

TOWARDS MAKING STUDENT CONGRESS AN OPTIMAL FORUM FOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING

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"Student Congress has been called 'a realistic approach to the democratic idea of cooperative discussion.' The idea on which it is based--that of getting representative student leaders to consider some of the problems which actually confront our lawmakers--is excellent. Training of this sort is invaluable. It is, in a sense, a preparation for real life."

--From the NFL Student Congress Manual, 1995

INTRODUCTION

Many political observers are warning of the coming "leadership crisis" and how we will not have a new generation of capable young leaders who be able to take this country into the 21st century. While the definition of "leadership" has changed dramatically over the past few decades, the types of skills required of successful leaders have changed little. Among them are critical thinking and listening skills, charismatic interpersonal communication and persuasive speaking styles, as well as an ability to adapt, compromise, and negotiate. There is but one event in the realm of high school forensics in which a young leader can participate which will provide training and practice in these essential leadership skills--Student Congress.

Student Congress remains an event with the most to offer but at present, has the most untapped potential. Why? The authors believe that this shortfall centers around three primary reasons:

1. There is a great disparity in the structure and approach to Student Congress between the local/state competitions and the NFL National

Congress;

2. There is a lack of consensus about the role of and commitment to Student Congress as a leadership training event; and

3. There is a lack of training materials and coaching support for the event.

This essay begins with several observations about the nature of congressional debate, identifies several areas where Student Congress can improve as a leadership training event, and concludes with several proposals which the authors hope will be adopted.

CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE AND LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Both authors are dedicated NFL members as well as coaches but have also assisted other youth leadership organizations with student instruction and teacher training in congressional debate events, resolution and bill writing, and parliamentary procedure. Organizations such as the Junior State of America, YMCA Youth Legislature, Model United Nations, and others target nearly the identical student population which the National Forensic League and high school forensic coaches seek to recruit for speech and debate participation.

These leadership-oriented organizations take their congressional debate training programs very seriously and that level of commitment is consistently high from the school and local chapters all the way to national-level competition. In high school forensics, the commitment to Student Congress is varied at best; from consideration of the event equal to debate and individual speaking events to treating Student Congress as

a last-resort event for non-qualifiers in other events or as a baby-sitting activity for misfits and whiners. For those coaches whose commitment fits the latter descriptions, the authors feel that they are overlooking one of the best-kept secrets in high school speech and debate.

Student Congress has much to offer both public speakers and debaters in leadership training and development. We see several primary benefits from participation in congressional debate events:

Integrated skill development

No other event in forensics provides a forum for teaching the types of integrated skills which can be learned and practiced through participation in Student Congress. Among them (but certainly not exhaustive) are research methods, position development, proposal analysis, critical thinking, non-judgmental listening, problem solving, question and answer, and persuasive communication skills.

Development of "real world" communication skills

One of the more common criticisms of forensic events, especially policy debate, is that the communication skills which are emphasized and rewarded are not very applicable to the "real world." While the response to that criticism can be the subject of an entirely separate *Rostrum* article, the authors believe that Student Congress promotes the type of communication (informative and persuasive) skills which are most applicable not only to the political and policy making arenas but to business and academic environments as well.

Congressional simulations can also provide a valuable training forum for meeting ad-

ministration, networking, logrolling, interpersonal, and small group communication skills when appropriately structured. In other organizations, time is allocated for committee work, caucusing, and interaction between the main and supporting speakers. The trend in government and business is away from individuals working on problems and towards group problem-solving. Student Congress is, in many respects, the event for the future.

Student Congress has so much potential as an event which can provide not only a good learning experience but be enjoyable for both students and judges alike. From a tournament administration standpoint, congressional debate is a very cost-beneficial event to run. A group of 15 to 20 students can be judged by one to three judges, a far better ratio than other debate events. In order to achieve the full potential of this great event, several issues need to be addressed.

