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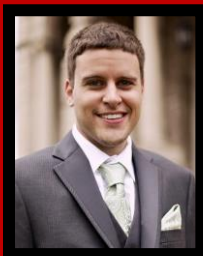
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College Policy Debate Community Climate: Data from the 2014 and 2015 College Policy Debate Survey

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A Research Brief

College Policy Debate Community Climate: Data from the 2014 and 2015 College Policy Debate Survey

Keith Richards and Paul E. Mabrey III

The College Policy Debate Survey research project was designed to answer relevant questions about current debate practices and the debate community. This information can be used to inform future interventions as well as programming (e.g. bystander intervention training, organization membership criteria, judge mentorship, and involvement of historically marginalized or at-risk populations). This paper analyzes qualitative data from the 2014 College Policy Debate Survey and incorporates both the quantitative and qualitative data from the 2015 version. The study was developed to help the debate community understand what members believe constitutes a good resolution and salient beliefs about why people participate in debate as well to identify concerns within the debate community. Over the course of two years 584 students, coaches, and alumni completed the survey. In 2014, 378 participants completed the questionnaire and 206 participated in 2015.

Participants indicated they want a sustainable resolution that was accessible to all skill levels and diverse perspectives. Their most important reasons for participating in debate were because it was fun and because of the educational benefits. Harassment and institutional/structural sexism were identified as the most pressing concerns for the debate community to address. This research brief concludes with recommendations, informed by the data, to positively impact the college policy debate community climate.

Key Words: Forensics, debate, survey, debate climate

In 2014, community members sought to better understand the demographics and attitudes of the current NDT/CEDA policy debate community (Mabrey & Richards, 2017). Several events motivated the interest in this information and research. First, institutions and individual members of the community were thrust into the spotlight with very public discussions about the NDT/CEDA policy debate community (Kraft, 2014; Thompson, 2014). The 2013 and

2014 national debate tournament championships made history with African-American teams competing for and winning the national championship while deploying argumentative strategies breaking from the traditional approach. Final round videos of African-American students speaking quickly, talking about race and sexuality alongside experiences of discrimination, and using the n-word were used as evidence for racist vitriol by members of white supremacist communities. Another example was alumni of college policy debate programs asking questions about the evolution of debate, speaking practices, and argumentative strategies. Coaches, judges, debaters, and alumni were being asked to participate in conversations about current practices and attitudes based on the popular circulation of these public pieces. As alumni or administrators saw these stories in *The Atlantic* or *The Washington Post*, it was not uncommon for them to ask their local college policy debate coach about the controversies.

The impetus for this research was to provide evidence to improve the discussions and decision-making processes that were taking place in the wake of the significant competitive and community victories (or defeats, depending on perspective). Policymaking in the debate community has traditionally been based in theoretical and applied communication research aimed at improving policy, evaluation, and programming based on what works (Head, 2008; James & Lodge, 2003; Sanderson, 2002). Decisions regarding the governance of the debate community should be informed by research rather than observational inferences and speculation.

The current essay utilizes an evidence-based policy making framework to analyze and discuss the 2014 and 2015 College Policy Debate Survey results and make recommendations for addressing concerns of the college policy debate community. While the 2014 quantitative results have been analyzed (Mabrey & Richards, 2017), none of the qualitative data from that survey has been shared. This essay includes both quantitative and qualitative data from the 2015 College Policy Debate Survey.

Method

Participants

The 2015 survey had a final sample of 206 participants, a 46% decrease from the 378 completed during 2014. The 2015 participant breakdown was fairly even between undergraduates (n=60, 29%), coaches (n=71, 35%), and alumni (n=66, 32%). These numbers were nearly identical, in percentage, to those of 2014 where 34% of the sample were students, 33% were coaches, and 32% were alumni.

