students who are frustrated with or just not all that interested in tournament debating. Public debates can expand the ways in which students can have meaningful involvement in the team's activities.

Finally, teachers and administrators may actually be more impressed to see a normally shy or academically challenged student speaking in public than to see an outgoing honors student with a 4.0 GPA. It may mean a lot to the student, as well, to be the subject of positive attention among her teachers for once.

Audience

The intended audience is already known, so the key is how to attract as many of them as possible. Giving notice several weeks in advance will help supporters with busy schedules set aside the time to attend, as will choosing a convenient location and an interesting topic. The event can also attract new supporters if it is advertised via the school newspaper, PTA meetings, and even a listing in a community newspaper or newsletter. Such advertising should make clear that this event is intended to be both entertaining and educational for a broad audience that is interested in finding out what a high school debate team is all about. Flyers that encourage the audience to "come see your school's city champion debaters discuss..." typically succeed.



Public Debated Designed to Increase Recruitment

When it comes to building student interest in a debate team and recruiting new members, there is no substitute for seeing the real thing. As much as potential recruits will want to know about the benefits of debate for their schoolwork, their personal development, and their college opportunities, they will also want to know what exactly they'll be doing and see their peers doing it. Many will not be willing to give up an entire Saturday to come observe at a tournament, and probably find the experience overwhelming anyway. Instead, teams can design a special public debate to introduce the activity.

Structure

The format of this debate should mirror that of a tournament round, albeit one that would be interesting and accessible to a novice. Speeches might be shortened to fit the debate into a specific time period, say a class or after-school session.

An audience of potential recruits will be looking for a realistic portrayal of a debate round that will help them to decide whether the activity is right for them. While speed reading and jargon should be de-emphasized so as not to make it seem too inaccessible, teams should stick as closely as possible to the arguments and format that they would use in an actual round. That means teams of two, with each student giving one constructive and one rebuttal speech. If time allows, these should be eight and five minutes in length, just like in a regular round. It may be helpful if team members who are not debating give a quick summary of what happened in each speech, perhaps during prep time, to help the audience can keep up.

While the audience is captive, the team should take the opportunity before or after the round to talk about the benefits of debate and the structure of the team. After the demonstration, they should allow time for questions about how debate works or what will be required of team members. As much as possible, students on the team rather than the coach should handle this, as their peers will probably be receptive to such information when it comes from them compared to when it comes from a teacher.

Time and Location

This is a great activity for an after-school Informational Meeting. It should take place immediately after last period, before prospective audience members have left the building. They are more likely to stick around to watch a debate than they are to go home and come back later in the evening. The event should be scheduled to avoid meetings of similar extra-curricular activities that interested students might already be involved in.



Topic

For a more realistic debate, the topic should be drawn from the current year's resolution and involve actual arguments that the team commonly uses. On the other hand, it may be possible to increase attendance and broaden the appeal of debate by focusing instead on a topic that would be of interest to other students at the school, such as a controversial new school policy.

Participants

This public debate should feature the students who are most passionate about the activity, usually those who have been on the team the longest. They will convey enthusiasm in their speeches and make debate seem more appealing. These may or may not be the members who have had the most competitive success.

If there is time and interest, coaches might want to give the audience a chance to give their opinions on the topic that was debated after the round. This is a good way to draw the potential recruits in and help them experience first-hand the fun and excitement of debate.

Audience

The primary audience will be other students at the school. The coach should encourage both team members and her colleagues to talk up the event to friends and classmates as potential recruits will be most likely to come if asked by a friend or well-respected teacher. The team can also build hype by hanging fliers and making announcements on the intercom. Giving students notice is helpful, but they frequently do not plan their time well in advance so it is important to give frequent reminders in the final days before the event. Food is a must as there will be plenty of hungry students after school, and getting teachers to offer extra credit in their classes can be a draw as well.



Public Debates Designed for Political Change

Many students join debate because they are interested in becoming policymakers later in life, and others choose to enter such careers as a result of their debate experience. However, debaters do not have to wait to begin using their skills to make a difference. Debate is a tool that can empower students to make their voices heard and start working for change in their communities right away. Public debates can be a very effective and satisfying way to raise awareness about an issue and communicate student opinion on matters that affect their lives.

