

FORENSIC ACTIVITY IN THE TEXAS EDUCATION SYSTEM

November, 2007

Compiled by Martin R. Cox

According to scholars Ronald Matlon and Thompson Briggers, students who participate on Speech and Debate teams become, disproportionately, the most successful business, political, communication, and legal leaders. Included in the most notable of this group are former president John F. Kennedy, news journalist Jane Pauley, and famous legal scholar Laurence Tribe.

Jim Hanson,
Whitman College

Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. An argumentative perspective on communication involves the study of reason giving by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values. From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences.

James McBath,
University of Southern
California

TEXAS: STATE OF FORENSICS

The art of forensics has a long and distinguished tradition in the state of Texas. At the University of Texas at Austin, the state's flagship institution, the *Aetheneum Literary Society* was the first chartered student organization at the campus, and provided a forum for students engaged in public speaking, intercollegiate debate, and the study & performance of literature. That institution began its involvement with national forensics in 1909 and the establishment of the Delta Sigma Rho chapter of the national honor society for speech and debate.

Through its subsequent work to establish the University Interscholastic League (UIL), which has fostered the state's academic and athletic contests in every discipline at virtually every public high school in the state, Texas has maintained a persistent presence in the fields of

speech & debate. In fact, the UIL was established in 1913 as a continuation of the Debating League of Texas High Schools (founded in 1909), with athletics and subsequent other academic endeavors added over time.

National contests have been hosted at every level in the state of Texas, including the American Forensic Association's collegiate National Individual Events Tournament (NIET) hosted at UT-Arlington in 1986 and 1996, Rice University in 1993, and UT-Austin in 2008. The National Forensic League's national high school tournament has been hosted in the state in 1963 at Rice University, 1974 at Southern Methodist University, 1984 at Trinity University, and 2006 at Grapevine/Colleyville ISD.

The collegiate National Debate Tournament (NDT) has been hosted at the University of Houston in

1970, Trinity University in 1991, Baylor University in 2001, and in Dallas in 2007.

The national Cross-Examination Debate Tournament (CEDA), National Parliamentary Debate Tournament (NPDA), National Catholic Forensic League Grand National Tournament (NCFL), Interstate Oratorical Association (IOA), Phi Rho Pi national tournament for 2-year colleges, and many other national contests have all been held in the state of Texas in the last 15 years.

Overall, the hosting of and access to statewide and national level forensic activities has been a strong point for the state of Texas, providing consistent opportunities to operate at the highest levels of excellence high school and collegiate speech and debate.

By Martin R. Cox,
University of Texas at Austin

COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES: RECRUITING AND REPUTATION

Colleges now acknowledge, based on years of experience, that students who demonstrate success in extracurricular activities which give them real-world skills like critical thinking, oral and written communication, and the ability to organize ideas and present them effectively perform better in college and turn out to be successful alumni who give back generously to their alma mater.

What does this mean? According to Lee Stetson, Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, "We realized one of the better predictors of success is the ability to dedicate oneself to a task and do it well." But according to the Wall Street Journal's recent study of top universities and ten years of applicant, admissions, and scholarship data, "not all extracurricular activities are created equal." Two of the surprising findings were that participation in some of the more common sports in high school athletics, soccer, basketball, volleyball,

horseback riding, skating, and baseball, did very little for applicants. Unless these students win state or national awards, there does not appear to be any significant benefit from participation in these activities. Second, the Wall Street Journal study noted that "although community service has been widely touted over the past decade as crucial to college admissions, our numbers suggest it matters much less than you might expect."