Responses to questions about race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disabilities were similar to those from 2014. In 2015, 73% identified as White while 7% were Hispanic, 5% were Asian, and 3% were African-American. Similarly, in 2014 most of the sample identified as White (76%) followed by Asian (6.5%), African-American (5.4%), and Hispanic (5.4%). Men made up 63.6% of the sample, females comprised 21.4% of the sample, 5.3% identified as queer, 2.4% were transgender, 1.5% were “another gender” and 6.8% preferred not to answer. In 2014

22% identified as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, similar results were found in 2015 with 20% having a sexual orientation that was not heterosexual. Nearly half (48%) identified that they had a disability, up from 38% in 2014. The most frequently identified disabilities were anxiety (19%), depression (17%), and attention-deficit disorder (11%). Physical disabilities play an important role in access at a tournament, but only 3.4% of the population indicated this type of disability. A total of 164 disabilities were indicated across the 2015 sample (*note, an individual could report multiple disabilities*).

The undergraduate participants were asked what type of institution they were attending and 70% were currently members of a four-year state university, 27% were attending a private four-year institution, and 3% were at a community or junior college. Students had a range of experience with debate in high school with 25% having had no high school policy debate experience, 14% having debated five to seven semesters, and 51% debating for eight or more semesters in high school. Most participants (59%) had no experience with a form of debate outside of policy debate. These findings are generally consistent with those from 2014.

Materials and Procedure

The survey instrument was modified from one used in research conducted on the same topic in 2014 (Mabrey & Richards, 2017). The 2015 iteration included slightly modified questions as a result of feedback and data analysis from the 2014 version. To reach as many members of the debate community as possible the survey was distributed through the CEDA organization web forums, CEDA membership email distribution list, College Policy Debate Facebook group, and College Policy Debate Alums Facebook group. No incentive was offered for participation. The survey was launched August 24, 2015 and closed October 5, 2015. The quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS v22.0 statistical software. A graduate research assistant was trained to code the qualitative data along with the two principal investigators.

Results

Topic Issues

All of the quantitative questions were scored on 5-point Likert scales with answers ranging from 1 *not at all important* to 5 *extremely important*. Students ($M=4.50$, $SD=0.62$) and coaches ($M=4.44$, $SD=0.69$) in 2015 valued a resolution that was sustainable across the debate season. Another highly rated aspect was the balance between affirmative and negative ground ($M=4.51$, $SD=0.63$). To gather additional information on the important elements of a resolution, three themes were identified in the 2014 open-ended questions and were added for 2015. They were *making the resolution accessible to historically marginalized groups* ($M=4.37$, $SD=1.98$), *novice friendly* ($M=4.40$, $SD=1.86$), and *creating a resolution that allowed for more argument variety* ($M=4.86$, $SD=1.44$).

Round Issues

Data from both the 2014 and 2015 surveys suggested that participants were concerned with non-competitive factors impacting the results of competitive debate rounds. Judge ideology

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was indirectly mentioned (through their expressed concern with the community division along argumentation style lines) by 32 of the 160 participants (20%) in 2014 and 18 of 64 participants (28%) in 2015. These concerns were not exclusively about judge ideology, but reflected dissatisfaction with the way some judges would let their own preferences for certain argumentation styles bias or influence their ability to judge a given debate, team, or argumentation style.

Community Questions

The survey was also designed to create a better understanding of why individuals participate in debate. This was accomplished by asking each participant *how important to anyone are the following reasons for participating in debate* with the answers focusing on education, competition, resume building, and as a form of activism. Each question was scored on a Likert scale with answer choices ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The highest rated reasons were fun and enjoyment ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.79$), educational benefits ($M=4.23$, $SD=0.96$), and competition ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.98$). Overall coaches, undergraduates, and alumni agreed on the value of each category except for education. Undergraduates ($M=4.19$, $SD=1.01$) valued the educational benefits of debate significantly more than did coaches ($M=3.93$, $SD=1.12$) ($F(1,130)=7.58$, $p=.007$, $d=.24$). Qualitative results confirmed the importance of education for motivating debate participation where 26 participants (out of 106) in 2014 indicated they found debate provided an educational benefit to the participants with similar results in 2015 (10 of 43).

