

CAD FORUM

VOICES FROM THE IDEAFEST:
THE OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE AND URBAN DEBATE IN THE U. S.
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Karl Popper's concept of the open society is rooted in the simple idea of humility: Humans are fallible and no one has a monopoly on the truth. Measured against this idea, the greatest premium is placed on questioning, arguing, having the right to express oneself, and most importantly, having the ability to do so. As a tool for creating, maintaining, and expanding open societies then, debate seems like a natural. Unfortunately, debate education in this country has been a child of larger social systems, systems that are marked by deep inequities. The zones of this society that are least open to possibility also tend to be the zones that offer the least in educational opportunities, including debate.

This special forum issue will focus on recent efforts to address this educational inequity by expanding the reach of academic debate in neglected high schools in American urban areas. Supported by the Open Society Institute and several other organizations, these programs have reached hundreds of urban students in several major cities. The following essays were collected at Ideafest II, a recent gathering of college and high school debate professionals and others who are already involved or seek to become involved in the project of diversifying debate. This issue of *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate* seeks to give a forum to a cross-section of their voices.

Melissa Maxcy Wade begins this section by considering the role of urban debate as a component of educational reform and an alternative to the alienation spawned by current educational practice. Providing a voice from the Open Society Institute, **Beth Breger** contributes an overview of the goals and history of the foundation's support for urban debate activities in the United States. As the National Director of the Urban Debate League Association, **William Baker** chronicles the development of the New York Urban Debate League, highlighting the role of spirit and passion in the unique argument community that this program has fostered. **Les Lynn**, Coordinator for the Chicago Debate Commission, sketches a powerful contrast between the situations faced by suburban and urban schools. Taking Chicago as an example, Lynn points out disparities in funding and attention which justify the expansion of urban debate initiatives.

Moving from the systemic to the individual, **Ede Warner** provides a narrative of his own dilemma in choosing between academic debate and an African-American cultural identity, and reveals how this dilemma was answered for him at the original Ideafest and among the New York urban debaters at the Emory National Debate Institute in 1997. Reporting on the success of the Tuscaloosa Debate League, **Carrie Crenshaw** provides a concrete description of the program and builds a compelling case for the inclusion of outreach programs as a component of every university debate program. **George Ziegelmueller** of the Detroit Debate League identifies not only the benefits, but also many of the more practical considerations that one should bear in mind before involving oneself in debate outreach programs. **Alfred Snider** describes his own experience with the Urban Debate Leagues and provides an overview of the themes discussed at the second Ideafest. Finally, **Edward Lee** provides a unique perspective as one of the initial graduates of the Atlanta Urban Debate League and as the current Co-director of the Tuscaloosa Debate League. Justifying debate as an answer to a failing educational paradigm, Lee creates the image of an educational "homeplace" of identity and opportunity for populations who have been forgotten by the current educational system.

Every great project forges its own narrative, a narrative which includes a history and a culture. It is hoped that this forum section will provide the interested reader with a brief introduction to the ongoing narrative of urban debate in this country.