





# George LaMaster: What Forensics Did For Me

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*ALUMNI CORNER: The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.*

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**W**hen I graduated from college, I headed to seminary to learn how to be a Presbyterian minister. One day I wore my speech team sweatshirt, and thanks to a chance meeting in the cafeteria, my wife and I wound up moonlighting as coaches for a local team. During the same years I served as a hospital chaplain and a youth minister, I observed as many and more lives transformed by coaches in speech and debate. I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Communication. I've spent most of the years since then coaching, only recently retiring from active duty in favor of settling in as department chair. That's what forensics did for me. It offered me a calling to a transformational ministry in higher education.

Now, you can't throw a stick around any university's Communication Department without hitting faculty who discovered academia through forensics; and, from deans to presidents, you'll find speech and debate alumni well represented among the ranks of university administration, too. Like so many others, forensics ignited my passion for learning, and then it gave me the skills to achieve it.

I coached speech all through graduate school. In my first tenure-track job, I had no intention of spending my weekends on the road with students. A talented honors public speaking class changed my mind: with a budget of zero dollars and our

family's mini-van, I started a new program. Twelve years later, looking back through the eyes of a department chair on the other side of tenure, forensics offered me a remarkable way to serve students. True, it required a lot of nights and weekends. It's also a great way to teach.

**Transformational teaching requires experiences and relationships that transcend the classroom.**



Transformational teaching requires experiences and relationships that transcend the classroom. As this series of essays from alumni testifies, the result is students who say “speech and debate changed my life.” It should come as no surprise. Forensic programs boast so many high-impact teaching practices:

- An intentional learning community
- A writing-intensive experience
- Collaborate projects
- Individualized undergraduate research
- Community engagement and service
- Mentoring relationships with faculty
- Encounters with diversity and global issues

Few co-curricular programs contribute so directly to academic and social integration, positioning students for success. That’s why my university supports it. We’d like to duplicate this model wherever possible: the professor serves as a coach for a community of students who are highly engaged in learning outside the classroom. It works.

High-impact teaching involves the whole person. It challenges students to articulate how they fit into this world and how they intend to make a difference in it. With the help of a team and a teacher, students find their voice – and the courage to raise it. I could tell any number of miraculous stories here. Every coach can. They’re the kind of stories you read in this series. Though each story is different, they take a familiar form...

A student stumbles upon the world of speech and debate. The student might just as easily have joined the lacrosse team or the quiz bowl club, but a coach makes a connection. Competition throws trials in the path of the student. The student accomplishes more than they ever imagined possible. At some point along the way, the student faces a personal crisis. The student will say “I might have gotten lost, but this team was my family, and this coach was my mentor.” The story is personal. The student performs poetry about his experience with depression or writes a speech about her response to racism. The personal is also public. Debating the issues of the day, week after week, is consciousness-raising.

**Education at the intersection of lived experience with art and argument is holy ground.**

The student gets, as they say, “woke.” When it’s all over, the student will look back and say, “This activity changed my perspective on life. It helped me find myself. It set me on a course for the future.” That’s transformational.



Education at the intersection of lived experience with art and argument is holy ground. You might even say that forensic education is a space where students encounter the mysterious “something more” of life, the grace that makes transformation possible. Nurturing that kind of learning community has been the most important ministry in my life.

“The heart of a champion is to compete for a higher calling than 1<sup>st</sup> place.”

I guess you could say what forensics did for me is let me serve the First Church of Speech and Debate. I’m not unique. Those who are coaching and traveling with speech and debate programs, weekend after weekend – as far as I’m concerned, they are all #&?! saints. They’ve answered the call to a transformational ministry, and they see miracles happen all the time.

