EVIDENCE BASED DECISION MAKING AND ASSESSMENT FOR THE CROSS EXAMINATION DEBATE ASSOCIATION

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Abstract: In an attempt to provide evidence that might enhance deliberations regarding assessment of college policy debate a survey was administered during the fall of 2014 to gather data on current college policy debate demographics and attitudes toward contemporary debate practices, norms, and controversies. The survey was completed by 378 respondents, representing current debaters, coaches, and alumni. While participants were overwhelmingly White (75%) and male (63%) the sample provided evidence that participants identifying with some form of disability (38%) and participants identifying as other than heterosexual (28%) make up a considerable part of the debate community. Furthermore, the number of participants with no high school policy debate experience (21%) or non-policy debate experience (40%) provided additional data to suggest that squads and organizations may want to rethink debate governance and community norms. Results related to satisfaction regarding the debate resolution, motivations for debate, community concerns, tournament administration, and overall debate were included. Participants reported that they were primarily motivated by competition and education to debate, that hostility and harassment were the most important issue to address in the debate community, and that sustainability and ground balance should drive topic construction.

Keywords: CEDA, policy debate, community norms, debate assessment

Evidence has always played a central role in the intercollegiate policy debate community. For decades, evidence has been the foundation of arguments

advanced and decisions rendered by debaters, judges, and coaches. Granted, the evidence may have taken different forms over the years. From quotes and statistics, to note cards and evidence briefs, evidence now is prepared and communicated almost exclusively digitally through email chains and flash drives. Despite the various forms of evidence, the role of evidence has always been to provide the substantive and authoritative support for claims advanced in and about a given debate round. The privileging of evidence (and research) in forming arguments in intercollegiate policy debate sets the policy debate community apart from the worlds, parliamentary, public, or other debate formats. Despite this strong tradition, the role of evidence in decision-making about debate community policies, norms, and guidelines has been lacking.

Recent events have increased the appeals to evidence for decision-making about and for the intercollegiate policy debate community. First and foremost, the accountability movement within higher education has demanded evidence and data for justifying resource allocation for universities, curriculum, and programming (Burke & Minassians, 2003). Calls for assessment, high-impact practices, and evidence-based programming are now beginning to infiltrate the intercollegiate policy debate community (Partlow-Lefevre, 2012; Watt, 2012). Second and perhaps most importantly, demographic and argumentative trends over the last decade have changed the very nature of the debate community. These trends mirror the growing diversity in higher education over the years, but are perhaps intensified with outreach efforts to minority and at-risk populations. The proliferation of Urban Debate Leagues over the last two decades have increased the number of minority students who are college ready (Anderson &

Mezuk, 2012).

These shifts in debate participation are accompanied with changes in argument choices, even motivations for joining and staying in debate. The differences in demographics, argumentation, and motivation came to the fore recently with the successes of Towson University and Emporia State University. Public (and external) discussions about debate in outlets like *The Atlantic* (Kraft, 2014) and *The Washington Post* (Thompson, 2014) spurred further conversations, and in some instances policy changes, within the policy debate community. In deliberating about recent events and in seeking out answers about the policy debate community, most members could only respond with anecdotal or speculative evidence. This essay responds to these questions with an attempt to generate evidence to inform decision-making by, about, and for the college policy debate community.

Debate and Assessment Research

Assessment

Debate program assessment research has rarely, if ever, taken the form of actual assessment (Bauer & Young, 2000; Murphy, 1992; Partlow-Lefevre, 2012; Watt, 2012). On the one hand, debate program assessment has sought to determine the common characteristics of top debate programs (Bauer & Young, 2000; Murphy, 1992). Here, research is more concerned with evaluation than assessment. The evaluation provided in this research is not in terms of value added or program improvement. Rather, it sought to identify the common characteristics of the debate programs ranked highest in CEDA. For example, Bauer & Young (2000) build on previous research by including National Debate Tournament (NDT) participating debate programs to look at the number of students,

