

## BUILDING OPEN SOCIETIES THROUGH DEBATE

Beth Breger

In the Spring of 1997, the Open Society Institute launched its High School Debate Grantmaking Program. OSI has had a tradition of supporting high school debate through its network of foundations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. As OSI began to formulate priorities for its domestic grantmaking, successful international program models such as debate were taken into consideration. In investigating whether high school debate merited funding in the United States, it became clear that not only is this activity concentrated on students at private, parochial, and wealthy suburban schools, but more important, the tools which debate offers are the very skills which empower young people to actively participate as citizens of an open society. The purpose of this program is to support initiatives which seek to institutionalize competitive debate opportunities in high schools in traditionally underserved communities.

### Why Debate?

Given the declining conditions of large urban school systems in the United States, funding for extra-curricular activities in public high schools is more often than not nonexistent. The cost of providing debate programs is often prohibitive for financially strained inner-city high schools. Because the preparation and delivery of debate arguments provides students with the opportunity to think critically, develop their academic research skills, improve their communication abilities, solve problems creatively, and increase their self-confidence, support for this activity is a crucial empowerment tool for youth. It is these skills which are hardest to teach in traditional classroom settings in inner-city schools. Because students involved in debate regularly engage in in-depth library and Internet research, writing, and information analysis, debate students often receive higher grades than non-debaters in high school and are more likely to continue on to post-secondary education. Debate enables students to present their views effectively and respond to the arguments of those who disagree with them. In a time when youth violence is of increasing concern to all, debate teaches students to command attention with words, provides students with an

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alternate outlet for day-to-day conflict, and gives them a tool with which they can combat physical aggression.

These programs serve not only to offer debate as an educational and cross-cultural opportunity for traditionally underserved high school students, but in doing so they also encourage a dialogue between students and teachers from underserved schools and those from other communities, thereby resulting in profound learning. When those who rarely have opportunity to interact can come together across the common ground of a debate tournament, education becomes the bridge across the chasms of difference.

### Program Goals and Objectives

The primary goal of the Open Society Institute's High School Debate Program is to help make competitive debate accessible to those students most in need of the skills and benefits which it provides. To this end, support is provided to programs which attempt to institutionalize competitive debate in traditionally underserved high school communities in order to give these students the tools to stimulate social change. Grants typically fund the formation of new leagues which offer training and technical assistance as well as administer competitive opportunities. These new "urban leagues" are intended to serve as a springboard for participation in the local competitive debate circuits. In planning these initiatives it is important to consider the character of the local competitive debate circuit in order to determine how these schools will participate in the future. In order to insure that debate programs will eventually be sustained in inner-city high school communities, projects must also include commitments from other partners, such as universities, local boards of education, community based organizations, and other sponsors.

### Program Activities to Date

The program was launched in March 1997, and has since supported Urban Debate League models in Atlanta, Detroit, Tuscaloosa, and Chicago. Since the program's inception, there has been significant networking and information exchange among grantees, as well as potential partners interested in launching similar programs elsewhere in the country. These initiatives have made great strides in attracting other sponsors and supporters, as programs in Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, and New York already have funds allocated by the participating schools. Universities have contributed extensive in-kind

support, school systems have begun to allocate funding from their budgets, and community and corporate foundations have expressed interest in supporting these initiatives.

#### Future Goals and Challenges

The greatest challenge facing both new and existing urban debate league programs is sustainability. There is sustainability needed both in terms of funding and long term technical assistance. OSI's plan is to provide seed funding to strengthen existing Urban Debate Leagues and launch new ones. It is hoped that this support will set the stage for school systems and foundations to recognize the importance of supporting competitive debate in these communities. In addition to securing funds for these programs in the long term, there needs to be a support mechanism to help these schools institutionalize their debate teams, as well as provide ongoing assistance as the schools become competitive in their local debate circuits.

#### Partnership with University Debate Programs

In successful Urban Debate League models, local university debate programs play a crucial role as the centers of training, mentorship, and outreach. The universities serve not only to provide the training for teachers and students, but university debaters play an invaluable role as coaches in local high schools. These students provide a support mechanism for high school teachers as they move into the role of coaches. In addition, college debaters comprise the judging pool at Urban Debate League tournaments. These tournaments provide a practice ground before joining the local debate circuit. As judges, university debaters play a pivotal role in students' learning and debate maturation.

As the momentum for Urban Debate Leagues spreads, university debate programs will continue to be the nuclei for new initiatives. It is important, however, that before new programs are started, that program initiators take time to understand the challenges and successes of other program models, as well as the perspectives of the proposed program participants (the teachers, the students, and the larger urban community). It is hoped that the Ideafest II, being hosted by the Open Society Institute, can serve as a starting point for sharing information and gaining experience about the challenges of expanding urban debate in the United States.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW YORK URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE AND IDEAFEST II

William Baker

A movement started in Atlanta and Detroit. It has taken root in New York. Existing models are expanding in Chicago and Tuscaloosa. New programs are starting in St. Louis and Kansas City. There have been inquiries about starting new programs in several places including Waco, Los Angeles, Tallahassee, Oklahoma City and San Antonio. In four years, there will be a population of between two hundred and eight hundred debaters from the inner-cities with skills and abilities that will transform their vision, their goals and our understanding of how the world is and functions. This reality is the Urban Debate League initiative.

An academic analysis of the importance of this project would fail to convey the depth of commitment and sincere joy that this league provides. In the eighteen years I've been involved with debate, and six years I've been involved with the United Nations, opportunities to open doors and dramatically change a society create my most treasured moments. The New York Urban Debate League (NYUDL) represents one of those cherished experiences. This pilot program funded by the Open Society Institute in partnership with the Emory University Barkley Forum sought to replicate the Atlanta Urban Debate League model in New York. The IMPACT Coalition, a non-profit career development organization using debate as a mentoring base at the collegiate level, provided local support and consultation to the NYUDL on debate instruction and the administration of tournaments.

There were concerns: Atlanta is different from New York. Are there trade-offs between competition and inclusion? Can programs survive the rigors of policy debate over the long haul? How will we select and retain teachers? Yet when all was said and done, the only question was, how can we bring this wonderful program to the attention of those who need to know? Logistical questions may linger but there is no doubt that Urban Debate

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