Structure and Format

This can vary greatly depending on the nature of the event and the intended audience. It is unlikely but not impossible that when the team is in agreement about their stance on a particular issue, they will have the opportunity to debate policymakers or members of interest groups who endorse the opposite stance. When a controversial proposal threatens to impact students' lives in an immediate and negative way (for example, if the school board is considering decreasing funding for or closing their school), they may be able to call attention to it by challenging its advocates to a public debate. Even if the challenge is not accepted, the offer itself might attract attention from local media and result in bad publicity for the relevant authorities.

Students should be careful what they wish for, though. If their challenge is accepted and they are not fully prepared to defend their position, they could end up doing more harm than good to their cause. Coaches must also take political sensitivities into account. While the goal is to ruffle feathers, pushing the issue too hard could potentially threaten jobs or get students into trouble at school. A less risky approach would be to arrange for a public debate on the issue and invite community members, local politicians, and the media to come hear what students have to say on both sides of the issue. This can be a powerful way to call attention to a problem or issue and get student input taken consideration.

If this is the route that the team takes, they must fairly represent both sides of the issue, even if they are in agreement that one is more correct than the other. The underlying philosophy of debate is that truth emerges from a rigorous clash of opposing viewpoints. Not only would a mock-up debate where one side is made to look overly weak or foolish not raise the quality of public discourse on the issue, it might also damage the reputation of the student debaters, their team, and the activity in general.

Finally, teams may be able to arrange for an impromptu discussion of an important issue in a public venue such as a park or marketplace. First, they need to find a location. They may need to get a permit or other special permission, or they may be able just to get up on a soapbox and start talking. In any event, they should first try to get as many other students as they can to come show support by building an audience or even speaking. Then, they just take turns speaking their minds to whoever stops to listen. Everyone should take turns speaking, and they can even encourage passers-by to get in on the action.



Time and Location

The event should be scheduled for a public place in the community affected by the issue at hand. If the goal is to attract media attention, the team will need to choose a location where cameras and microphones can be setup with ease. They should choose a time when a large number of people will be gathered in their chosen location, such as lunchtime or weekend afternoons.

Topic

The topic should be a general discussion of the pros and cons of the policy or issue at hand. The broader it is, the more opportunities there will be for students to voice their opinions, which is one of the central goals. Remember it is important that all sides of the issue should be represented fairly.

Participants

Since the central purpose is to make student voices heard on issues that are important to them, every student should be given the opportunity to speak. Even those who are not members of the team can be invited to share their opinions. When there is a general consensus on an issue, it may be necessary for some students to represent the other side even if they don't believe in it themselves. The ability to see all sides of an issue, even those of one's opponent, is a valuable skill that students learn from debate. Given the challenge inherent in this task, the most experienced and accomplished debaters should be the ones to undertake it.

It is also worth trying to find genuine representatives of opposing views. If the policymakers advocating them cannot or will not fill this role themselves, teams should make an effort to find representatives of interest groups that share these positions. In an impromptu discussion in a public arena, this could mean simply turning over the floor to an opinionated passer-by who wishes to speak her mind. Students should be respectful of these speakers, even if they disagree vehemently with them.



Audience

When the purpose of the public debate is to raise awareness and create change the audience should be as wide and diverse as possible. Send a press release to local media outlets and invite local policymakers to come hear students speak out. Also advertise the results of the debate (number of participants, for example) back at the school after it has occurred. Advertising may be of some help in attracting the attention of the community at large, but the best way is simply to draw in passers-by by choosing a popular location and delivering impassioned speeches that make people want to stop and listen. Debate was once a popular spectator sport in this country, and this kind of public debate is a way to tap into that legacy.



7. The Bottom Line

There is a lot of information in this book, and undoubtedly every coach will nonetheless encounter many unanticipated challenges. Hopefully, other resources will be available: colleagues, mentors, league administrators, school officials, and other manuals.

Being a successful and effective coach, however, isn't about having all the answers. By remembering a few central principals, any coach can ensure that her work is of great service to her students, her school community, and herself.



Principle #1:
Coaches must know why they coach and why their debaters debate.

