

SUPPLYING A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION: A CASE FOR MANDATORY TOPIC ROTATION

Sarah Topp, *Trinity University* and **Brett Bricker**,
University of Kansas

Abstract: Contemporary NDT/CEDA topics have typically focused on foreign controversies and have overwhelmingly avoided technical legal debates. This should be cause for concern because it undermines diversity of education, hurts students' chances for post-debate success and undercuts the ability to provide a pedagogical justification for debate to university administrators. We propose a mandatory 4-year topic rotation that includes foreign, domestic and legal controversies. In this paper we explain the costs and benefits of a mandatory topic rotation and respond to likely criticisms of such a proposal. We seek to make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue surrounding topic choice and rotation.

The choice of a debate resolution is central to the production of knowledge that will occur throughout a season. The topic directs attention and each word has the potential to drastically influence what is debated during the nine months of intercollegiate debate. Understanding this importance, it is certainly important to assess the pedagogical criteria topic-writers should use for assessing topics. Coming up with a topic that reflects a controversy with well-divided literature base is a widely accepted necessity, but is not sufficient for an ideal learning experience. This paper argues for the importance of looking at the entire 4-year career of a debater when determining topic selection.

Even a cursory glance at contemporary National Debate Tournament (NDT) topics displays a bias towards foreign policy issues. A closer inspection reveals that since the 1989-1990 academic year, 12 of 22 resolutions

were focused on issues of foreign policy, while only seven focused on domestic concerns and just three on legal issues. If we broaden the count to include the previous decade, the disparity between foreign and legal becomes even starker. From 1979-2011, 17 of the 32 topics were focused on foreign issues, while 11 were domestic and only four legal. Such a disparity should be cause for concern. Seeking topic balance and increasing the breadth of issues debated should be of primary importance in selecting controversy areas. A principled way to approach this problem is to introduce a mandatory rotation of controversy areas so that a four-year cycle includes foreign, domestic, and legal issues.

We offer several arguments in favor of mandatory rotation, including maximizing the educational opportunities of NDT-CEDA debate participants, improving students' chances for post-debate success, bettering our ability to provide a pedagogical justification for debate to university administrator and faculty, and improving the topic options available each year. Finally, we answer objections likely to be lodged against our proposal, including that mandating a rotation means preventing debate about timely topics and that legal topics are bad for debate.

Justification for Our Proposal

In order to maximize topic area diversity and educational opportunities available to college debaters, we support a four-year rotation of controversy areas, where year one is foreign, year two is domestic, year three is community choice, and year four is legal. The mandated four-year rotation ensures that over a four-year career, each student would be exposed to foreign policy, domestic policy and legal policy issues. At the same time, it still gives flexibility in the "community choice" area to account for timely events and community desires. Such a rotation

is possible under current NDT-CEDA procedures, but it is not guaranteed and empirically has not occurred.

We suggest placing community choice into the third spot because that will preclude the community from debating two foreign topics back-to-back. History suggests that the community prefers foreign topics to others. Assuming this trend continues into the future, placing community choice between domestic and legal separates it from the foreign topic, helping to avoid two foreign topics in a row.

Benefits of Mandatory Rotation

The proposed topic rotation scheme would help maximize the educational value of debate. As noted, topic choice has great influence in shaping the research done by students. Starting in July, after the release of the resolution, and continuing until April, after the conclusion of the CEDA and NDT national tournaments, students research every aspect of the topic – evaluating issues from multiple and diverse perspectives. The research is turned into arguments and tested and refined in debates throughout the season. It is estimated that the resulting research is equivalent to the work done by a master's candidate on his or her thesis (Mitchell, 1998) and the refinement of arguments throughout the year makes many college debaters experts on the selected topic.

Mandatory topic rotation would guarantee that students achieve depth of education on a diversity of areas. Mandating a new topic area each year means that a four-year debater will have in-depth knowledge of four different areas of controversy. It is true that absent compulsory rotation, students still learn about several topic areas, but with forced rotation, there will likely be a larger variety of topics discussed. Crucially, each student will be exposed to issues relevant to foreign policy, domestic policy, and legal policy. Failure to guarantee topic rotation can result

in stale education.

