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AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN CEDA DEBATE¹

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Harold Hodgkinson [Senior Fellow, Inst. for Educational Leadership] has succinct advice for anyone planning for the future in higher education: "Learn to read the present more carefully than you used to".

Kelley Fead
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CEDA is not reading the present very well. We need to come to terms with the racial homogeneity of the activity--and work to change it. CEDA debate is, by and large, a white male activity. This is homogeneity is not reflected in society at large, as Harold Hodgkinson points out, "by 2000, most Americans will be descended from non-Europeans" (in Fead 1989 20). Specifically, "...82 percent--of the 20 million new workers in the market between now and 2000 will be a combination of female, nonwhite and immigrant" (Fead 1989 20). According to a recent report by the National Task Force on Minority Achievement in Higher Education, "projected labor statistics show that, in less than 10 years, a third of new workers will be members of minority groups and most new jobs will require a college education" (Atlanta Constitution 1990 A-9). To help prepare tomorrow's leaders CEDA must take steps to ensure that the values and practices learned in debate are applicable to tomorrow's world.

This article has four explicit goals: to explore the level of black participation in CEDA; to assess the competitive level of that participation; to discover if these levels are a problem; and if they are a problem, explore some possible solutions.

METHOD

A survey was sent to all schools on the fall, 1989 CEDA mailing list. Respondents were asked to reply to a series of closed ended questions, and room was provided for comments. Follow up surveys were sent to African-Americans who asked for them. Follow up interviews with African-American debaters and coaches were also conducted from Spring 1990-Spring 1991. The numeric data was collected and compiled by the Center for the Study of the Black Experience in Higher Education, at Clemson University.

RESULTS

¹ The author would like to thank the Center for the Study of the Black Experience of Higher Education at Clemson University for compiling the data, and Walter Ulrich and William Baker for their insight and encouragement.

64 schools returned complete questionnaires. Of those, 22 schools reported having black debaters on the team (only one historically black college, Southern University in Louisiana, responded; notably missing are Howard University and Morehouse College). One school responded that a black member of their team "usually does IEs, but debates from time to time". These 22 schools had a total of 40 black debaters; if Southern U. is excluded (15 black debaters) the figures go to 21 schools with 25 black debaters--or 63 respondents and travelling 25 black debaters. The 64 schools responding reported having a total of 692 debaters (63/677, excluding Southern U). This means that 5.78% of debaters represented by the survey, and 3.69% of debaters at predominantly white institutions responding to the survey, are black. This compares unfavorably with a black college student population of 8.66% (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac 1990 3).² Further, of the 40 black debaters, 22 were defined as novice, 10 junior varsity, and eight varsity (for predominantly white institutions those numbers go to 13, eight, and four). Only two schools reported that their black debaters were "often in the elimination rounds of large tournaments", seven schools responded "sometimes" and 10 "rarely/never". The numbers are slightly more balanced for speaker awards; nine schools reported that their black debaters win speaker awards "often", eight "sometimes" and only two "rarely/never".³ Of the 37 schools that reported offering debate scholarships only three wrote that blacks were recipients of those scholarships--including those debaters at Southern University. Many directors of forensics expressed concern over the lack of black participation--yet only nine reported making special efforts to increase the racial diversity of their teams. In short, 63 predominantly white institutions of higher education report having 677 debaters, 25 of whom are black; of those 25 debaters, only two are often involved in elimination rounds of large tournaments. Only one school reported having a black director of forensics (William Baker, Director of Forensics at Columbia University from 1989-91). Clearly, African-Americans are under-represented in CEDA. Further, even if the difference between black participation in CEDA and black student presence on campuses is statistically insignificant, there is a perceptual problem. When the numbers are this low, few attending tournaments notice the greater statistical meaning of those numbers. To many--blacks and non-blacks--the level of participation is low.⁴ Even if black participation in

² Including those attending historically black colleges.

³ That black debaters win speaker awards more often than they are in elimination rounds is also noted by Brenda Logue (1987, 1991).

⁴ The popularity of, and response to, the panel discussion at the 1991 CEDA National Tournament ("Why is debate a white male dominated activity?") is evidence of this perception.

CEDA is not statistically low (when compared to black participation in higher education), both blacks and whites in CEDA think and act as if it is. Many of the impacts of perceived low participation are likely to mirror the impacts of actual low participation.

