

BUILDING THE NOVICE LD DEBATE PROGRAM

Recruiting and retaining novices can be one of the most difficult and daunting aspects of the season for even the most experienced of coaches. Often, a school's speech and debate program is an entirely extracurricular affair, requiring even greater effort on the part of the director to guarantee a large number of new recruits. While many teams place the greatest emphasis on preparation for varsity success, the lifeblood of any healthy program is a vibrant group of novices. A program's continued success is entirely dependent upon its ability to attract and retain new members.

This document provides a brief model—based on the successful novice recruitment techniques at the Bronx High School of Science, one of the leading ten chapters in terms of degree strength in the National Forensic League—for attracting and retaining novices to your program.

NOVICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Trophy cases. Even with all of the obvious educational benefits of participation in competitive debate, the aspect that is most likely to attract large number of students is the competition itself. Prominently displaying your team's hardware in a case (or cases) in your school can be very effective in generating word-of-mouth and attracting interest among non-members. Ideally, the trophy case would be located in the front of the school; if this is not possible, or if multiple cases are available, a case near the room in which the team meets will encourage students to think of that particular room as "the debate room," regardless of whether or not the room has such an official designation. This will make your program feel an organic part of the school and will thus make your program seem like something that everyone should at least check out.

Announcements. If your team travels, highlighting the cities in which your debaters have competed will often do more to make your announcement over the P.A. system stand out than giving a laundry list of the benefits of the team. An effective announcement could take this form: "Atlanta. Boston. Chicago. Dallas. Minneapolis. New York. Philadelphia. What do these cities have in common? They all host tournaments that [Your School] debaters attend each year! Want to know more? Stop by our first meeting."

For schools that do not travel during the regular season, you might want to include the locations of the last few National Tournaments, or, perhaps, the names of local schools that you have defeated at tournaments. (Friendly rivalry can sometimes be as attractive to new students as a travel agent advertisement!) You may also want to highlight the names of famous people who have participated in speech and debate in the past. Popular genres of famous people include:

1. U.S. Presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Bill Clinton, Richard Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter, John F. Kennedy, George McGovern)
2. Political Figures (Hillary Rodham Clinton, Edmund Muskie, Karl Rove, Arianna Huffington, Margaret Thatcher, Lamar Alexander, Phil Gramm, Ann Richards)

3. Actors (Brad Pitt, Michael Stipe, John Wayne, Shelley Long)
4. Television Personalities (Oprah Winfrey, Jane Pauley, Tom Brokaw)
5. Attorneys (Alan Dershowitz, Laurence Tribe, Johnny Cochran)
6. Millionaires (Ted Turner, Lee Iacocca)
7. Justices (Samuel Alito, Antonin Scalia, Sandra Day O'Connor)

These types of ads, which place emphasis on the experience of debate, will do a great deal to attract students to initial meetings, at which they can learn about the substance of debate. Placing emphasis on the substance of debate in early advertisements, despite the best intentions of coaches, may cause potential novices to tune out because of the sheer mass of information and the difficulty in differentiating between the nitty-gritty details of the many different academic extracurricular activities that exist at the average high school.

Simple signs. Posters around the school should similarly be unburdened by great amounts of information about the structure and substance of debate and place emphasis on the core ideas of the activity. Like an effective poster for a motion picture, “taglines” can reinforce the core aspects of the activity and the key reasons to join. Examples could include:

“Like Politics? Join Debate.”
 “Debate is Life. The Rest is Just Prep
 Time.”*

“Join. Compete. Win. DEBATE.”
 “Like to Win? Join Debate.”
 “Forensics: Not About Dead Bodies”*

* *Like effective movie taglines, these ever-popular debate expressions are intriguing enough to catch the attention of the mildly curious.*

Signs that simply highlight “DEBATE”—without making reference to the various types of options that exist in competitive forensics—and that include basic information about the first meeting can also be highly effective. (*See example.*)

Sometimes these types of advertisements work against our more pedagogical instincts, which place due emphasis on the educational benefits of this activity. The reality is that students are more likely to be attracted to debate because of the competition, the public speaking component, and the thrill of arguing. Placing emphasis on these skills will make *more* students *more* receptive to the activity and allow the coach to *more* effectively spread these educational benefits to a greater number of people.