A mandatory rotation ensures that students are exposed to a large variety of literature bases, and therefore expand their research skills. Debaters' research skills already tend to be far ahead of their non-debate peers in college. However, some debaters can currently go their entire college career searching a database or source unrelated to domestic or legal issues. In particular, the focus on foreign policy and avoidance of legal policy has limited the research bases to which debaters are exposed. A topic rotation changes the types of databases and searches done because some databases are more relevant and useful for some topics than they are for others. The result is that students will experience and benefit from working with different interfaces and reading a variety of academic genres. Such exposure will make them more well-rounded debaters and students and better prepare them for life in the law, academia and other professions.

Many former debaters attend graduate school or law school, while others join think tanks, intern, or work in politics. Regardless of which path is chosen, debaters would benefit from having debated a variety of areas. Exposure to more topics helps to create well-rounded students with stronger critical thinking abilities; this, in turn, may make them more appealing to graduate school admissions boards.

A mandatory topic rotation also can improve the image of debate in the minds of college administrators and professors. As universities move toward new models of education and as budgets tighten, it is absolutely necessary for the debate community to clearly explain the pedagogical value of the activity. A shift to a mandatory topic rotation system would highlight the educational value of the activity. Debate programs nationwide can benefit from being able to detail the myriad of educational benefits to be accrued

from debate in general, and topic rotation, in particular. Additionally, graduate and professional school enrollment of graduates can improve the university's image, so a debate team with a high percentage of students bound for graduate school will boost the debate team's capital on campus. Further, programs can increase their on-campus profile by showcasing the year's topic in a public debate on campus. Their campus communities would benefit from the diversity of topics being shared. Such campus involvement is rewarded by many administrations.

Finally, mandatory rotation will improve the quality of options available for the controversy area vote. Currently, papers submitted fit no common theme. The community is asked to decide between disparate foreign, domestic and legal questions. A topic rotation focuses all papers in the direction of the year's topic mandate, instead of towards a haphazard mixture of controversies. This narrow limit ensures better-selected topics and a larger selection of comparable topics that will not be disregarded in favor of a foreign controversy.

Answering Primary Concerns

Upon consultation with several Directors of Debate, two criticisms of our proposal have surfaced. First, the argument has been forwarded that a mandatory topic rotation lacks the flexibility necessary to address issues of timely concern. For example, an extremely salient foreign policy issue may be disqualified from the list of possible topics because of a recently debated foreign policy topic. This objection questions whether the costs of inflexibility may be larger than the benefits of a mandatory rotation. Second, the inclusion of a legal topic has prompted concern. Anecdotal evidence points to a lingering backlash over the last legal topic debated in the 2006-2007 season. This objection carries a wide variety of concerns: the "boring" nature of the topic, the "tediousness" of legal research, and

the lack of affirmative literature supporting the mechanism of the last legal topic which asked the court to overrule a decision. While each of these objections has merit, the educational and structural benefits to a mandatory topic rotation that includes a legal topic outweigh the possible drawbacks.

The first criticism of our proposal questions whether a mandatory rotation leaves the community enough flexibility to craft a resolution that addresses a timely concern. For example, if the community chooses two domestic topics in a row, our model would preclude the ability to choose a domestic topic for a third straight year. While a mandatory rotation certainly constrains community choice, this limit is insubstantial.

First, our proposal leaves one of every four years unconstrained by the rotation. If an issue demanded debate, and it did not fit into the rotation, the community could vote to use this free year on that topic. Second, it is not difficult to find timely concerns in our proposed areas. New domestic, foreign and legal controversies arise daily. A mandatory rotation would simply preclude multiple consecutive years of timely issues in a single area (domestic, foreign, or legal), but not a discussion or timely controversies in general. Finally, we question whether timeliness should be a major concern when crafting a resolution. While a timely topic is great for learning about current events, too often the status quo begins to resemble the mechanism of the resolution, which substantially limits (both affirmative and negative) uniqueness. For example, debates on the 2005-2006 topic, which asked affirmatives to substantially increase diplomatic and/or economic pressure on the People's Republic of China, oftentimes devolved into simply a question of whether status quo pressure was sufficient to trigger advantages and disadvantages. Similarly, debates about Afghanistan on the 2007-2008 topic, which asked affirmatives to

increase its constructive engagement with Afghanistan by offering them a security guarantee(s) and/or a substantial increase in foreign assistance, were similarly stale because the status quo was moving in the direction of the mechanism of the resolution. In both examples, debates often avoided the heart of the topic in favor of a focus on uniqueness. While debate over timely resolutions may be a noble educational endeavor, the topic committee should carefully ensure uniqueness for both the affirmative and the negative by avoiding timely issues that may be unpredictably addressed by the Federal Government during the season.

