



## **F O R U M**

*Editorial Note: In 2014, this journal began a Forum feature in hopes of stimulating a productive, reflective discussion among the members of our association. As ever, addresses to the forum are reprinted here without editorial intervention beyond copy-editing and proof-reading.*

# Unethical Frameworks Undermine the Educational Value of Debate

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Over the years, collegiate debate has grown into an extremely competitive activity. While coaches and institutions stress the importance of solid communication skills, the competitive aspect of forensics is one of the largest forces in such activities. The pursuit of victory drives programs to build their budgets, dictates their competition schedules, and even changes their approach to the activity as a whole. The drive to win individual debates and national titles has continuously given rise to practices that undermine the activity as a whole and threaten the educational benefits of competitive forensics.

Competition can be a great way for students to enhance their skills. Debate provides a hands-on method of learning that increases students' understanding of key subjects. In fact, forensics instruction serves as a method of teaching through intentional study that is beneficial to college students, especially those with learning styles that pose challenges to their instructors and require nontraditional teaching methods in order to effectively learn complex material (Wilson and Gerber, 2008). Students are drawn to the activity for the competitive aspect and the prospect of attaining collegiate scholarships as early as middle school, and this competitive ambition lasts well through college.

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While debate is a wonderful activity in these regards, the drive to win has led to unfair and unethical practices within various debate communities. In NDT-CEDA, teams attempt to “spread” their opponents out of the round by providing as many arguments as they possibly can in a rapid manner. The purpose of such tactics is to win the round on the technical argument that one’s opponents have not addressed all of the arguments in the round. The desire to win has also given rise to the prominence of critical arguments (kritiks) in collegiate forensics. In many forms of debate, frivolous critical arguments are employed not as a means to address an important issue, but as a means of side-stepping opposing arguments without actual debate on the topic. Similarly, there are evolving tactics in the IPDA community that shut down real debate by presenting unfair frameworks that disadvantage ethical debaters. This is tempting to competitors and forensics programs because it provides an unfair and corrupt advantage to schools that shed the pedagogical value of debate in favor of the prestige of winning (Hobbs and Pattalung, 2008). Engaging in such unethical debate tactics weakens the educational value of the activity.

Debate is supposed to be about education, and its growth as a collegiate activity can be attributed to schools valuing this aspect (Burnett, et al. 2003). When properly instructed, collegiate forensics provides a greater educational experience and forces students to think critically about key subjects. This type of activity allows students to experience a higher quality of education and possess a deeper understanding of the subject matter than traditional teaching methods (Allen, et al. 1999). It is this educational value that attracts communications departments and donors to support debate at the collegiate level.

Unfortunately, we tend to measure the success of forensics programs not by their ability to improve the communication skills of their students, but by their competitive records (Mazilu, 2002). Organizations rank schools, programs, and competitors in every format of debate. Coaches are increasingly concerned with the competitive standing of their schools and winning titles. This leaves the very purpose of IPDA debate behind. One of the founders of the IPDA wrote that “the Public Debate format was created by starting with the educational goals and working backwards” (Cirlin, 2007). The nature of the IPDA format was developed to allow competitors to develop real-world communication skills instead of complex technical jargon. Rather than focusing upon winning championships and gaining clout in the forensics community, IPDA was founded for the educational benefit of the student competitors. That benefit is achieved when students engage in fair, meaningful debates, and is stifled through the use of abusive debate tactics and teams that seek primarily to win championships.

The drive to win rounds tempts competitors to leave behind ethical debate in favor of abusive argumentative tactics designed to increase the likelihood of victory (Chandler and Hobbs, 1991). Not only are competitors responsible for such tactics, but the drive for program awards tempts coaches to train their students to utilize such methods in debate rounds. As a result, technical arguments have become quite common in IPDA. Debaters attempt to place high burdens upon their opponents in hopes that the

judge will be convinced that the opposing debater failed to meet some established obligation. This can be seen when competitors tell the judge that their opponents “must prove beyond a shadow of a doubt” that a certain statement is true. Conversely, the tactic of lowering the bar for oneself has become increasingly popular among competitive programs, with statements like “all I have to do is to cast some doubt that the affirmative is true, and then you (the judge) have to vote negative.” Such tactics not only miss essential debate theory, they sidestep the fundamental IPDA burden of the negative to clash with the affirmative and refute the affirmative case while also undermining the educational value of the debate itself by not actively engaging in the argumentation at hand. Convincing judges to reward such dishonest debate ruins the educational value by demonstrating that ethical debate does not win.

Ethical debate can and will get left behind if the IPDA community continues to reward unethical framework arguments. When coaches teach their students how to sidestep affirmative advocacy through the use of unrealistic burdens, they teach their students that taking home a trophy is the most important part of our activity. As debaters convince lay judges that they must vote on unfounded and unfair technical arguments, they learn that taking shortcuts in debate increases their chances of an award. Affirming such behavior through ballots and coach instruction degrades the quality of the debates themselves and removes the educational purpose behind our activity. As we allow our community to become corrupted by these tactics, we allow for our pedagogy to be undermined and lose the very reason why we as coaches claim for forensics to be important (Richardson, 2017).

As coaches and educators, we ought to strive not to find new and innovative ways for our students to win rounds through shady means, we ought to empower our students with real-world communication skills predicated upon established ethical frameworks. In sum, “we ought to value our students learning in and out of round more than any number of plastic trophies” (Key, 2014). Until we return to focusing our efforts upon these goals instead of chasing national titles, our students will not receive the level of education promised to them and to the departments that support our activities, nor will the IPDA retain an educational advantage over forms of debate that employ spreading or kritiks as a shortcut to winning rounds.

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