coaches, and funding as related to competitive success. On the other hand, more recent debate professionals have called for forms of assessment more in line with the accountability movement within higher education (Partlow-Lefevre, 2012; Watt, 2012). This scholarship is less oriented toward contributing original research around data collection than providing a theoretical and practical framework for debate program assessment going forward. Building on traditional assessment practices, Partlow-Lefevre (2012) suggests a four-stage assessment cycle for debate programs and administrators: establishing written objectives, examining practices in relation to the written objectives, identifying assessment tools, and using results to improve practices. Partlow-Lefevre (2012) goes a step further, giving examples throughout each stage of what a program director might do, identify, or look for in assessing one's debate program. Watt (2012) continues this call for debate program assessment, but does so by focusing on the use of the debate ballot as an instrument for assessment.

Norms

In addition to debate programs, debate practices and community norms have been an area for research and scholarship (Cox & Adams, 1993; McDonald & Jarman, 2000; Ulrich, 1991). Rather than focus on demonstrating the value, worth, or contribution of a debate program, these studies have isolated specific debate norms for evaluation. McDonald & Jarman (2000) evaluated the need for six versus eight preliminary rounds. Given the cost of attending and hosting tournaments, they tested a community hypothesis of whether having fewer preliminary debates would impact the preliminary round results. Judging assumptions, another aspect of tournament norms were examined by Cox & Adams (1993). Their research

experimented with non-expert judges in collegiate policy debate and the attitudes of debate participants toward these judges. This experiment questioned the motivations for college debate; whether debate should be viewed as a game, educational, or a different understanding. Both Cox & Adams (1993) and Ulrich (1991) gestured toward the impact of community norms on debate participation, notably asking how, if at all, debate norms are creating a community which lacks a significant minority population. This research is valuable, but currently more than twenty years old and in need of updating as the participation in debate has likely changed over the years. While some norms have been studied they have likely changed over the last twenty years, for this reason we propose the following two research questions:

> RQ1: What are the attitudes about norms held by members of the debate community toward contemporary debate practices?

> RQ2: How could current debate practices be improved?

Community

The final thread of debate research and assessment considers what kind of community climate is created by and through debate practices and norms (Jones, 1994; Jones & Treadaway, 2000; Loge, 1991; Rogers, 1997; Ulrich, 1991). Some scholars looked at the climate as a whole while others evaluated the impact of the debate community climate on specific populations. Jones (1994) questioned the overall motivations for why one would participate in college-policy debate. More than just looking at the reasons, Jones (1994) wanted to move into motivations for collegiate policy debate participation. He found that students liked the intellectually challenging climate of debate and the

cultural emphasis on critical thinking. Rogers (1997) wondered about the overall impact of the community climate, although he focused on the attitudes of dominant versus subdominant group members. Here, women and minorities were the defined subgroup. Rogers (1997) sought to identify the views of group members toward the other major group as well as about their own group members. He remarked, "Real or not, if subdominant cultural groups perceive of their contributions to the activity as unwanted, unwelcome and/or unsuccessful as they attempt to increase both their experience and commitment level, how can the forensic community expect significant levels of participation?" (Rogers, 1997, p. 5). Rogers (1997) was concerned with the impact of community norms on particular debate participant populations. Given that community climate continues to be important and has not been empirically researched in nearly two decades, we ask the following research question.

> RQ3: What concerns exist among members of the debate community regarding the overall debate community?

In particular, scholars focused on the debate climate via both Black participation and sexual harassment. While Cox and Adams (1997), Rogers (1997), and Ulrich (1991) expressed concern for the lack of minority participation, Loge (1991) using a mailed survey, wanted to know the percentage of Black participation in CEDA debate. He found that Black participation was significantly lower than that of Black participation generally in higher education. Loge (1991) identified recommendations for increasing Black participation, like targeted recruitment efforts and alternative topic construction. Jones & Treadaway (2000) focused specifically on the relationship between the debate community climate and sexual harassment. They

identified different systems of support, individualist and collective, and analyzed what impact these support systems may have on experiencing and reporting sexual harassment.