When comparing the reasons males and those identifying as a gender other than male participate in debate there were a few statistically significant differences. The first of which was that males valued competition more ($M=4.02$, $SD=0.92$) than those identifying as not male ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.04$); ($F(1,204)=5.73$, $p=.018$, $d=.30$). A second difference was related to debate as a form of activism where males ($M=1.98$, $SD=1.25$) valued it significantly less than those identifying as not male ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.39$), ($F(1,204)=15.82$, $p=.000$, $d=.57$). The final significant difference ($F(2,194)=9.30$, $p=.003$, $d=.42$) was that men reported having fun was a more important ($M=4.45$, $SD=.72$) reason for participating than did those identifying as a gender other than male ($M=4.11$, $SD=.88$). The last demographic variable driving statistically significant differences for motivations to participate in debate was sexual orientation. Those identifying as heterosexual valued competition significantly ($M=4.17$, $SD=.86$) more ($F(2,194)=22.63$, $p=.000$, $d=.68$) than those who identified as a sexual orientation other than heterosexual ($M=3.52$, $SD=1.05$).

All respondents were asked about the importance of certain issues for the collegiate policy debate community to address. The most important issues were addressing harassment and/or hostile debate environments ($M=4.18$), participation numbers and the decline of participation ($M=4.07$), and structural/institutional sexism ($M=3.83$). Concern about threats to the overall health of the college policy debate community (and subsequent recommendations) were the most prevalent responses across both years of the survey for the open-ended question

asking *what concerns you as a community member*. Of these, the most frequent theme from both 2014 (43 out of 160) and 2015 (23 out of 64) were concerns about a hostile environment, not welcoming or inviting to individuals, and civil discourse. The second most popular response of community concern was concerned with a lack of civility around argumentation style and political leanings. These connections to argumentation style and ideology solicited 32 (of 160) responses in 2014 and 18 (of 64) responses in the 2015 survey.

Finally, the question about successes of the NDT/CEDA policy debate community is the last instance that yielded responses relevant to community concerns. Here, respondents pointed to community diversity and attitudes toward diversity as positive aspects of the debate community despite some of the previously mentioned concerns. As examples of increasing diversity, respondents cited the “increasing success of persons of color in debate,” “inclusion of diverse populations,” and having increased “the acceptance of difference.”

Discussion

When it comes to formulating a resolution, the most important element for participants and coaches was that it be sustainable across the entire season. Participants indicated that the resolution should be accessible to disadvantaged groups as well as novices. Accessibility here means that the controversy and literature base are accessible to student-debaters across a spectrum of prior life experiences. Debate practitioners have argued that resolutions centered on role-playing U.S. Federal Government action have been accessible only to students with traditional debate experience and substantial life privilege. Another significant finding was that the survey participants wanted a resolution that would fit a range of debate styles; whether one interpreted the resolution instrumentally and literally to role-play as the federal government implementing a policy, one interpreted the resolution figuratively to affirm the resolution as a metaphor for discussing the resolution’s controversy area, or if one refused to affirm the resolution at all and instead used it as a launching point for critical reflection, scholarship, or activism. One recommendation is that the topic committee considers these data as evidence for supporting certain styles of resolutions. The community could treat these preferences for topic sustainability, inclusion, and access as explicit decision-criteria for whether a topic makes the final ballot.

The focus on external factors influencing the competitive outcome of a given debate appeared again when individuals were asked about how team reputation and post-debate behavior should influence a judge. A point of contention was how judge ideology influenced results. Over thirty percent indicated they had concerns with how judge ideology and judge preferences for a particular style influenced the outcome. CEDA has the potential to host public, transparent conversations about the role of ideology and bias in judging. For example, CEDA could partner with a major national tournament that many programs attend, like the Wake Forest University tournament. Wake’s tournament has been a site for many important community conversations and debate practice experimentation. If not at an invitational during the season, CEDA could host this conversation at their end of year national tournament, the National

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Communication Association Convention, or CEDA's summer business and topic meetings. If a conversation like this was to occur, both new and experienced judges could share their best practices for navigating the difficult spaces often required when judging a debate round.

Another goal of the study was to better understand why students, coaches, and alumni participate in debate and the surveys indicated that, in order, having fun, educational benefits, and competition were the highest rated. Individuals are enjoying themselves while reaping educational benefits. These results occurred in both years as well as across the quantitative and qualitative data that further ground the findings. One recommendation to tap into the educational motivation is to experiment with other forms of debate community participation. Perhaps governing institutions can offer more structural support for the non-competitive avenues for debate community members to engage the topic, one another, and their communities. Examples might include public debates, modified tournament experiences, academic conferences, or alumni events.

