

# Student Congress "Urban Legends"

By  
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Forensics celebrates our democratic society by encouraging dissent, which can often persuade people's views enough to sway their position on an issue. What distinguishes Student Congress among other debate events is that it uses a practicable framework for discourse through parliamentary procedure. "Parli Pro," as it's abbreviated, is a useful tool for allowing for fair discussion of issues, and most importantly, protecting the free speech rights of the minority before a "majority rules" vote is taken. The key word in the previous sentence is "tool," which is what gives procedure the potential to help build effective debate in a chamber, or be the proverbial wrench that slows debate to a halt.

The paradox of Student Congress as a competitive event is that at its core, it's not about winning or defeating arguments in a quantitative way. In fact, from a competitive standpoint, the student who contributes best to the goodwill of the chamber by fostering participation in others is often the most successful. Just as a real assembly exists for the betterment of the people it collectively represents, the ultimate goal of debate on a bill or resolution is to draw a conclusion (by means of an "aye" or "no" vote) based on the collaborative claims made by members upholding each side of an issue. Collaboration requires that members listen to all of the others to avoid duplicating claims already made by speakers on the same side of an issue, as well as being prepared to address opposing claims through refutation.

Unlike original speech events, Congress is not static; it's dynamic. Through the course of debate on an issue, speeches move from a more constructive orientation to refutation, and finally, to crystallization – or synthesis of what the discussion "boils down to." All too often, debaters simply

read prefabricated speeches, rather than extemporaneously responding to the debate that has been forwarded by their peers. That's why the new one-minute questioning period for all speeches that follow the sponsorship (which still has a two-minute questioning period) will encourage more interactivity in debate. Many coaches simply used to instruct students to leave time at the end of a speech to field questions, showing they have command of an issue. The new rule allows all students to do so, while maximizing their speaking time. It keeps them accountable for the claims they make.

So, if Student Congress is about debate, what about parliamentary procedure? The best use of procedure in a session is that which is transparent. It exists so seamlessly, it's barely noticeable; it is simply a means for facilitating a fair and equitable discussion by members of the chamber on one issue at a time. Like any tool, however, procedure can be manipulated in the most egregious ways as a competitive weapon. More often, it is simply misused, like using a screwdriver to pound in a nail. That is why having a parliamentarian present in the chamber is important. While parliamentarians should allow presiding officers latitude in demonstrating their proficiency in parliamentary procedure – since that is part of how they are scored/evaluated – they should always step in to protect students who are wronged by unethical or ignorant uses of procedure. Attentive judges will also take competitive integrity into account when evaluating students.

## Be a "Good Speaker Who Speaks Well"

One of the most insufferable tactics Congressional debaters use is manipulating the course of debate. Many tourna-

## Let's Strive for Ethical and Meaningful Debate

ments begin with committee sessions or allow for proposals to establish the agenda, based on the docket of legislation released ahead of the tournament. In weighing the eventual agenda, members should carefully consider balancing legislation from a variety of schools and what bills and resolutions will engender the most clash. Once an agenda is established, it cannot be amended. However, items can be laid on the table, but that motion should never be used to "shut out" speakers from the opportunity to debate. An effective presiding officer will rule that motion dilatory (out of order). The proper and ethical motion to use when closing debate would be the previous question. After all, when Henry Martyn Robert wrote his rules, he was very clear on protecting the free speech rights of the minority, which is why the previous question requires a two-thirds vote. The proper use of tabling is to address an immediate concern, such as allowing a member to prepare a speech when no one wishes to speak on a particular side. The intention of laying on the table should always be to take from the table later on.

When debate naturally finishes – that is, when the presiding officer calls for speeches on either side and no one seeks the opportunity to speak – it is not necessary for a member to move the previous question. An efficient presiding officer will simply say to the chamber, "are you ready for the question?" If there is no opposition to that statement, voting on the actual legislation may commence, saving the precious minutes it takes to take a vote for the previous question. If that's done for just a handful of votes, it allows for an extra whole speech!

## Parliamentary Pet Peeves

When I teach procedure, I often use

# ◆ Student Congress

a tongue-in-cheek mantra inspired by a popular soap opera: “like sands in an hourglass, so are the minutes in a Congress session.” The point I make is that the more time students use for gratuitous motions – especially motions that do not exist in the real world – the less time *all* of the students in a chamber have to speak. Here are a few examples of motions that do not exist, and what should be done instead:

- “Open the Floor” or “Convene” – the presiding officer simply calls the session to order and commences business, based on the agenda.
- “Reconvene” – when a member moves to “recess,” s/he should stipulate the amount of time for the recess, or what times the chamber should return (that’s why there’s a “T” on the NFL motion table). When the chamber reassembles, the presiding officer bangs the gavel and calls the session to order again.
- “Set the Speaking Time” – speeches are a maximum of three minutes, with two minutes of questions following the sponsorship speech, and one minute of questions following every other speech. This is to establish consistency and fairness. If an individual speech is controversial, a chamber may move to suspend the rules by extending questioning for *that particular speaker*, but it cannot alter the competitive framework of this debate event.
- “Point of Information/Clarification” – because one of the hallmark rules of Congress is to first recognize those who have spoken least or

not at all, when a speaker seeks to clarify or correct another speaker, they are manipulating the floor. Even seeking “permission to address the chamber” through moving a personal privilege can be abusive, and should be reserved for addressing a concern for the benefit of the entire chamber.

- “Two-part Questions” – for the fair recognition of all members, manipulating questioning time by asking a series of questions takes time away from other questioners. A questioner may remain standing after her/his first question and seek recognition (along with anyone else in a chamber) a subsequent time to ask a second question.
- “Minimum Cycle” – this may emanate from a specific rule in the NCFL, but largely, there is no requirement as to when motions (including amendments may be made), other than after the sponsorship speech.
- “Rolling Docket” – first of all, “docket” refers to the packet of legislation sent ahead of a tournament; “agenda” is the word describing the order of legislation established at the tournament. By its very meaning, “agenda” means “order,” and following a vote on previous legislation, the presiding officer states, “the next business in order is (insert title of legislation)...”
- “Open Chamber” – suspending the rules that require a motion for personal privilege to leave the chamber (to use the restroom or other

purposes) makes it difficult for the presiding officer and judges to track how long individual students are out of the room. Even though it does take a few seconds, by drawing attention to the action of leaving, it holds students accountable for not missing too much time; rather, staying and listening to the course of debate on legislation (and remember that Congress is dynamic – speeches don’t exist in a vacuum).

Finally, as the famous Strunk and White “Elements of Style” aphorism advises, “omit ~~needless~~ words.” Presiding officers who understand the art of word economy will say (following a negative speaker leaving the floor), “affirmative speakers, rise” instead of “seeing as how that was a speech in negation, we are now in line for a speech in affirmation; those who wish to speak in affirmation, rise.” Concision and minimizing emphasis of parliamentary procedure will allow for more of what really counts in this oral communication activity: speeches!

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