The Wall Street Journal report did specifically highlight a "consistent trend"—one that forensic coaches have known for a long time—that dedicated participation in drama and debate has significantly increased the success rate of college applicants at all schools which track such data. State and national award winners have a 22% to 30% higher acceptance rate at top tier colleges and being captain of the debate team "improved an appli-

cant's chances by more than 60% compared with the rest of the pool," according to the report. This is significantly better than other extracurricular activities that tend to recruit from the same pool of students as forensic teams such as school newspaper reporter (+3%), sports team captain (+5%), class president (+5%), and band (+3%). Even without winning major awards, participation in speech and debate develops valuable skills that colleges are seeking out and that is reflected in the above average acceptance rate (+4%). Colleges and universities today are looking for articulate thinkers and communicators who will become active citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

Excerpted from *Forensics and College Admissions*, by Yale University Professor Minh A. Luong

BENEFITS OF FORENSICS TO STUDENTS

A Speech and Debate Team ensures that students have the best opportunities available to them. Consider the following benefits:

1. Strong Research Skills

Students learn how to use a library at a very sophisticated level. Their learning goes beyond what students typically attain in other courses and in visits to the library. They learn to use advanced databases, government documents, and electronic on-line information. Plus, when they research they must do so at a level of depth that goes well beyond a typical class paper, including ten and twenty page ones. Dedicated, championship level students will spend hours working at your library, mulling over articles and books, researching at a level that rivals the work college masters candidates put into their theses. These students bring these research skills to others at your school as well, offering tips and help.

2. Strong Communication Skills

Students in speech and debate learn skills in speaking. The effort to do their best in competition encourages them to communicate in the most effective way for their audience. Students learn to adapt to differing judges because every round they must adjust to the judge in front of them. They improve as communicators as a result of the many comments they receive from a diverse group of judges. It is true that students in championship policy team debate have a tendency to speak too rapidly. However, the better debaters are able to speak slowly and persuasively when their judges prefer that style of delivery. And the "quick" debaters with whom I have worked, were also, without exception, able to adjust to regular speaking situations with clear and articulate presentations (and were far better than other students who did not participate on the speech and debate team).

3. Increased Knowledge About the World

Students in speech and debate learn about a wide variety of issues confronting our world. Students intensively discuss and research issues like immigration into the United States, our policy toward China, and what we should do to reduce environmental pollutants.

They read the newspaper, contemporary journals, and books. The competition and diversity of ideas that students are exposed to at speech tournaments dramatically increases student awareness. They bring this knowledge to their other courses sparking discussions and thought among their peers.

4. Increased Critical Thinking Skills

Students in speech and debate do not accept information uncritically from others. Instead, they think about how strongly supported the arguments of others are. They learn to think through arguments and to analyze them critically. At tournaments, students are subjected to a wide variety of arguments. Students who debate only in a classroom are not exposed to as wide a diversity of arguments, leaving them less knowledgeable about the world.

5. Develop Team Work Skills

While students engage in this competitive activity, they also work together to make themselves as strong as possible. Students in speech and debate form a strong and cohesive group. Trips to tournaments bring students together in the van, at restaurants, and at hotels. They form strong bonds with each other that do not happen in a classroom. They study and work together. They are friends with each other. In competing against other schools, students learn ethical approaches to competing as well as the importance of working together as a team.

6. Build Educational Connections with Other Schools

Students on a speech and debate team make strong connections with other schools. Students compete with and talk with students from other schools. Students get feedback from instructors at other schools. Coaches learn from the wide variety of speeches they hear and that enhances their instruction in classes they teach. These connections enhance the learning experience and add to the strength of your school.

7. Benefits to Student Futures

Maintaining a speech and debate program provides more opportunities for students trying to enter into colleges. Students who have competed in forensics are considered top notch recruits for graduate school because recruiters know that these students are committed, hard working students. At many communication and law schools as well as political science graduate schools, students are offered scholarships for their skill in forensics. This opportunity would be lost without such a program.

All in all, forensics is an activity with unique educational benefits. Students get the opportunity to engage in an intellectually challenging competition between their ideas and those of other people. They develop skills that will make them more effective advocates. And, perhaps most important, they develop a lasting group of friends who share their interests.