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While many identified positive aspects of debate there were concerns. Some issues that need to be investigated further are structural and institutional sexism, structural and institutional inequalities, and harassment or hostile debate environment. These are significant concerns and surprising given the number of positive experiences that participants reported. Qualitative data supported the notion that it was difficult, both interpersonally and online, to share ideas for change because they were often met with aggression.

Women indicated unsafe conditions where they were encouraged not to report harassment or sexism. Coaches were singled out as not being active in the protection of debate members from sexual harassment and charged with worrying more about reputation and less about safety. One 2014 respondent indicated, "The debate community has created an environment where sexual predators can run rampant. It needs to be fixed immediately. People are being sexually assaulted and raped." A 2015 participant echoed this sentiment, "The NDT/CEDA policy debate community has a terrible track record when it comes to handling sexual violence. Too often, the community is safer and more welcoming to the person doing the assaulting than to the survivor of the assault." These findings are troubling for a community that proclaims diversity and inclusion as a sense of community pride.

To combat these structural inequalities, more steps need to be taken at institutional levels. Great communities of support already exist for those who experience traumatic events, whether at or away from tournament preparation and travel. The concerns raised here suggest members of the community want something more. First, CEDA should review the current protocols to ensure that they meet legal requirements as well as ensure that these are aligned with the beliefs of those in the debate community. Additionally, CEDA should more actively communicate the protocols and resources that exist to protect and care for participants.

Second, perhaps CEDA should experiment with different incentive systems to encourage debate teams to be hospitable and to reduce hostile environments. For example, CEDA could require that every student competing at the national tournament demonstrate they have received

training related to sexual assault, bystander intervention, or another training that the community deems valuable. This could be achieved through an online training. The governing debate organizations already have similar programs for academic standing. As many higher education institutions are requiring something similar of incoming first-year students and employees, this may not create a substantial increase in those trained. But perhaps it could still be the beginning of a conversation orientated around meaningful prevention.

Also, new awards could be created to celebrate debate programs that actively recruit and retain diverse debaters onto their campuses and teams. The data support that some in the debate community wish that it was more inclusive and hospitable. The awards could be modeled after current academic standing awards where a strict quantitative metric like grade point average is used. Here, a debate program would need to demonstrate that it meets or exceeds the diversity representation of the school's own demographic markers. Or perhaps an award modeled after the public debate award presented annually by CEDA. Debate programs submit nomination packets that may include statement letters, programming examples, assessment data, or other evidence to be considered by the awards committee.

Third, CEDA should expand both the expectations and resources required for hosting tournaments. Because many of the concerns about debate participation happen at tournaments, hosts could use more information and guidelines on how to actively be more inclusive. CEDA has recently done this by appointing an access coordinator for their national tournament participants who might have accessibility concerns or need accommodations. Furthermore, CEDA could host community wide discussions of these best practices or encourage experimentation to identify the best resources for a given tournament or region. CEDA also has tournament sanctioning at its disposal. Tournament sanctioning is something it has recently used to leverage tournament actions to increase judge diversity. While the success of this approach has been called into question, there is a continued need to explore ways to meaningfully increase access and inclusion.

Conclusion

The current essay sought to add to and further explain the results of the 2014 College Policy Debate Survey while simultaneously sharing the 2015 follow-up results. Taken together, this project provided data as evidence to help improve the discussions about and decision-making for the NDT/CEDA college policy debate community. Like all research, this project and these surveys were not without limitations. The narrow scope and inability to refer to a known debate community population hindered the kinds (and magnitude) of inferences than can be made based on this data. Furthermore, the demographic data suggests some groups within the community might be under-represented here, like members of the African-American student debate community. This is particularly important given the historical and public controversies driving contemporary discussions and this research. The lack of an intersectional approach to data collection and analysis limits the ability to provide more robust descriptions and recommendations. The survey itself had some limitations one of which was that the question

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about disabilities did not provide specifics on physical disabilities. This information would be beneficial for those organizing tournaments to ensure that the proper resources were available to serve this population. Despite the limitations with this project, the data, analysis, and recommendations provide ample starting points for deliberations about and for improving the NDT/CEDA policy debate community.



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