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Reasoning and Risk: Debaters As An Academically At-Risk Population

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Student populations at-risk for educational failure are increasingly gaining the attention of educators and researchers. According to Wood and Lazzari (1992), "as a result of demographic shifts and changes in societal rules and practices, the face of the student population is changing. Students at risk for educational failure comprise the fastest-growing student population" (p. 24). Although many scholars focus on at-risk populations such as the learning disabled (Mealey, 1990), economically disadvantaged (Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 1989), and ethnic minorities (Darling & Abrams, 1989; Gill, 1992; Howerton, Enger, & Cobbs, 1993; Levin & Levin, 1993; Miller, 1991; Sapp, 1994; Stephen, Varble, & Taitt, 1993), intercollegiate debaters are overlooked. One might assume that competitive debate attracts very bright, highly motivated students who would be least likely to become academically at risk. However, students who participate in intercollegiate debate face several factors--tournament travel and extensive research burdens, for example--that may place them at-risk academically. To investigate the possible at-risk status of intercollegiate debaters, we first explain the concept of academically at risk. We then state our research questions and explain our survey methodology. Finally, we present the results and the implications of our findings.

DEFINING AT-RISK POPULATIONS

Several competing definitions of at-risk populations exist in the literature. Initially, at-risk students have traditionally been defined in terms of their personal and familial characteristics (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993). McMillian and Reed (1994) define at-risk students as "those in danger of dropping out of school because of academic failure or other problems" (p. 137). Sapp (1994) explains that the "Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors defined 'at-risk' as students with normal intelligence whose academic background may cause them to be perceived as candidates for future academic failure or early withdrawal from school" (p. 161). In addition, Slavin and Madden (1989) describe an at-risk student as "one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skill" (p. 4).

While these definitions provide a starting point for the examination of students at-risk, they are largely pejorative and fail to account for several important variables. Contemporary definitions often focus on deficient characteristics of the *student* without accounting for

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characteristics in the students' *environment* which may facilitate risk. As Richardson, Casanova, Placier, and Guilfoyle (1989) note, current definitions of at-risk populations are problematic because they are rooted in an epidemiological metaphor:

> Unfortunately, the decision to employ an epidemiological mode for the study of these problems limits educators' ways of thinking about these phenomena. Since the problem is believed to be inherent in the student, then the search for the cause is limited to the characteristics of the students themselves. Characteristics of our society and school are left unexamined. (p. 6)

The epidemiological model identifies risk factors as exclusive properties of the student: inadequacies, limitations, incompetencies, and deficiencies. According to this perspective, students are at-risk for academic failure if they possess "deficient" characteristics such as learning disabilities, low self-esteem, or external locus of control. Richardson et al. (1989) suggest that being at-risk involves far more than the personal characteristics of the student. This research has led Richardson and her colleagues (1989) to propose the following social constructivist or interactive model of at-risk variables in schools:

> It is an interactive view in which the perception of at-riskness is constructed within a particular social or cultural context. The child brings to the classroom a certain number of characteristics that have been shaped by background and personal factors and past experiences in school. This child interacts with a classroom context that includes other children, teacher(s), and materials. (p. 7)

Unlike the epidemiological model, which focuses solely on personal characteristics, the interactive approach examines the construction of at-riskness within a given context. As educators move beyond the epidemiological model and focus on classroom, school, and societal variables, they will acquire a more accurate and holistic perspective of at-risk students.

The current study uniquely contributes to contemporary discourse regarding at-risk populations for two reasons. First, the study examines a population that has previously been ignored by researchers. This population may be overlooked by those who subscribe to the epidemiological approach precisely because intercollegiate debate is an academic endeavor. If we assume that debaters are very bright and highly motivated, then we are likely to assume that they have the capacity for academic success. However, many variables within the context of intercollegiate debate may influence debaters' at-risk status. Loss of classroom time because of research and travel, for example, tends to compete with debaters' academic commitment.

Second, this study avoids a major shortcoming of many studies in this area by privileging the perspectives and perceptions of those under investigation. The present study should expand discussion regarding at-risk populations by including students' voices.

The following research questions guide our investigation of debaters' perceived at-risk status:

RQ_1: Do students who participate in intercollegiate debate perceive that time committed to the activity interferes with their academic success?

RQ_2: Do students who participate in academic debate perceive that it is important for them to succeed academically?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 102 subjects participated in the study. Data were collected at a large Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) debate tournament, held at a large Midwestern university. This site is appropriate because of the broad range of participants across the CEDA debate population present at the tournament. The ethnic distribution of the sample is: 83.7% Euro American, 6.1% African American, 2.0% Hispanic American, 2.0% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.0% Native American, and 2.0% Bi-Racial/Mixed Race. In terms of gender distribution, 70.5% are male and 27.5% are female. The remaining 2% did not indicate gender. Class rank distribution is as follows: 23.5% freshmen, 28.7% sophomores, 23.8% juniors, and 23.85% seniors.