By Jim Hanson,
Whitman College

"[Forensics] may allow a university to develop a reputation for competitive excellence, to recruit outstanding high school students and to be active in community life"

-Colbert & Biggers, 1985

JUST A FEW FAMOUS FORENSIC ALUMNI

- Lamar Alexander, Governor of Tennessee and Republican candidate for President
- Jackson Browne, singer and songwriter
- Jimmy Carter, President of the United States
- Hillary Rodham Clinton, First Lady of the United States
- William Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States
- Harry Connick Jr., Singer and songwriter
- Admiral Crowe, Four Star Admiral, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Ambassador to England
- Alan Dershowitz, noted attorney and Harvard law professor
- Thomas Foley, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives
- Bob Graham, Governor of Florida and U.S. Senate
- John Graham, Director, Institute for Policy Studies at Harvard
- Phil Gramm, U.S. Senator and Republican Candidate for President
- Arianna Huffington, conservative TV commentator
- Lee Iacocca, CEO Chrysler
- Lady Bird Johnson, First Lady of the United States
- Lyndon Johnson, President of the United States
- Barbara Jordan, U.S. House of Representatives
- John F. Kennedy, President of the United States
- George McGovern, U.S. Senate and Democratic Presidential Candidate
- Zell Miller, Governor of Georgia
- Richard Nixon, President of the United States
- Ann Richards, Governor of Texas
- Susan Rook, News Anchor for CNN
- Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States
- Franklin Roosevelt, President of the United States
- Antonin Scalia, Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court
- Nadine Strossen, President of the ACLU
- Laurence Tribe, Preeminent Constitutional Law Scholar
- Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States

“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”

-Franklin D. Roosevelt

COMMENTS ABOUT FORENSICS

"My speech and debate experience and training at Pennsylvania State was the most important single educational experience of my life....Dialectical and communicative competencies and insights are the major educational values which result from participating extensively in forensics and debate. From my experience as a participant, coach and teacher, I believe those competencies and insights are better developed through forensic and debate experiences than any other educational experience" (Hunt, p15).

Jerry M. Anderson, President of Ball State University

"My debate experience at Bates was helpful in my post graduate study at Oxford. At all times the necessity of organizing ideas and presenting them vigorously has been pertinent to newspaper writing, asking questions at press conferences or interviewing statesmen was aided by my public speaking experience" (Hunt, p14).

Erwin Canham, editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*

"As a Senator, my principal responsibilities are threefold: First, a Senator must do his best to reach logical policy conclusions about issues with which our nation is confronted. Second, a Senator should be able to effectively translate technical aspects of a position into language that will clearly communicate it to the public. Third, to be effective, a Senator must have the ability to persuade others to accept his policy conclusions. No aspects of my education was more useful in preparing me to meet these responsibilities than my training in speech and debate" (Hunt, p14).

Senator David Boren of Oklahoma

"Years of observing high school and college students in forensics have convinced me that this is one of the major contributions we in speech communication can make to the education of youngsters. It is our various forensics activities, more than in any other of our programs, that most of what we believe in and study can be brought together and passed on to each generation of students. It is in our various forensics activities that we can most

effectively communicate the values that form the base of speech communication. And it is these activities that can best help our students to develop their capacities for leadership. It is no accident that such a large percentage of the outstanding leaders in our country have been high school or college debaters" (Hunt, p15).

Sam Becker, former president, Speech Communication Association of America

"The group developed fellowship and team camaraderie which had important by-products for personal growth. The visits to other schools, and travel experience, the living and working together - all under the high expectations of the 'Coach' and his most gently administered but ever firm supervision - made for an individual development which has remained for me a high point in

my educational experience. The meaning of scholarship, the 'feel' for the handling of ideas, the fellowship of professional service were for me but some of the outcomes of my debate experience" (Hunt, 16).

David B. Henry, President of the University of Illinois

"...I joined the debating team, which was sponsored by Mr. Virgil Parks, our Latin teacher. That's where I developed my speaking skills and learned to think on my feet. At first I was scared to death. I had butterflies in my stomach - and to this day I still get a little nervous before giving a speech. But the experience of being on the debating team was crucial. You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your brains won't get you anywhere" (Iacocca, 16).

