

SELECTING A COLLEGE DEBATE PROGRAM

ALLAN LOUDEN

Wake Forest University

Deciding to continue debate, selecting the most appropriate program, and knowing which college or university to attend are among the most difficult decisions facing high school students following graduation. Far too often these important decisions are also the least informed. While there exists no magic formula for selecting a college or debate program, the following observations are offered to provide some guidelines for approaching these decisions.

SHOULD I DEBATE IN COLLEGE?

After completing a rigorous high school academic and debate career many have serious hesitations about pursuing debate in college. It is fair to note that college debate is not for everyone. College provides a cornucopia of opportunities and closing off those chances should be examined carefully. Too often, however, high school seniors *prematurely* decide to “wait to get involved” until they first master their class work. Delaying participation sounds prudent but this strategy is not always the best approach. The rewards in college more often go to those who *do get involved*. Staying “too busy” is often the formula for accomplishing more than your peers.

The most common question I am asked by incoming college freshmen is *HOW MUCH TIME WILL COLLEGE DEBATE TAKE?* The glib answer, of course, is too much. Most college activities are more specialized and make greater demands on your time. It is important to remember, however, that the level of commitment required to succeed in college activities, in turn, provides the very highest rewards. The bottom line is that compared to the “ordinary low-intensity student,” those who pursue some area of excellence utilize their “time” in ways that are forever memorable. Debaters who “sacrifice” the time are rewarded with intense friendships forged through competition (local and national), ability to handle pressures comparable to the most challenging jobs, and academic skills heads and shoulders above their peers. Not a bad payoff for an activity that participants generally love anyway.

In addition to time commitments many incoming freshman express hesitations about their own abilities to succeed. Importantly, college debate is not just for the “stars” of the high school circuit. A prevalent *myth* which says “only the best need apply” is empirically denied every year. The ranks of college debate are filled with competitors whose high school careers were average and those who competed in programs with limited opportunities. On occasion, top college speakers have not even participated in debate until college. The great equalizers are determination, tenacity, and maturity. One should never decide out-of-hand that they cannot make it in college debate. If you are genuinely interested there are opportunities to match your enthusiasm.

If you are interested in debating in college or simply want to learn more about potential programs how can you go about learning which programs exist and what they are really like? The following guidelines may help sort out the available information and misinformation.

NOT ALL PROGRAMS ARE FOR EVERYONE

What college debate program might be best for you? There exists a myth among high school students that there are only a half dozen or so programs to consider if one is serious about college debate. In reality there are scores of programs which exist that provide quality opportunities to compete in college debate. Not every program is for everyone (regardless of what college recruiters may tell you). Programs have personalities. By this I mean they offer a

variety of philosophies and opportunities. Depending on your goals there are traditional (NDT/CEDA) and parliamentary debate programs, private and public schools, regional and national programs. Each option has a number of benefits and should not be rejected out-of-hand simply for cursory reasons (e.g., prestige). Do not overlook programs that can provide you with the greatest *opportunities* to debate. Surprisingly, these are not always the “name schools.” The real questions are what kind of education, at what price tag, with what kind of environment can you expect?

It is usually worth finding time to visit the campus. Plan enough time (usually a weekend) so that you can get a genuine feel for the debaters and coaches. Ask to room with and active debater or even attend a squad meeting. It helps if you can call ahead to see if your visit is convenient for the host team (remember that they have busy travel schedules too).

Additionally most programs now have Web Pages that outline the opportunities offered by their school and squad. Typically these electronic addresses can be found with popular search engines, looking at collections of debate links on several homepages, or by placing a phone call to the program director.

GETTING IN CONTACT

The cardinal rule in learning about programs is to *LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE INTERESTED!* While it is undoubtedly personally gratifying to be actively recruited by a college debate program most debaters do not receive this personal attention. You *should never conclude that a program is uninterested in you just because they do not initiate contact.* Most college coaches are busy with their own programs and attend few high school tournaments. In many instances their “lack of interest” is nothing more than that they do not know you are interested. How, then, can you get the attention of college directors? What follows are some hints on making contact with college programs.

1. When you write the college admission office, *enclose a separate letter to be forwarded to the college debate coach.* This will let the program know you are interested in learning more about their program and introduces yourself. This strategy may be your best way to initiate contact, particularly in those instances when you do not know the name of the college coach.
2. *Make some phone calls.* Most colleges and universities have an information desk which can provide the appropriate numbers and addresses. And then you can directly contact the coach.
3. *Find an e-mail address.* Most homepages have e-mail addresses not only for the staff, but often for all the squad members at a given school.
4. *Ask people who know.* Most college debaters and coaches are happy to provide the names and thumbnail sketches of a variety of programs. Most individuals associated with active programs can provide the addresses and phone numbers of several contacts, and are willing to do this even if you may not be interested in their program.
5. *Contact several programs.* Comparing and contrasting a variety of programs allows you to make independent judgements about the quality of a program and how well it fits your needs.

RELEVANT QUESTIONS TO ASK THE COLLEGE COACH

Once you have made contact with college programs, it is still important to investigate these programs. The following questions help sort out the barrage of well intentioned positive claims made by programs.