LIMITATIONS

There are some crucial problems with my survey data--the response was limited, I did not examine non-CEDA forensics activities (notably IE, ADA, NDT and Lincoln-Douglas) and I did not explore other non-white male groups (women, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native Americans). Clearly further study is necessary.

DISCUSSION

Is this low level of participation a cause for concern? Yes. The educational experience of both African-American and white debaters is hurt.

Don Wilson, an African-American debater at Transylvania State University echoes many when he writes, "[low black participation] deprives African-American students of a chance to express themselves, learn how to think logically and prepare for a career"(survey). Essentially, that anyone does not debate is bad. The importance of African-American participation gets magnified when one closely reads the present. By the year 2000 white males will be a minority of those entering the work force of this country. Unfortunately, the expansion of non-whites in the population is not being mirrored by their appearance at college and university graduations. Our institutions of higher education are not luring minority students, and not keeping those students who do attend. To combat this, Dr. Reginald Wilson outlines seven "principles of good practice for instructors". Of these, five are met especially well by debate. Dr. Wilson writes that: students should be encouraged to work together; "actively learn"; get prompt feedback on their progress; be aware that high expectations of them exist; and have high levels of faculty contact (Black Issues in Higher Education 1990 6). Most debaters must work with a partner (and larger squad), thus meeting the first suggestion. Since most debate education happens in rounds, debaters spend much of their time actively learning. The existence of the ballot and post-round critiques guarantees prompt feedback. The competitive nature of the activity fosters high expectations. Finally, the nature of coaching and judging ensure high levels of faculty contact. Debate, then, could be used to combat high dropout rates among black college students.

⁵ Many respondents indicated that Afro-American students competed on the school's individual events squad; the reason for this higher level of participation in IE (if it exists), as well as the implications of that participation, needs to be explored.

Members of the non-Black community are also adversely affected by low levels of black participation. Kevin D. Amey, an African-American debater at the California State University at Fresno points out that, "since many Blacks do not engage in this activity, contributions [that] advance the study of debate are lost. Cultural diversity is lost..."(survey). This lack of cultural diversity means that issues are not explored completely, and that, "social topics are poorly represented by whites on 'black' topics..."(Townsel, survey). Essentially, a small group of whites are arguing about policies and values that directly impact a culture that is either ignored or misrepresented. This problem is not unique to CEDA, there is a general lack of examination of non-white issues in higher education (Penn State 1987 25). Debate serves a socializing function, as a significant part of the college experience for many undergraduates. Low levels of black participation means that many debaters are being socialized into a world that does not exist. Debaters not learning how to interact in multi-cultural settings, and are not being exposed to the views and values of a significant part of our population. Moreover they may be learning that, by and large, whites succeed at intellectual activities and blacks do not.

In responding to the question, "do you think that low black participation in intercollegiate debate is a cause for concern? Why/not?", William Baker writes:

Yes. It is a venue for communication and the choice of topics should reflect relevant issues in society. If the issues chosen communicate the unimportance of the black person in this community, what does that say about the relevance of the black experience on the macro level? One of the obvious cases on the fall 1990 topic [censorship of public artistic expression] is Rap music and the plight of Ice-T and 2 Live Crew. Affirmative teams will discuss free speech, the value of rap and even possibly the racism underlying the censorship acts. Teams may debate children's rights or the need for music as a vent for frustration! I guarantee that no one will be discussing the economic impacts of a boycott by the African American community or the strength of its nationwide potential coalition! Isn't it ironic that such a well-researched community can as a base assumption dismiss millions of voters and \$40 billion in buying power? No it's not ironic, it's a tragic reality of a powerful myth of impotence self-perpetuated by an apathetic African-American community and an arrogant caucasian mind-set (survey).

It could be argued that, while black debaters are rarely present at the highest levels of competition, they are at tournaments (if mostly in junior and novice divisions). It would then seem that the problem is diminished--especially since those debaters will gain experience and eventually compete at the varsity level. However, a number of respondents wrote that blacks often leave debate when they have to compete in open divisions. This means that at the varsity level (where more complex issues are explored) issues of importance to the black community are less likely to be argued. Further, the stereotype that whites are better at intellectual competition is perpetuated. The general lack of non-white debaters at the top levels also furthers the lack

of non-white debaters at the top levels; one African-American debater writes that, "a persistent pattern of gender, racially, and ethnically dissimilar individuals as the only successful participants in an activity makes it hard for minority and non-traditional students to relate to...the activity"(survey).