Door-to-door salespeople. If one’s school has a designated homeroom period, that means one’s program has a captive audience ready to hear about the benefits of joining the debate team. Sending pairs (always pairs) of more experienced members around to homerooms is a proven strategy that helps give the team a human face. Where possible, be sure to diversify the students who are representing the team, not simply in terms of race, ethnicity, or gender, but also in terms of “social appearance.” Debate can attract a very wide variety of students, and that wide variety should be reflected in the students chosen to represent the team. Generally, these presentations should highlight the same

themes as your posters and announcements, but can go into more depth regarding substantive benefits of the team. Highlighting the benefits that debate can give towards your overall academic performance will be an appealing message to hear *directly from students*. (The same message seems less appealing when heard indirectly from coaches on posters and announcements.)

Should your school not have designated homeroom periods, one should speak with a sympathetic department chair—perhaps of the social studies or English department—to see if more senior students may visit freshman classes at the beginning of the period on a designated day. This will be more difficult to coordinate logistically but the benefits of this type of “advance notice” by actual debaters will pay dividends.

WHY JOIN LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE SPECIFICALLY?

If your team competes in events beyond Lincoln-Douglas debate, one needs to explore the reasons a novice would choose LD specifically. As so many skills are universal to all forensic events, emphasis on the unique benefits of LD seems in order. Oftentimes, making the distinction between the benefits and challenges of debate event and speech events is easy; making a positive distinction between LD, policy, and Public Forum might not be as simple.

You’re on your own. Well, of course, ideally, no novice LD debater is truly on her own—the support network provided by fellow novices, varsity members, and the coach(es) should be strongly emphasized—but the solo nature of Lincoln-Douglas debate is quite often the determining factor in the choice of event for novices on teams that offer multiple debate categories. Some students cannot imagine debating without a partner; some students cannot imagine having to rely on one. In talking about the benefits of LD debate, frame the overall discussion by talking about LD as “one-on-one” debate. This is the easiest contrast to the format of both Public Forum and policy debate.

Philosophy and politics. From its inception, Lincoln-Douglas debate has included dialogue about government and current events, so framing policy and Public Forum as the venues for discussing “government” and “current events” is inaccurate. It also will immediately turn off large numbers of Lincoln-Douglas debaters, as many people are attracted to debate because of a deep interest in those very areas. While the discussion of values is central to the activity, this type of terminology can often alienate new students. A new coach might be better served employing expressions such as “the interaction of philosophy and politics” or “the discussion not of what is, but of what *ought* to be,” and so on. Point out to students how many of the topics discussed in LD—the death penalty, civil disobedience, affirmative action, the power of the government, the rights of citizens—are timeless issues that offer a great deal of space in which to form unique arguments.

A balance between speaking and arguing. Lincoln-Douglas debate allows for competitors to grow both as public speakers and as quick-thinking arguers. Noting that

the round has “scripted” elements and “impromptu” elements should serve to gain the interest of everyone. Clear speaking and clear thinking are skills that are important for high school, for college, and for life. (Sometimes students get a kick out of hearing how they will be engaging in “real debate,” as opposed to the kinds of mindless, substance-free debates so often seen in presidential elections.)

Academic benefits. Lincoln-Douglas debate encourages research skills in students because its unique emphasis on philosophy and analytical arguments encourages book-based reading. A coach who is looking to recruit students to LD specifically might want to follow up on the message spread in freshman classrooms by more senior students: the academic benefits from debate are real, measurable, and invaluable. (This message must come from students first, though, to be effective.)

THE FIRST MEETING

Once your Lincoln-Douglas debate novices have come to your first meeting in droves, what do you do to keep them there?