1. *What is the college's support for the debate program?* Actual support in travel opportunities and long-term traditions at the school speak much louder than vague promises by the debate coach indicating, for example, how it "may be possible in the near future" to drum up support. Programs which have a strong tradition in the university are more likely to have solid futures, withstand coach changes, and attract potential partners/debaters. Obviously there are always "exceptions to the rule" as program success are personnel sensitive.
2. *Where did you travel last year?* While it is natural for programs to (over) claim their own success, it is legitimate for you to ask the director to provide specifics. Most programs can provide information as to where the team competed and who got to go on those trips. It is also important to not only know where the "top team" traveled but what opportunities were provided for other students in the program. Every year I talk to students who have been told amazing stories extolling particular program's travel and competitive prowess, yet they do not seem to be at many tournaments. Ask for the evidence!
3. *What kind of support is offered to the debaters?* Programs differ in the amount of support they can provide their debaters. It should come as no surprise that programs have wide discrepancies in what they provide for participants (travel expenses, supplies, copy services, etc.). Although these extras should not be a major decisional factor it is fair to check out what extra expenses you can expect. One should be careful, however, not to confuse the "extras" with provisions for adequate educational opportunities, coaching, and competition opportunities.
4. *Who coaches?* Selecting a debate program is much like picking the best professors for a class. If a program, is active, debaters can expect to spend a lot of time with the coaching staff. Travel, practice, and preparation time is NOT a minor part of your college education. It is probably worth the effort to check out the persons with whom you will be working. The best sources are often debaters presently in the program or coaches who have observed the program over the years and know the track record. Do not be shy in seeking out unbiased/knowledgeable opinions.
5. *What financial aid is available?* The availability of many and lucrative college scholarships for debate is undoubtedly overestimated. Debaters (and their parents) often assume that high school debate is a ticket to financing college. This financial bonanza usually is not the case; at least directly. Many programs do offer some help, generally ranging from tuition waivers at public institutions (in-state) to partial tuition waivers at private institutions. There are a few schools in the higher cost range which offer one or two full scholarships. Applicants need to be aggressive in finding those unique scholarships which are established to recognize special talents (e.g., debate.) There is, of course, no substitute for proven academic accomplishments. The best schools engage in serious competition for the top students and are willing pay big bucks to attract them to their campus. Remember that when students have good board scores and rank high in their class there are scholarships available for those who *investigate the opportunities and apply early*. Most special category scholarships also have application deadlines which occur prior to normal admissions. It is not uncommon for deadlines for major scholarships to be in November and December. It is increasingly the case that you can no longer wait until after Christmas anymore to start the process. Most college coaches are familiar with the special categories at their schools, so do not hesitate to ask.

PITFALLS

Every director is understandably proud of his or her program. There is no doubt that the vast majority of individuals coaching in college today are motivated to help students find their best personal opportunities. The recruiter's natural enthusiasm for attracting students to debate at their school, however, requires that you develop a critical ability to sort through the embellishments that come your way. This section alerts you to some of the reservations to keep in mind when investigating a program.

1. *Over promising.* Be suspect of programs which promise too much. Programs are dynamic; they change in ways that are often unanticipated by the staff or current debaters. When you are offered *guarantees* of team position or selected partners, for example, recognize that come fall term this may change. The one thing you can pretty well count on is that things will not unfold as you might expect (sometimes for the worst, more often for the better.) About all a program, can honestly promise is that they have a commitment to debate and there will be others with whom you can debate.
2. *Seeking independent confirmations.* In the process of gathering information on programs you will undoubtedly encounter some information which is less than favorable about rival programs. Instead of accepting one opinion, which you would not do for other important decisions, get a second or third opinion. Far too often the reasons for rejecting one program over another are based on rumors and insinuation. These "facts" are usually only a perspective and are often "false." The best, and most ethical tact, is to ask the "maligned" school about *their perspective*. Minimally, it is important to actively seek the opinion of several unbiased observers.
3. *Choose for you.* College decisions are often based on little more than "that's where my friends are going" or "all the *cool* debaters are going there." Before you are *pressured* into attending a college which does not provide you with the best opportunities reflect on why you are making that decision. It makes sense to find an environment where you can develop your own identity. *Strangers* become *friends* in a minimum of time. Obligations imposed by history, peer pressure, geography, or whatever are increasingly less persuasive criteria in an age of e-mail, telephones, and jet planes.
4. *"I cannot afford it."* In many instances students are discouraged from applying to certain schools because they appear to be too costly. Similarly, some fall into the trap of thinking that "if it is expensive it must be good." Either conclusion may stop you from attending a college which is better for your needs. It is often a mistake to rule out a college simply based on cost. Most reputable institutions, once a student is accepted, make a genuine attempt to make it possible for them to attend. Financial aid, tuition waivers, and grants often make the "more expensive" school accessible. The advice offered here is, apply where you *want* to go, seek financial aid, and then assess the "real" or "net" costs for each institution. The results may surprise you. In addition, one should be cautious when concluding that increased cost is directly correlated with increased worth. In many instances, specific curriculum, quality of the debate program, and personal intangibles correlate better with your desires.
5. *Avoid unfair pressure.* In choosing a college or university applicants have considerable and often unrecognized rights. Universities are notorious in trying to place obligations on students to attend even thou *you have the right to change your mind*. "Early decision" obligations, for example, *do not* mean that you cannot later change for a better opportunity. Debate coaches can sometimes fall into this pattern when they say, for

example, "I need a commitment that you will attend my school before I can influence admissions." Both parties, the coach/institution and yourself should, of course, act in good faith, but exacting promises for their help is suspect. The responsible coach will try to help you *and* convince you to attend his or her school based on the institution's merits.

SUMMARY

Debating can be one of the most rewarding experiences you are likely to encounter in college. If you have found your high school competition to be rewarding on any number of levels (social, knowledge, skills, excitement, etc.), you can expect the college experience to exceed your expectations. Each year I have contact with dozens of alumni, many of whom are well established in successful careers. I am continually struck with the nearly universal sentiment that: "debate was the most rewarding experience of my college career." Take control of your own future and *intelligently investigate* the opportunities that college debate offers.