While the literature on debate research, assessment, and evaluation is not as robust as one would like, it does provide a basis for moving forward in today's climate of higher education accountability. One can draw on the recent call for development of an assessment strategy for the debate community (Parlow-Lefevre, 2012). There is a strong need to address some of the concerns identified, one of which is the perceived changes in demographics and argumentation. The seeming increase in non-White, non-male debaters has been accompanied by a diversification in argumentation approaches to college policy debate. One may speculate these changes are due to different topic construction, argumentation style, economic trends, or any number of factors influencing debate today (Loge, 1991). Calls for understanding debate community demographics, attitudes, climate, and learning without any recent evidence-based baseline to make comparisons or demonstrate change contribute little to assessment efforts or policy deliberations. Therefore, we suggest the following three research questions to help provide a foundation for further research, deliberation, and assessment.

RQ4: Who is currently participating in debate?

RQ5: What are the characteristics and attitudes of former debate participants toward contemporary debate practices?

RQ6: Are members of the debate community satisfied with college policy debate?

Method

Participants

The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the principal investigator's university. The initial sample contained 563 surveys, 185 of which were removed for significant missing data (>70%). The sample contained 378 completed surveys with a fairly even mix between undergraduate students (34%), coaches (33%), and alumni (32%) participants. Three quarters of the sample (76%) identified as White with 63.3% being male (Table 1). The next largest groups by race were Asian (6.5%), Black (5.4%), and Hispanic (5.4%). Six percent (5.9%) did select a gender identity other than male or female (Table 2). In response to the question about sexual orientation, 22% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or another sexual orientation while 75% identified as heterosexual (Table 3). Just over one third (38%) identified themselves as having some form of disability, with psychological being the largest identification category (12.2%) (Table 4). Finally, 1.3% of respondents identified as being or having been an international student.

A majority were currently a member of a four year public university (61%) or a private four year institution (29%). Information on CEDA region affiliation and NDT district affiliation were gathered and were fairly evenly distributed. For CEDA, the two most represented regions were Mid-America (16%) and Mid-Atlantic (14%) (Table 5). As for the NDT, the top two districts were D3 (26%) and D7 (15%) (Table 6). Regarding debate experience, 21% of respondents had no high school policy debate experience (Table 7) and 41% had at least one high school semester in a debate format other than policy debate (Table 8).

Materials and Procedure

The survey instrument was created by members of the CEDA Research & Assessment working group, led by individuals with experience and interest in assessment and data collection. The instrument emerged out of a process beginning with big picture questions about what kind of information might help inform the discussions (and subsequent decisions) happening within the collegiate policy debate community. From there, the group generated a list of questions that might be used in the survey. The questions were reviewed, edited, and grouped into their main themes; demographics, attitudes toward community norms, attitudes toward tournament practices, and overall satisfaction. Specifically, the overall satisfaction subscale consisted of two items ($a = .74$) while all of the other items were analyzed individually.

The data collection tool was labeled the College Policy Debate Survey and distributed through the CEDA organization web forums, CEDA membership email distribution list, College Policy Debate Facebook group, and College Policy Debate Alums Facebook group. The survey was accompanied with information that informed participants that the goals of the survey were to better understand the demographics of the college policy debate community and to understand their attitudes regarding policy debate practices. There was no incentive for participants to respond aside from contributing to this data collection effort to better understand the college policy debate community. The survey was launched August 22, 2014 and closed September 24, 2014. The timeframe was chosen to coincide with the beginning of the competitive debate season because this time period would likely provide access to a greater number of members of the college policy debate community. The survey did not collect information about where participants learned about the

survey. Because the survey was administered in open online forums, email distribution lists, and Facebook groups, it was impossible to determine a response rate.

Results

Attitudes toward Topic and Resolution Norms

Respondents were asked questions about their attitude toward what makes a good policy debate resolution and the role of the resolution throughout the debate season. Participants responded to the question "Please tell us what considerations you consider to be the most important when thinking about what makes the best collegiate policy debate resolution." They were presented with eight different options and asked to rate importance on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being *not at all important* and 5 being *extremely important*. For example, respondents were asked if they consider the role of resolution agent, balance of affirmative/negative ground, and opportunities for public engagement to be the most important when thinking about what makes the best policy debate resolution. The mean response varied across the eight different considerations, as high as 4.43 for a resolution that should be sustainable across the debate season to a low of 2.36 for a personally relevant resolution (Table 9).