AREAS IN WHICH STUDENT CONGRESS CAN IMPROVE

Close the gap between local and state events and the NFL

National Congress

There appears to be significant differences in how Congressional events are administered and conducted on league and state level compared to the National Student Congress held at NFL Nationals. While local and regional variances are beneficial to add flavor and diversity at Nationals, there has to be some consistency in rules and practice. In some parts of the country, the coaches actually write the bills and resolutions, thereby depriving the students of the benefits of researching and writing legislation. In other regions, there is no adult judging, just an attendant to make sure things do not get out of hand; coaches assign NFL points after the "tournament" based on the attendant's re-

port of which students spoke. These types of variances cheapen the learning experience of the students and negatively affects the prestige of the event.

What is needed is a mindset change and recommitment to the event as a training forum for real-world skill development. While that does not exclude the beneficial elements of what is presently being taught, it does require taking Student Congress much more seriously and appreciating what the event can provide as a professional skill development platform.

For tournament directors, it means offering Student Congress in addition to debate and speech events. It also means empowering judges to make comments on ballots which will be distributed to students, just like a debate ballot.

For coaches, it means spending more time teaching congress-applicable skills and promoting the event to the most talented students, not just the ones who cannot "cut it" in debate or individual events.

For students, it means spending the same amount of time and effort preparing for congress sessions as a comparable debate or speech tournament. There should be recognition that success in Student Congress requires mastery of many more skills than other forensic events.

For judges, it means taking notes on speakers and providing written comments on evaluation forms instead of just rewarding speeches with points. Oral critique, which is becoming customary in debate events, can be included in Student Congress as well. Congressional debates at Junior Statesmen programs regularly include faculty critic oral critique of 20 or more student debaters which usually takes no more than 15 minutes.

Abandon the "canned speeches" approach to Congressional debating

Many "successful" partici-

pants in Student Congress take a "canned" approach by literally reading a pre-written speech and giving stock answers to questions during the Q+A period. Some schools are reputed to keep a collection of such speeches on file covering a wide range of topics which are frequently subjects of bills and resolutions.

In order to make the event a more educational event, programs should steer away from recycling speeches and files, and instead, move towards a more extemporaneous approach of debating.

Authors of bills and resolutions should be encouraged to expand the coverage of legislation beyond the short list of usual suspects which includes the budget deficit, illegal immigration, gun control, welfare, etc. By increasing the diversity of topics discussed, students can enrich their educational experience by examining more "real world" issues which policy makers are facing.

Consistent resolution and bill construction

A review of the last several NFL Student Congress bill and resolution packets reveals a wide variance in the construction and format as submitted to the Clerk from districts around the country. The authors suggest resolution and bill templates or a guidebook be issued, similar to those produced by the other youth leadership organizations as well as the U.S. Clerk of Congress Office.

Upholding high standards for the writing of bills and resolutions not only maintains Student Congress as a leadership event, but properly constructed legislation keeps the quality of debates consistently high.

Commitment to judging standards

In several areas of the country, there is no judge evaluating the student speakers in Student Congress. The authors feel that this system, while still educational, can be significantly improved

by addition of judges who evaluate students.

In regions where adult judges are present, the authors observe that there is less consensus in Student Congress than even Lincoln-Douglas debate when the issue of judging standards is raised. Unlike values-based argumentation, policy-focused congressional debates can be judged on a more objective scale which would add consistency and direction for our student leaders-in-training.

Development of training and teaching materials

One reason for the shortcomings of Student Congress which was mentioned time and time again by coaches who were interviewed by the authors was the fact that there are few training manuals and instruction guides for students and coaches. Because Student Congress is practiced so differently around the country, few textbook publishers have ventured to produce a comprehensive, in-depth guide to Student Congress. Such a guide would help improve the event significantly.

OUR MODEST PROPOSALS

The authors suggest restructuring Student Congress to include the sub-components of the U.S. Congress to emphasize application of real world skills. A league or state association might have to be a little creative in scheduling some of these proposals, but other youth leadership organizations currently incorporate these activities into their own legislative simulations, so it can be done effectively.

Develop an NFL Congress Training Manual and Video

The authors believe that this will be an important first step in helping Student Congress improve to its potential and will create some measure of consistency throughout the country. For those students who travel from all over the country to compete

at Nationals, they will feel more at ease if they know that the basic format for Student Congress is consistent throughout the country. Too often students complain that the National tournament is very different from local competitions and that they spent the first few days "just re-learning the event." This creates more fear and anxiety than is necessary for those participants at the NFL Congress. Develop and publish a Congress student training manual which includes bill/resolution writing, parliamentary procedure, judging criteria and sample ballot, NFL approved protocol for making motions, etc.