If we are to educate all of our students to the best of our abilities, then the lack of cultural diversity in CEDA clearly is a problem--one we ignore at our own peril.

SOLUTIONS

Given that low levels of black participation in CEDA is a problem, the remaining issue is how to solve it. Two areas need to be addressed: first, the existence of barriers to participation; and second, specific steps that can be taken.

Barriers to participation

While only one respondent indicated that "subtle remarks [were] made by judges during oral critiques and written decisions"(survey), all wrote of attitudinal barriers. Baker sums up the position by writing, "The perception that involvement requires 'selling out' to the white community rather than dissemination of 'our' ideas among peers and professors is the primary [barrier]"(survey). Others have expressed a natural aversion to any subjective judgements by whites, as well as a general lack of awareness of debate in the African-American community. Certainly the "whiteness" of the community serves as a disincentive to participation on all of these levels--as Amey writes, there is a "fear of public speaking in general and specifically with whites"(survey). Bismarck Myrick notes the catch 22 that is set up, "the best way to get more black people to debate is to get more black people to debate"(interview). The question remains--how is this cycle of non-participation broken?

Initially, there is a problem at the entry level: the high-schools that tend to excel at debate tend to be in predominantly white areas, thus few African-Americans get experience at the high school level. If one debates in high school, one is more likely to debate in college. Recognizing the importance of high school debate and the non-traditional debater, Melissa Maxy-Wade, (Director of Forensics at Emory University), has begun to bring debate to inner-city high schools, with some success.

⁶ Brenda Logue more fully explores the notion that students tend to join groups that reflect their cultural identity (1987, 1991).

⁷ One Atlanta high school, in particular, is doing well. In a video produced by the debaters at that school (all of whom are black), they indicate that debate is directly responsible for increased interest in--and success in--school. All those involved

Another entry barrier may be time. The time commitment involved makes it difficult to hold a job, maintain a high grade point average, and be a nationally competitive debater; to the extent that many black students need to pay for all or part of their education themselves, the number of potential participants in the activity is diminished.⁸ Some black debaters also pointed out that they are among the first in their family to attend college, or that good grades are seen as a way out of poverty; this pressure to excel academically means that many black students tend to participate in fewer time-consuming extra curricular activities--like debate.

Relevance is an important attitudinal barrier. Murder is the leading cause of death among young black men, of those who survive and graduate from high school,⁹ few attend college--fewer still graduate. Yet no CEDA topic in recent memory has directly addressed these (or similar) concerns. The issues addressed in most CEDA rounds are simply irrelevant to many African-Americans.

Finally, it is suggested that, "expression in the [African American] community isn't suppressed, but is channeled toward other activities. Most Black public speakers are channelled toward the religious community and don't try to compete in intercollegiate debate" (survey).

It becomes clear that while there are no overt barriers, the subtle barriers are numerous.

Solutions

On a fundamental level, we must intervene against racism. If we hear a debater joke that he did not make the his high school basketball team, "because blacks tried out" we must explain why that attitude is racist and will not be tolerated. If racist comments are made during a round, in the halls, or in the squad room, we must step in and talk about why such attitudes are unacceptable.

More specifically, CEDA needs to encourage greater participation in debate at the high school level. Individual directors can work with local schools. Directors could sponsor

said that before debate, they were getting in trouble, getting poor grades, and did not plan on attending college. All are now getting good grades, and are likely to peruse higher education.

⁸ Certainly many whites do as well, but the existence of an outside job diminishes the size of an already small pool.

⁹ Business Week reports that, "Among white 18- to 21-year olds, 13.6% have dropped out of high school. Among blacks the rate is 17.5%, among Hispanics 29.3%. The high school dropout rates in major cities, where minorities are concentrated, range from 35% in New York to as high as 50% in Washington [DC]" (1988 114).

undergraduate or graduate student independent study projects that bring debate to the inner-cities. CEDA needs to actively encourage such projects--even if under taken by those not officially affiliated with CEDA programs.