The second criticism of our proposal questions the benefit of including a legal topic in the mandatory rotation. Criticism of the 2006-2007 legal topic, which asked affirmatives to overrule one or more of the following decisions: *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*; *Ex parte Quirin*; *U.S. v. Morrison*; *Milliken v. Bradley*, widely vary. Some view the research as boring, others found the debates stale, and many more question forcing affirmatives to defend an overrule of a previous decision as the mechanism of the plan. Despite these concerns, there are significant benefits to including a legal topic in the four-year rotation.

First, legal topics teach strong research skills. Kade Olsen (personal communication, February 2011), a law student at New York University and a successful debater during the 2006-2007 season, argues that the most recent legal topic offered uniquely important education:

The court topic was invaluable for legal research in law school. It taught me to closely read judicial opinions, chase footnotes, and apply judicial reasoning to difficult fact patterns. More importantly, I learned to approach judicial opinions as tools to apply in argumentation instead of absolute answers to questions.

Andrew Jennings (personal communication, February

2011), a law student at the University of Kansas, agrees that the court topic “helped with making sense of complex legal databases and put me a step ahead of my peers in terms of research and preparation.” These research skills are unique to legal topics. While other topic teach debaters to navigate relevant think tanks and Lexis-Nexis news sources, legal topics teach debaters to effectively utilize distinct legal databases such as WestLaw, HeinOnline, and Lexis Law reviews.

Second, legal topics facilitate an education that is useful in law school. The most recent legal topic provided Olsen the “background knowledge of everything we have/will discuss in constitutional law this semester.” Brenton Culpepper (2010), a former law student at Vanderbilt University, utilized information researched for the Morrison area (his affirmative on the topic) to publish in the *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*. Given the large number of debaters that go on to law school, the community does itself a disservice by avoiding topics that are explicitly legal in nature.

Finally, the objection to asking affirmative’s to overrule a previous court decision has merit. This mechanism made the affirmative defend an action by the Supreme Court that was only sparingly supported in affirmative solvency advocates. Fortunately, we don’t have to make this mistake again. A recurring legal resolution allows the community to reflexively learn from our mistakes, and write better resolutions. For example, future legal topics may choose not to ask the affirmative to overrule a decision as the mechanism of the resolution. Or, the committee may choose case areas that demand that the affirmative overrule a decision, allowing the mechanism to guide the choice of topic areas. Incorporating a legal topic into a four-year mandatory rotation helps streamline the resolution writing process, because the pitfalls are immediately memorable.

Conclusion

A compulsory rotation of controversy areas clearly accrues many benefits. From helping to maximize the educational advantages of debate and increasing the image of debate teams on their home campuses to improving the options available for a vote, mandatory topic rotation can help the debate community in several ways. Although there are several viable concerns that could be lodged against the idea of forced cycling of topics, we believe the merits of our proposal outweigh the drawbacks. The four-year rotation gives the community flexibility through the “community choice” area and each of the other areas (foreign, domestic, and legal) have inherent richness and depth ensuring a wide variety of topics can be debated under each one. Similarly, while some may express concerns related to the legal topic, the educational benefits should put their fears at ease. We believe there are strong merits to our proposal of foreign, domestic, community choice, and legal and encourage the colleges and universities that NDT-CEDA to begin a dialogue and move towards ensuring its passage.

References

- Culpepper, B. T. (2010). Missed opportunity: Congress’s attempted response to the world’s demand for the Violence Against Women Act. *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, 43, 733-762.
- Mitchell, G. R. (1998). Pedagogical possibilities for argumentative agency in academic debate. *Argumentation & Advocacy*, 35, 2, 41-60.

Sarah Topp is the Director of Debate at Trinity University. Brett Bricker is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. The authors would like to thank Robert Rowland for his feedback and advice. Please address correspondence to Brett Bricker at bbricker@ku.edu.