The NFL has been successful in producing its own instructional video series called "The National Forensic Library." While the series has multiple volumes on policy debate, Lincoln-Douglas, and various individual events, there is not a single tape on Student Congress. Two needs are particularly pressing: one tape on parliamentary procedure and chairing a session, and another on preparing for and debating in Student Congress sessions.

Any training materials should be distributed to all congress participants down to the local level. It is imperative that all coaches acquaint their students with the NFL rules for Student Congress. If we are to have a successful and meaningful experience for students at all levels, students need to know the basics like the rules.

Provide committees and hearings

If we are to provide students with a positive and realistic experience, then coaches and tournament directors should consider using committees as part of the Student Congress experience. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate depend upon committees to effectively consider thousands of bills that are proposed for each

session. Committees help ease the workload and are the key power centers in Congress.

Committees can serve a valuable purpose in Student Congress. First, they allow members to listen to supporters and opponents of a bill, work out compromises, and decide which bills will or will not have a chance to become law. Second, it allows students to begin to form arguments on bills that will be introduced on the floor. Third, committees provide an opportunity for students to understand the concept of lobbying. Fourth, committees also provide an opportunity for students to set their own calendar. Each committee sets a priority calendar of bills. Then during the regular session one bill is taken from each committee calendar for consideration. This seems more equitable than having the chairperson choose bills randomly, as is the practice in many leagues. Please note that the tournament director should check all committee calendars before the regular session begins. The same school may be represented first on all calendars. This would provide one school with the opportunity to monopolize the first speeches.

Committees should be standing committees, committees that deal with certain kinds of bills. They are more commonly known as subject-matter committees. If the tournament director would provide the coaches a list of the subject matter committees with the invitation, then students can gear their bill writings to those committees. Students should place the committee name at the top of the legislation. This saves the tournament director a great deal of time on the day of the tournament.

Evaluating student involvement in committees can be a challenge for judges who are not familiar with the committee system. However, a savvy tournament director can prepare criteria for judging

committees, and attach this information to the invitations and ballots. If judges know ahead of time what they should look for, then judging committee deliberation is not difficult.

Committees do not take a great deal of time. The average committee meeting need only be twenty (20) to thirty (30) minutes long. Committees will provide students a realistic look at Congress and its workings, especially to those students who are not comfortable with role-playing "senator" all the time. Committee deliberations provide valuable educational opportunities for students to role-play social activists, lobbyists, and experts providing testimony to Congress.

Chairing and speaking as separate roles

Far too often the role of the Chair is not taken as seriously as it should. A good Chair, as an impartial facilitator of the session, is crucial to the smooth running of Congress. If we provide a greater incentive to those interested in serving as a chair, the authors believe that we will get a better quality student, and keep Student Congress debates running more efficiently. In California students qualify for the state tournament as either speaker or chair, and the separation has allowed Student Congress sessions to run smoothly.

There are many students whose primary interests are parliamentary procedure and meeting administration; offering chairing as a distinct and separate role will provide these "leaders among leaders" an opportunity to focus on those skills.

Improve judging criteria and ballots

At the local and state level, many students participate in Student Congress only to receive a batch of scores at the end of the tournament with no written feedback. Even when provided, very often judges do not provide enough

feedback to the participants. From a coaching perspective, this is frustrating because we have no way of helping students improve their congressional debating skills.

Since congress speeches are short (3 minutes), judging criteria must be simple and straightforward. The authors suggest the following criteria for judges which can be printed two or three to a page:

- * Delivery skills / presentation style
- * Focus on key and relevant concepts
- * Use of supporting material (facts, anecdotes)
- * Use of sound logic and reasoning
- * Performance in question and answer period
- * Strengths (written comments)
- * Suggestions for improvement (written comments)

Tournament directors should insist judges complete their ballots before distributing them.

CONCLUSIONS

The National Forensic League must be not be left behind by other youth leadership organizations such as Boys and Girls State/Nation,