

**SHARING THE GIFT OF DEBATE:  
NOTES FROM THE TUSCALOOSA DEBATE LEAGUE**

Carrie Crenshaw

Debate historically has been a privilege. The opportunity to learn debating skills has been provided for those who already have the bulk of our nation's educational resources devoted to their successful preparation for the public sphere. Access to a debate education is located in the very school system characterized by disparate resources that privilege some students at the expense of others on the basis of socio-economic status, race, gender, and geographical location. As a result, the opportunity to learn how to debate has not been available to everyone. Too often, debate has been a game for the privileged few.

The need to resist the construction of debate as a privilege is the most important reason why we should conduct outreach programs based on the Urban Debate League model. We must begin to understand debate as a gift. Debate teaches proficiency in argument construction, policy evaluation, library and on-line research, critical thinking, persuasive speaking skills, and information processing, integration and management. These gifts are essential to making our way in the world. They prepare us for professional life, improve our educational achievement and communication skills, and teach us how to manage the complexities of the information age. I would not be an assistant professor at a major state university if it were not for debate and the dedicated professionals who gave me the opportunity to participate. I know many others who would say the same about their own experience.

The University of Alabama's involvement in the Urban Debate League project sponsored by the Open Society Institute has been most gratifying because it has enabled my debaters and me to share the gifts that debate participation has given to us. The development of the Tuscaloosa Debate League has been an extraordinarily meaningful opportunity for us to become actively involved in a community partnership designed to provide an equal chance for public high school students in our area to participate in a life-changing activity. In this essay, I offer a description of our nascent but growing pilot project, and some of the reasons why it has been such a valuable undertaking. I do so in the

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hope that it will assist you to do the same in your community and inspire you to think of debate as a gift that should be shared rather than a privilege to be exclusively enjoyed.

**Elements of the Tuscaloosa Debate League Pilot Program**

The Tuscaloosa Debate League (TDL) is an active partnership between the University of Alabama Debate Team and the seven public city and county high schools of Tuscaloosa. The League is designed to provide the opportunity for high school students to participate in team policy debate. The Open Society Institute has supplied grant funding for launching the Tuscaloosa Debate League's eighteen-month pilot program. The mission of the program includes the following goals: (1) to establish a stable program that will provide opportunities to all students, including those who otherwise could not afford to participate, the many pedagogical advantages of competitive debate; (2) to assist students at risk of dropping out by teaching the skills necessary to succeed in school and by promoting effective alternatives to violent forms of conflict resolution that often lead to suspension and drop out, (3) to increase the probability of college attendance after graduation from high school by supplying students with debate training so that they will be eligible for collegiate debate scholarships and by supplying them with small debate scholarships to the college or university of their choice upon graduation from high school, and (4) to involve University of Alabama debaters in active community service that utilizes their special skills and knowledge for a valuable purpose.

Guided by the purposes set out in our mission statement, the program model is based on five key elements: provision of coaching assistance, squad meetings, workshops, tournament competitions, and the sponsorship of scholarships. After initial contact was made, each high school instructor was assigned two or three University of Alabama debaters to serve as assistant coaches. These assistants attend all after-school meetings and are extensively involved in classroom instruction in those schools that have a class dedicated to speech and debate. They are responsible for developing a curricular plan in concert with their assigned high school teacher, coaching the high school students and judging at TDL competitions. The group of assistants also researches a starting packet of debate briefs. Each high school instructor and their assistants hold consistently scheduled squad meetings in class and/or after school. These meetings provide time for coaching and preparation and intra-squad practice debates. Next year, each of the assistants will receive course credit for these activities in the form of directed independent study hours.

The Tuscaloosa Debate League also hosts workshops for high school faculty members and students. This semester we hosted two faculty development seminars that covered the basics of instruction in argumentation and debate. We supplied each high school instructor with a packet of materials that can be incorporated into their classroom and squad instruction periods. We conducted a demonstration debate that the instructors flowed and adjudicated to give them a practical introduction to the tournament format. Each workshop also included time for open feedback from the high school teachers and planning TDL projects and activities. In concert with each high school principal, I arranged for each of the high school instructors to receive credit for a "professional development" day for attendance at the workshops. We will also host a three-day workshop at the end of the school year. This workshop is designed to give those students who are already involved in TDL a boost on their summer work, and to provide an introduction to policy debate for those new students who intend to join next year.

The Tuscaloosa Debate League also conducts tournament competitions. While the first semester of the eighteen-month pilot project was originally conceived as a planning and implementation period, we got off to such a good start that we were able to host two tournament competitions at the end of our first semester. This accomplishment was inspiring to everyone involved given that the assistant coaches and teachers had less than two months to recruit, coach and prepare those students who participated. The first tournament involved sixteen students and the second involved thirty in debate competition. These competitions are one-day events held after-school or on Saturday using a 6-2-4-8 format. Each participant received a certificate for participating, and awards were given to the teams with the best records and the students with the best speaker points. Because there is no cost involved to the high schools due to TDL sponsorship, the high school teachers are able to involve as many students as possible. At the end of the 1998-1999 competitive season, the Tuscaloosa Debate League will host a championship tournament and awards ceremony. School administrators, parents, teachers, community members and other sponsors will be invited to attend the ceremony. Appropriate student awards will be given. Each high school coach will receive a certificate of appreciation, and other appreciation awards will be given to parents, teachers, school administrators, community members and others who have shown support for the program.