Instrument

A specific instrument was created for the purposes of data collection. The Self-Perceived Risk Assessment Inventory (SPRAI)[1] has twelve items, ranging from demographic questions to perceptions of academic success. The first seven items solicit information about participants' demographic background, GPA, and time they spend on debate activities versus class work activities. Categories are modeled after instruments used for instructional course evaluation (ICE) familiar to the researchers. The final five items are rated on a five point Likert-type scale. These questions seek participants' perceptions on several issues related to

[1] Because the instrument lacks specific reliability claims, results should be viewed from the perspective of a pilot study.

academic success. Categories are based upon the literature pertaining to debate and at-risk populations.

Statistical Analyses

Simple frequency distributions were conducted for each item. The researchers wanted to gather information which may inform others for future study and research on debate populations. In addition, two t-tests were performed. The first t-test measured differences between participants' GPA and the importance placed on getting good grades in school. The second examined differences between participants' GPA and the importance placed on performing well in debate. For both tests, the researchers isolated participants who referenced a GPA of 4.0-3.5 and 2.9-2.5.

RESULTS

Beyond demographics, the first question on the SPRAI instrument concerns participant GPA. In general, results illustrate above average marks. Specifically, 48.5% of the participants reference a GPA between 4.0 and 3.5. A total of 29.7% of the participants indicate a GPA between 3.49 and 3.0. The remaining 21.8% note a GPA below 3.0. In short, 78.2% of the participants claimed that their GPA is between 3.0 and 4.0.

Results also manifest that participants have been involved in debate (high school and college) for more than three years. Specifically, 25.5% reference less than 3 years working in debate. A total of 55% of the participants indicate 3-6 years involvement. Finally, the remaining 19.6% claim more than six years of involvement.

The results also indicate that more time is spent in debate activity than academic activity. Specifically, only 22.5% state that they spend less than 15 hours a week on debate. Further, 11.8% spend between 16 and 20 hours on debate. The remaining 65.7% of the participants respond that they spend more than 20 hours each week on debate activities.

Results for how much time participants spend on class work were distributed more evenly. The highest percentage (22.5%) of participants indicate that they spend between 1 and 5 hours per week on class work. As compared to 20 or more hours spent on debate (65.7%), only 20.6% of the participants spend more than 20 hours on class work. The remaining values of hours spent on class work are as follows: 21.6% between 6 and 10 hours, 19.65% between 11 and 15 hours, and 15.7% between 16 and 20 hours.

The remaining five questions of the SPRAI focus on participant perceptions of debate, academic success, and combinations of both. First, results demonstrate that more participants believe debate traveling "sometimes" (42.5%, M = 3.186) interferes with their academic

success. Twenty-two point five percent claim that debate travel "rarely" interferes with academics, while 25.5% feel that it is "often" an interference.

Second, results demonstrate that debate research "sometimes" (43.1%, M = 2.882) interferes with participants' academic success. A total of 27.5% claim that debate "rarely" is an interference. The three remaining categories are distributed fairly evenly (never = 7.8%, often = 11.8%, always = 9.8%).

Third, a strong majority of the participants state that being involved in debate benefits them academically (M = 3.99). Specific values are as follows: 21.8% mark that debate is "sometimes" beneficial, 40.6% indicate "often", and 32.7% state that debate "always benefits them academically." Collapsing the last two categories, then, 73.3% of the participants believe that debate benefits them at least "often."

The fourth question of the SPRAI asks participants about the importance of earning "good grades" in academic settings. In general, participants indicate that this is important (M = 4.297). Specifically, 57.45% claim that earning good grades is "always" important. Further, 23.8% believe that this is "often" important. Again, combining these two categories demonstrates that 81.25% of the participants claim that earning good grades in school is important at least "often."

The final question of the SPRAI asks participants about the importance of "performing well" in debate activities. The researchers constructed this question as a means of comparison with school performance. Much like the previous question, results indicate that it is important for participants to perform well in debate (M = 4.228). More than half (51.5%) of the participants claim that performing well in debate is "always" important. In addition, 26.7% and 15.8% state that debate performance is "often" and "sometimes" important, respectively. In short, 78.2% of the participants believe that it is important that they perform well in debate at least "often."

The t-tests yield statistically significant results. The first test demonstrates significant differences, $t(59) = 3.17$, $p < .01$, between groups. Participants reporting a GPA of 4.0-3.5 (M = 4.60) state that getting good grades in school is significantly more important than participants reporting a GPA of 2.9-2.5 (M = 3.77). Results from the second t-test also manifest a significant difference, $t(59) = -2.52$, $p < .05$, between groups. Specifically, participants reporting a GPA of 4.0-3.5 (M = 3.98) indicate that performing well in debate is significantly less important than participants who reported a GPA of 2.9-2.5 (M = 4.77).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study is to gather preliminary data on student debate populations. The researchers are interested in this particular population because students involved in debate spend a significant amount of time away from their usual academic activities. This extra time is often in the form of debate research and traveling. From an intuitive basis the researchers are curious if these time constraints and other factors place debate students academically at-risk.

