

OVERVIEW OF THE URBAN DEBATE PROGRAM

by
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The mission of the Urban Debate Program (UDP) is to make competitive policy debate accessible to students in urban school districts around the nation. The Urban Debate Program is one of the many grantmaking initiatives funded by the Open Society Institute's Office of U.S. Programs. The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private operating and grantmaking foundation that seeks to promote the development and maintenance of open societies around the world by supporting a range of programs in the areas of educational, social, and legal reform, and by encouraging alternative approaches to complex and often controversial issues. Established in 1993 and based in New York City, the Open Society Institute is part of the Soros foundations network, an informal network of organizations created by George Soros that operate in over 30 countries around the world, principally in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union but also in Guatemala, Haiti, Mongolia, Southern Africa, and the United States.

OSI first launched the Urban Debate Program (UDP) in the spring of 1997. OSI funds urban debate leagues (UDLs) because debate provides urban youth with the skills they need to actively participate as citizens in an open society, so that their voices are heard and their opinions are considered in public discourse, both in their communities and beyond. The first urban debate league was founded in 1985 in Atlanta, Georgia by Melissa Maxcy Wade of Emory University and by Dr. Larry Moss at Spelman College. OSI's Urban Debate Program was designed to create a mechanism to support the replication the Atlanta model, and the first urban debate league replication was piloted in New York City in 1997. Since the launch of the UDP program, OSI has been fortunate to have both Melissa Wade and Larry Moss as advisors to the UDP initiative, with Ms. Wade serving as a strategic consultant on national program implementation and Dr. Moss serving as a training director for high school coaches in urban debate leagues around the country. OSI has funded urban debate leagues in twelve cities, including Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Tuscaloosa, St. Louis, Kansas City, the San Francisco Bay Area, Baltimore, Providence, and Southern California.

In order to provide a forum for the

voices of the urban debate leagues to be heard in America's forensics community, the National Forensic League has graciously offered to provide space in each issue of *The Rostrum* for program directors, teachers, and others from the urban debate leagues to voice their opinions on issues and challenges surrounding the teaching and institutionalization of debate in the United States. In order to introduce the first of the upcoming series of articles, I have provided an overview of the Urban Debate Program and have explained the rationale for its design and implementation.

Why Debate?

The goal of the Urban Debate Program is to empower urban youth by teaching them debate. By targeting schools which serve those students who stand to benefit most from the skills which the activity provides, the programs offer young people from some of America's most underserved high schools access to formal debate competition, thereby enabling them to have the opportunity to excel in a rigorous intellectual activity which positively affects all aspects of their lives.

The preparation and delivery of debate arguments challenges students to think critically, develop their academic research skills, improve their communication abilities, solve problems creatively, and increase their self-confidence. Debaters often receive higher grades and are more likely to graduate high school and continue on to college. Debate teaches students to command attention with words so that their voices may be heard, and gives them a tool with which they can combat physical aggression. The UDP typically funds grants to university debate programs in order to conduct outreach into the local urban school districts. The funding provide teachers and students from selected high schools with intensive summer training in policy debate, weekend tournament competitions, on-going mentoring, debate materials and curricular resources, scholarships to national summer debate camps, and a final awards banquet for students, families, and members of the school community.

Policy Debate and Academic Achievement

Not only does participation in policy debate affect students' self-development,

but the activity also strongly impacts students' ability to meet graduation requirements in their schools. Many states' learning and performance standards recognize what the debate community has known for a long time; learning happens through the application of skills in a meaningful way, and through continued practice. Preparing to debate requires students to conduct research in both mainstream and scholarly publications, to perform comparative analyses of data, and to develop strategy. Defending their positions in competition allows them to draw from their prepared materials, but also requires students to listen closely and critically to others before organizing and articulating a persuasive reply. Winning a round requires them to follow the accepted conventions of logic, to work within a formal system, and to exhibit exemplary sportsmanship under the pressure of intense competition.

Furthermore, policy debate is an inherently flexible, interdisciplinary activity. Coaches include teachers in all subject areas. The resolutions are broad enough to allow for argumentation drawn from the natural sciences, world and domestic affairs, the humanities and arts, etc. Students therefore develop skills in analyzing and comprehending the content of policy issues covered in the both global studies and American history and government. They regularly read newspapers, follow-current events, and monitor political activities in the United States and beyond.

Many school districts' English standards measure student performance in other skills which debate coaches have been teaching students all along, including listening comprehension, reading comprehension, policy analysis, and oral persuasion. Finally, math standards measure student performance in logical argumentation and sequential analysis, yet another skill taught by debate. It's no surprise that students who debate improve their school performance, and that coaches are often consulted by colleagues seeking to implement debate techniques in their own classrooms. In fact, debate has become an approved curricular offering in many urban high schools around the country as a tool to improve academic achievement.

Conclusions

Urban debate leagues serve as a training ground in which urban schools compete in the short-term so that they can eventually join the local forensics leagues in their communities. The goal of the Urban Debate Program is to institutionalize policy debate competition in urban school districts around the country, so that its place in urban schools is revered with the same importance that high school athletics is today. To this end, it is necessary for school administrators, education leaders, parents, community members, and leaders from the private sector to understand the importance of debate as an activity which profoundly effects students' academic and personal lives. It is hoped that sharing experiences from the urban debate community will help to foster that dialogue. When those students who rarely have the opportunity to interact come together on the common ground of a debate tournament, education becomes the bridge across the chasms of difference. As one inner-city Atlanta student commented, "When we are working together on an argument, I see our similarities instead of our differences."

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