Another obvious action that needs to be taken is the dissemination of information. We need to combat the "general lack of awareness" (survey). If non-white students don't know about debate, and the benefits potentially reaped from participation in the activity, then it will be difficult to increase black participation. Directors of forensics need to make special appeals to potential pools of African-American debaters--black fraternities and student unions on campus. Many Directors said that they take anyone, regardless of race, gender, etc. By the same token, they seek out no one group over another. This may not be an adequate answer, as Kuh and MacKay explain:

What is clear, however, is that mere tolerance of diversity is an unacceptable institutional response to the growing numbers of students of color appearing on predominantly white college campuses. Institutional commitment to promoting a genuine pluralistic learning community is not only desirable, but necessary (1989 54).

If one is attempting to raise money from alumni, one does not appeal to all alumni equally--some are sought out with more vigor than others. Such must be the case with our debaters.

One key to increased participation "is getting more black coaches" (Myrick). A study conducted at Penn State University reported that, "Non-white students tend to seek the advice of minority advisers, counselors, or faculty members for help in solving academic and career problems" (14 1987). The study goes on to report that, "Students often feel more comfortable discussing personal, academic, and nonacademic issues with non-White faculty, staff, and administrators" (1987 15). A coach is far more than a 'guider of arguments', she or he also serves as an advisor and mentor; if African-Americans look to African-Americans for guidance, and none are in the debate office, those students are likely to go elsewhere. Here is another catch-22; most coaches are former debaters, so to get more black coaches, we need more black debaters and to get more black debaters, we need more black coaches. To break this cycle, we must not only encourage blacks to debate, but also to go onto graduate programs and become assistant coaches and directors.

Further, all of the respondents said that scholarships ought to be ear-marked for black debaters. If a barrier to participation is funding, then we need ensure that funding is provided for participation.

CEDA needs to become relevant. Debate ought to bring in the African-American community by addressing here to fore ignored issues--hold on-campus forums, select national topics with obvious case areas that focus on issues of concern to large segments of the African-American community. Coaches need to work with debaters to help them see the impacts of resolutions on non-white communities.

If CEDA does not address issues of importance to the African American community, there is little incentive for African-Americans to debate. On campus, debate teams have special opportunities (through campus forums) foster greater understanding of those issues. Forums would expose non-black debaters to problems of which they may have been unaware, bring those issues to the campus community at large, and serve as a way of locating and recruiting potential black debaters.

On a more comprehensive level it has been suggested that CEDA work with United Negro College Fund (UNCF) schools to encourage participation in the activity--possibly through an ambassador program. CEDA could fund (in conjunction with the host school) such an ambassador. An outstanding African-American debater would be tasked with establishing a debate team on that host campus. There is no reason why that person needs to be a graduate--a mature undergraduate could do the same thing. Similarly, schools with debate programs that are close to historically black colleges (HBC) without debate teams could encourage an assistant coach (or debater) to work with that

It has also been suggested that historically black colleges set up a debate league, similar to the HBC football league (Myrick). While a "HBCCEDA" would foster separatism, it would at least be increasing involvement. Those who do participate might then go on to help non-HBC schools (thus increasing the coaching pool). There would also be spill-over; there is no reason why a member of HBCCEDA would not attend a non-HBC tournament--thus increasing the number of blacks competing, thus increasing the number of blacks competing. On a less-adventuresome scale, CEDA schools could offer financial help (waiving fees to new programs at HBCs, offering scholarships to outstanding African-American debaters on a needs-basis). At the least, we should encourage historically black colleges to join CEDA (Baker, survey and personal interview). These steps will not "solve" the problem. But they will help.

CONCLUSION

CEDA has recently begun to try to open the activity to non-traditional debaters. Brenda Logue's work, the study headed by Pam Stepp and conducted at the 1991 National Tournament, the forum held at the 1991 National Tournament, and the formation of the Commission on Women and Minorities, are all important parts of this opening-up process. There is a risk, however, that we may now consider the issue "dealt with"--it is not. Continued efforts must be made by individuals, programs, and those elected to govern CEDA. Further research needs to be done, and potential solutions need to be tried. This piece is not meant to be a last word, but a first step. When asked what a white teacher can do to combat racism, a black university official responded, "find a teachable moment, and teach". CEDA is an on-going teachable moment. As teachers, coaches, and directors we must seize this moment--lest our teachable moments slip into irrelevance.

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