There appear to be two basic schools of thought on how to introduce novices to the activity. One school of thought is based in “immediate immersion”; in other words, start talking about the resolution and the structure of debate at the very start of the meeting. The other suggests introducing novices to the “debate experience” before concluding the initial meeting with an introduction to the first resolution (but not to the structure of the round).

Introducing students to what happens at the first tournament will make later discussion of the structure, mechanics, and substance of a round less abstract. Understanding from the start who judges rounds, who competes against them in rounds, and where they compete will make discussion of the time limits in a round and the nuances of a particular argument much more relevant.

Some overlooked topics which might frame the initial discussions of the event include:

1. How do tournaments work? (“Get on a bus, go to a school, eat a meal, debate some rounds, eat another meal, debate some more rounds, and, if you’re lucky, get a trophy. And then get back on a bus. And in the meantime, make friends, outsmart opponents, and have fun.” This kind of jocular opening summary will make students laugh and feel comfortable learning about the new event. It will also let them put everything in perspective.)
2. What is persuasion?
3. Who judges rounds? Why are they judging rounds?
4. Is there an audience?
5. What are prelims? What are elims?
6. How does one know where one debates? (At our first novice LD meeting each year at the Bronx High School of Science, we our discussion first with the

humorous summary above, and then with an explanation of a schematic. Kids find discussion of schematics strangely entertaining and interesting! It also helps frame discussion about the tournament itself. Specifically, the schematic can help lead into discussions of what it means to “affirm” and “negate” and how a judge determines who wins.)

7. Why do we care about philosophy? About politics?

This type of discussion can easily fill a full meeting and set up a brief introduction of the resolution. Concluding the meeting with an assignment to bring five arguments on each side of the resolution to the next meeting will help students think in terms of the topic at hand.

RETAINING NOVICES

Most fundamental to retaining novices is to provide a warm, encouraging atmosphere on your team. This is fundamental, of course, to good coaching, and does not need further elaboration here.

There are three specific tips that can also contribute to successful retention of the novices recruited at the start of the season.

Consider adding a culminating competitive event for your novices. Depending on the maturity of the students and the atmosphere inculcated throughout the season on the team, an intramural championship can also be a productive culminating event. If emphasis is placed on learning and friendly challenge as opposed to determining who is the “best” novice, students will have a memorable and exciting time debating their own teammates. It is wise to make clear that the results of such an event will have no impact on which tournaments specific novices will be attending the following year; it might also be wise to instead say that *participation in* or *hard work for* such an intramural tournament will play a part.

Locally or within the state coaches may want to bring novices together for their own special final tournament of the season experience. There are also several tournaments available across the country that are justifiably billed as “novice national championships,” at which novices are given access to top-rate judging and a tournament that “feels” like a varsity experience. So often, novices are unable to attend more prestigious or more long-distance tournaments because of seniority; having a special event *just* for the novices builds excitement throughout the year and allows novices the opportunity to be the center of attention. If these specific types of tournaments are outside one’s budget, one might consider designating a larger tournament in closer proximity the team’s “big novice tournament.”

Assign mentors to novices. Depending on your numbers, a coach may want to assign one or two novices to each varsity debaters so that these younger competitors can be “mentored” by an older student. This will allow newer debaters to interact more closely with an experienced student that can be modeled, and will also allow them to have a peer

with whom they can share concerns or anxieties that they might not be willing to share with an adult authority figure. This also allows for case revisions, argument discussions, and practice rounds to become possible—and not overwhelming—for the coach.

Judge novice debate. Many times coaches would prefer having varsity debaters or less-trained parents judge novice debate. This is somewhat understandable, but inconsistent with the premise that strong novice debate is fundamental to the continued health of the activity. If novices see the coach taking a direct interest in novice debate, the novices will feel more connected to the activity. Even if novices don't want to hear their coach initiate talk about academic benefits at the start of the season, they will quickly identify with and feel loyalty towards their coach. This loyalty should be reciprocal. Taking a direct involvement in novice debate at some tournaments will go a long way towards showing students how important their event is.