Our first research question was, "Do students who participate in intercollegiate debate perceive that time committed to the activity interferes with their academic success?" In general, the data present a complex picture. For example, the majority (78.2%) of the participants note that their GPA falls between 3.0 and 4.0. By most academic standards, this is above average. However, the majority (65.7%) of the participants also claim that they spend over 20 hours each week on debate activities. Further, most (22.5%) spend less than five hours per week on their class work. Obviously, the reader can interpret these data differently. Perhaps those involved in debate have enough intelligence and organizational skills to spend at least four times more hours per week on debate than on class work and still achieve at least a 3.0 GPA. However, 64.7% of the participants also indicate that debate at least "sometimes" interferes with their academic success. One has to wonder how much interference this actually is if students still achieve above average grades. Another way to interpret the data is to realize that asking students to report their GPA may not be a valid method. This is not to suggest that the results are entirely inaccurate, since our finding concurs with Jones' (1994) investigation of debater characteristics, which found an average GPA of 3.305. Regardless, the result that students spend significantly more time on debate as compared to academics should be cause enough for further research and possibly concern.

The results paint a positive picture about debate as well. For example, a strong majority (73.3%) of the participants indicate that being involved in debate benefits them academically at least "often." Further research is needed which isolates this variable and seeks to ascertain specific ways that debate involvement is beneficial. Nevertheless, these results bode well for individuals seeking to recruit future debaters, or justify the academic significance of a program.

Our second research question was, "Do students who participate in intercollegiate debate perceive that it is important for them to succeed academically?" Results of this study suggest a qualified yes. In general, these students report that they are concerned about their academic progress as well as their debate activities. However, results of the t-tests demonstrate that debaters with a high GPA are far more concerned with their academic performance than

their peers with lower GPAs. Debaters who report low GPAs indicate that performing well in school is significantly less important than those who report high GPAs. These findings could represent a manifestation of debaters' need to demonstrate their intellectual prowess in some academic context. In other words, students may feel that it is unnecessary to demonstrate their intellectual abilities in the classroom because they feel they succeed in intercollegiate debate. Indeed, Jones (1994) suggests that a clear motivation for debating is proving one's intellectual capacity.

At a minimum, though, debaters who privilege performance in debate and devalue academic performance may place themselves at-risk in the educational system. In other words, no matter how many trophies debaters win, by devaluing the academic experience they might earn only Ds and Fs in course work.

Finally, the reader should not overlook the other significant results of this study such as demographics. Based upon the present sample and despite recent efforts to make the activity more inclusive, the majority of participants in CEDA debate continue to be Euro American males. Diversity continues to be an important issue for directors of intercollegiate debate programs. Strong recruitment efforts are needed which seek out ethnic minorities and females. Increasing the numbers of these populations may benefit debate programs as a whole by introducing a variety of perspectives and backgrounds to the activity. Further research is needed which explores ways to improve recruitment efforts and boost participation by members of these populations (Loge, 1991; Logue, 1985a; Logue, 1985b; Logue, 1987; Simerly & Gartin, 1994; Simerly, Biles, & Scott, 1992; Stepp, 1991; Stepp, Simerly, & Logue, 1994).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite recent attention devoted to at-risk populations, researchers have overlooked students who participate in intercollegiate debate. However, those involved in the activity face several factors that may place them at-risk academically. The results of this study suggest that, while many debaters report high GPAs and a strong commitment to academic success, a significant portion privilege performance in the activity and devalue academic success. Finally, this study is an important step away from research rooted in the epidemiological model of risk. By examining students within the context of debate, the present study avoids the shortcomings of assessing academic risk based merely on the personal characteristics of the students.

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A Feminist Critique of Intercollegiate Debate

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This critique seeks to examine the current practices and mainstream attitudes in the field of intercollegiate debate to determine whether or not they show evidence of being patriarchal. Foss argues that a patriarchal society consists of relationships that "exist in all institutions and social practices" in which men attempt to dominate women. These values are instilled in society, and thus we view them as normal and tend to "perpetuate them" (1996, 166). If practices in the field of debate are found to be patriarchal, then these values and ideas are being perpetuated, perhaps unwittingly, by those in the community. The goal of this examination is to help empower people within the context of intercollegiate debate. Bartanen contends that debate can uniquely empower students in that:

> . . . the debate community can incorporate masculine and feminine ways of knowing and speaking. By understanding better how women and men students from a variety of backgrounds learn and reason and make decisions, we can modify our teaching practices and reform our debating norms to be more amenable to the development of authentic student voices. (Bartanen, 1995, 12)

This essay will proceed by explaining the methodology used, reporting the results obtained, reframing the results as double binds, and concluding with a discussion of possible solutions for the empowerment of the debate community.

METHODOLOGY

The first step in this critique is to define how gender is constructed in debate. How is rhetoric used to define the roles of men and women in the activity? Are there certain opinions, whether spoken or unspoken, about how women and men should behave? Is the viewpoint that debate offers the audience one of masculine or feminine understanding? Is there an attempt being made to leave women powerless? Are women being forced to adopt a masculine mind set in order to identify with and be included in the activity (see Foss, 1996, 170-171)?

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