Lee Iacocca, CEO of Chrysler



Lyndon B. Johnson and his debate partners preparing at Texas State Teachers' College, now Texas State University at San Marcos

COMMENTS ABOUT FORENSICS (CONT)

"I think debating in high school and college a most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business, or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of Women Voters. A good debater must not only study material in support of his own case, but he must also, of course, thoroughly analyze the expected arguments of his opponent....The give and take of debating, the testing of ideas, is essential to democracy. I wish we had a good deal more debating in our institutions than we do now" (Freedom and Union, 7).

President John F. Kennedy

"Debate was the single most important activity I participated in at the Naval Academy" (Lundquist).

Admiral William Crowe,
Four Star Admiral, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Ambassador to England

"But I will tell you that, right there in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been. Standing up there, the aces looking up at me, the things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling right, then I had won the debate - once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating. Whichever side of the selected subject was assigned to me, I'd track down and study everything I could find on it. I'd put myself in my opponent's place and decide how I'd try to win if I had the other side; and then I'd figure a way to knock down those points" (Malcom X, 184).

Malcom X

"Self expression is truly an art, and its successful development requires steady practice and determination. To articulate one's thoughts in a lucid and expressive manner - to capture and maintain the interest of an audience, whether it be in the classroom or in the United Nations General Assembly Hall - is strongly supported by the skill and knowledge one acquires from a forensic education (Hunt, p1)."

Donald F. McHenry, US Representative to the United Nations

"As I look back upon my own experiences, when I try to single out from among the long line of college students some one group which shall stand forth as intellectually the best - best in college work and best in promise of future intellectual achievement - I cannot draw

the line around my own favorite students of philosophy, nor the leaders in mathematics, nor those successful in biology; nor could I fairly award the palm to the Phi Beta Kappa men who have excelled in all their subjects. It seems to me that stronger than any other group, tougher in intellectual fiber, keener in intellectual interests, better equipped to battle the coming problems are the college debaters - the students who apart from their regular studies, band together for intellectual controversy with each other and with their friends from other colleges (Hunt, 16)."

Alexander Meiklejohn,
Former President of Amherst College

"One of the most important decisions in my life was when the student body of Warren Central High School in Indianapolis decided I should not be a varsity cheerleader. It meant my weekends were free. For the next three years, I spent most Saturdays on the road with the largest National Forensic League chapter in the country. While the fifteen-year-old girl inside of me still mourns the lost letter sweater, the adult Jane is grateful to NFL for something much more important a - career" (Hunt, 14).

Jane Pauley,
NBC television journalist

"No college freshman can project 25 years to decide what he needs to learn - subject matter is easily forgotten and in today's world, the knowledge explosion makes constant learning an inevitability. But all adults today need to be able to communicate with clarity, to articulate ideas, to reason, to separate key facts from the barrage of ideas we all are exposed to every day. No single activity can prepare one better than debating - the ability to think on one's feet, to form conclusions rapidly, to answer questions logically and with clarity, to summarize ideas are all processes which forensics activity develop and develop" (Hunt, 14).

Helen M. Wise,
former President,
National Education Association

Texas Intercollegiate Forensics Association

President
Martin R. Cox
University of Texas at Austin

Vice President
Wade Hescht
North Harris College

Secretary/Comptroller
Wayne Kraemer
Texas State University at San Marcos

All-State Squad Committee Chair
Mary C. Trejo
University of Texas at El Paso

Educator of the Year Committee Chair
Jolinda Ramsey
San Antonio College

Nominating Committee Chair
M'Liss Hindman
Tyler Junior College

Material compiled by Prof. Martin R. Cox,
University of Texas at Austin

<http://commstudies.utexas.edu/speech/index.htm>

Credit to Prof. Jeffrey Parcher of Georgetown University and the Philodemic Debate Society for compiling these excerpts, many drawn from:

Hunt, S. "The Values of Forensics Participation," in *Intercollegiate Forensics*. Ed. T. Winebrenner. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1994. 1-19.

<http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/Articles/gtreport.html>

Additional material drawn from:

Prof. Jim Hanson at Whitman College,
<http://www.wcdebate.com>

Prof. Wayne Kraemer at Texas State University at San Marcos
<http://www.finearts.txstate.edu/commstudies/debate-forensics>