When asked why they are involved in debate, very few coaches or students say, “To win tournaments.” Students are much more likely to mention an interest in making friends, becoming better at public speaking, learning about government and public policy, or improving their college opportunities. Coaches frequently want to provide these benefits to students at their school, and may also be interested in forming closer relationships with students and working with them on genuinely academic pursuits.

It is important for coaches to reflect on how they would answer this question and to encourage their students to do the same. Resolutions to most problems a team will face can be deduced from this information. Decisions about which tournaments to attend, what to focus on during team meetings, or how much independent work to require, for example, should all be informed by the reasons why everyone participates on the debate team in the first place.

The teams that find themselves in trouble in terms of sustainability are not those with budget shortfalls, an unfavorable win-loss record, or even dwindling student attendance. At most, these are symptoms of the real problem: that many people on the team have lost sight of what they want to get out of the activity. Perhaps competition or chores such as fundraising have obscured the fun of debate. Consequently, everyone is having a harder time convincing herself that the team is worth the time and energy it requires. The coach is rarely the only person to blame for this problem, but she usually plays a role in it, and in any case she is in a position to fix it.

The solution is to initiate a team dialogue about what everyone likes about debate and where each wants the team to go from here. If students share their opinions honestly and their coach takes them seriously, she should be able to re-orient the team’s activities towards the things that everyone loves about debate.

Better yet, she can avoid this problem altogether by being constantly aware of what both she and her students want from the team and frequently reminding to keep their eye on their goals. Most likely, this will entail checking everyone’s competitive streak, her own included, and ensuring that fun and education always come first.



Principle #2: Coaches Must Commit Themselves To Constant Learning

To run a successful debate program coaches must commit themselves to constant learning. This is doubly true for new coaches who have no debate experience of their own, but even former debate champions and coaches with decades of experience must remain committed to a process of constant learning.

In the first place, debate is an activity with a steep initial learning curve. Although it is very logical and in some sense second-nature, its vocabulary, structure, and other details are highly complex and unique. Mastering these requires immersion in the activity.

Moreover, debate is a dynamic activity. New types of arguments, new trends, and new community standards are constantly emerging. Coaches must remain engaged with the activity as it is currently practiced and stay on top of the newest developments are fully able to help their students do the same.

Finally, debate topics are constantly changing. Every year brings a new resolution with a new set of issues and terms with which coaches and students alike must familiarize themselves. Even staple arguments that are run every year, such as politics disadvantages, feature constantly shifting scenarios and internal link stories.

Needless to say this is a very challenging task for the busy coach. The good news is that the coach does not have to be the ultimate fount of knowledge for their debaters. As long as the coach is engaged in the activity and learning alongside her students, she will be an effective teacher and coach as well.

In order to keep her finger on the pulse of the activity, the coach must judge rounds regularly, assist students with research, read up selectively on each year's topic, talk informally with other coaches and judges, and seek out opportunities for formal training such as seminars and workshops. The more involved she is in the team's activities, the more in touch she will be with members of her community and the way they are practicing debate, and hence the better she will be at coaching her team. These efforts will also make the coach more credible in the eyes of the debaters.



Principle #3: Coaches Must Know Their Debaters

Every student has a life outside of debate that they do not “check at the door” when they participate on the debate team. The more a coach is familiar with the student’s families, friends, relationships, frustrations, goals, hopes, fears, and dreams, the better she will be able to use debate as a tool to help that individual develop as an advocate, a student, and a human being.

Of course, high-school students are often very guarded about their personal lives, especially around teachers, and it is *not* appropriate for coaches to pry into many of these issues when such attention is genuinely unwelcome. In many cases, however, students would very much like to have a trusted adult with whom to share their concerns but are wary of being hurt.

The important thing is that the coach make her students feel comfortable sharing this information if they want or need to do so. In return, she must understand how a student’s life outside of debate affects her involvement with the team. For example, students who need to miss practices or tournaments because of family or work obligations should not face the same repercussions as students who choose to hang out with friends or just do not feel like showing up every week.

Awareness of teenagers’ ever-shifting social landscapes enables coaches to avoid personality conflicts among team members altogether or address them before they spillover to affect the team’s larger sense of unity. In fact, a coach whose students know that she cares about them is the nucleus around which a debate team develops the sense of family that makes it fun, successful, and sustainable.