A very important additional element of the program is the Tuscaloosa Debate League's sponsorship of scholarships. This year, TDL will sponsor several coaches and students to

the prestigious Emory University summer debate institute. This will provide essential professional development opportunities for faculty and excellent educational opportunities for local area high school students. In addition, TDL sponsors scholarships for graduates of the program who decide to participate in intercollegiate debate.

#### **Reasons to Reach Out: Sharing the Gift of Debate**

The reasons to implement a high school debate outreach program are many and varied, and I could not possibly cover them all in this limited space. However, there are some central reasons why I believe that high school outreach should be an essential part of every college debate program. First, the benefits to the high school students and teachers are irrefutable. There is ample evidence documenting the benefits of debate participation in part because it provides pre-professional preparation, improvement of students' educational experience and communication skills, and it supplies training for coping in the information age. Participation in debate teaches students many skills including argument construction and evaluation, library research, as well as information processing, integration, and management. It also exposes students to the important social issues of our time and promotes depth of study, complex analysis, and focused critical thinking. Alabama is a state that suffers from chronic under-funding of public education. The Tuscaloosa Debate League supplies the chance to participate in a academically challenging co-curricular activity for students of schools that cannot afford to give them that opportunity. In addition, the League provides an outlet for our dedicated teachers who are overworked and underpaid. Providing local opportunities for students to compete in debate means that schools do not have to come up with resources they do not have. Teachers can promote and participate in an activity that does not consistently take them away from their work, families, and community obligations for days or weeks at a time.

Second, the benefits to the collegiate team are also convincing reasons to develop an outreach program. An intercollegiate program that gives university students the opportunity to share their special talents and skills contributes to their development as well-rounded adults who can see the value of their debate experience in a larger context. It provides a much-needed perspective on their own experience with competition by demonstrating the palpable benefits they have gained from debate. When your students teach others, they experience a deep realization of the depth of their knowledge and value of their own skills. They also improve the quality and quantity of their knowledge and skills. Moreover, they

experience the importance and gratification of sharing their gifts for the purpose of making a difference in the lives of others.

Third, partnerships like these connect the university to its surrounding community. It fulfills the university's obligation to give back to the community which supports it. It also educates the public about the worth and value of supporting your debate program and informs the collegiate debate program about the needs of the local populace. It helps us to understand how to construct our programs in ways that allow debate to make meaningful contributions to our community.

Most important, however, is that outreach programs help us to see debate not as a privilege but as a gift. Sharing debate as a gift resists privileges born of arbitrary and unfair disparities in opportunity. The beauty of debate is that its quality improves as more people of diverse backgrounds participate, contributing their experience to our shared argument knowledge base. Partnerships that share the gift of debate benefit everyone involved, contribute to the vibrancy of the community, and make the gift even more valuable because it is shared.

## THE DETROIT EXPERIENCE

George W. Ziegelmueller

In 1984, the supervisor of Detroit's Gifted and Talented Program asked me to assist him in developing debate programs within Detroit's public high schools. Prior to that time, one or two Detroit public schools had occasionally participated in debate competitions, but there were no continuing, institutionally supported debate programs. With encouragement from the supervisor, a dozen Detroit high school language arts teachers were persuaded to come to the Wayne State University campus to participate in a series of once-a-week debate training seminars. These seminars were two hours in length and were held after regular high school hours. The purpose of the seminars was threefold: (1) to get the teachers interested in and enthusiastic about debate, (2) to instruct them in the fundamentals of debating, and (3) to assist the teachers in organizing debate programs within their own schools. All but two of the teachers lacked any prior training in debate, and none had any substantial knowledge of the activity.

As a result of these seminars, the Detroit Public School Debate League was established to provide a non-threatening environment where Detroit high school students can learn debate while still being motivated by a competitive experience. Each year the League hosts a series of two-round, after school tournaments, and at the end of the debate season a city champion is named based upon the schools' cumulative records in League competition.

Since the founding of the League, substantial numbers of Detroit high school students and teachers have attended the Wayne State University Summer High School Debate Institute. Tuition for this summer program has been provided by Detroit's Gifted and Talented Program, and in some years, by grants from the National Forensic League. Because the Wayne State Summer Program is a non-resident experience, tuition is relatively modest.

Until this year, participation in weekend debate tournaments by Detroit high school students was very limited. Only rarely could money be found within the Detroit school system to fund such tournaments. However, this year, thanks to a grant from the Open Society Institute, all Detroit public schools were given the opportunity to participate in at least three weekend tournaments. While not all the schools took equal advantage of this

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