A number of statistically significant differences were found among demographic grouping variables in attitudes toward resolution characteristics (Table 10 & 11). Too few participants identified among the non-majority demographic variables so the respondents were grouped as either majority or non-majority regarding their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability status. In order to create groups that could be compared for statistically significant differences, all of those selecting non-majority categories, for example non-White, were collapsed into

one group and compared against the majority category, White in this example. Possible things to consider when creating a resolution were measured on a 5 point Likert scale with 1 representing *not at all important* and 5 indicating *extremely important*. For race, a significant difference was found in attitudes toward the role of resolution agent in constructing the best resolution between Whites (M = 3.53, SD = 1.01) and non-Whites (M = 3.79, SD = 1.09); t(376) = -2.096, p = .037, d = .25.

For gender identity, there were several significant differences. One difference was in the attitude toward a resolution being personally relevant between male (M = 2.26, SD = 1.09) and non-males (M = 2.54, SD = 1.18); t(376) = -2.310, p = .021, d = .25. Another difference was in attitude toward sustainability of the resolution across the debate season between male (M = 4.35, SD = .819) and non-males (M = 4.56, SD = .635); t(352.57) = -2.807, p = .005, d = .29. The final difference among gender was in opinions about the importance of contemporary relevance for a resolution between male (M = 3.53, SD = .974) and non-males (M = 3.79, SD = .898); t(376) = -2.579, p = .01, d = .28. Only one other demographic characteristic showed a difference in attitudes toward resolution characteristics; sexual orientation and the role of personal relevance. A significant difference was found between heterosexual (M = 2.26, SD = 1.08) and non-heterosexual (M = 2.64, SD = 1.24) respondents on a resolution's personal relevance, t(376) = -2.891, p = .004, d =.33. Disability status showed no differences between those indicating presence of a disability and those with no disability across coaches, students, and alumni.

Participants were asked what part should the resolution(s) play in guiding and determining what

happens in a given debate round. Participants were presented with five potential resolution relationships and asked how supportive they would be on a 5-point scale; from 1 *not at all* to 5 *extremely*. Support for a single resolution that included a non-USFG agent was the only model that received mean support larger than 2 (2.89) on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being *extremely supportive* and 1 *not supportive at all* (Table 12).

Attitudes toward Improving Contemporary Tournament Practices

Next, research question two investigated potential changes to the current practices of debate. Participants were asked questions about support for tournaments and the length of the tournament season. Respondents reported they were *a little likely or somewhat likely* to support tournaments that focused exclusively on a particular style of debate so long as it did not impact qualification for the NDT or accumulation of CEDA/NDT points (M = 2.64, SD = 1.30). Participants reported they were *somewhat likely* (M = 2.95, *SD* = 1.34) to support an additional sweepstakes award which would encourage schools in other debate formats to try CEDA/NDT tournaments or vice versa. Regarding the length of the competitive tournament season, respondents reported that they were *a little likely* to support the season being shorter than is currently practiced September through March (M = 2.25, *SD* = 1.32) while they were *not at all likely* to *a little likely* to support the season being longer than currently practiced (M = 1.83, *SD* = 1.20).

Respondents were also asked questions about the best practices for administering policy debate tournaments. For regional collegiate policy debate tournaments, the majority (65%) preferred 6 preliminary debates, and for national tournaments,

most (72%) preferred 8 preliminary rounds (Table 13). Participants were also asked about having a banquet and/or different social activity on the night before elimination rounds. Respondents reported 46% in favor, 20% opposed, and 29% indicating that they would only be in favor of having a banquet at the national tournaments.

Another set of tournament questions concerned seeding practices. In response to what should decide seeding for preliminary round pairings two options rose to the top. One third were unsure (33%) and the next highest selection was opponent win record (30%). When it came to elimination round seeding the results were similar with opponent win record (36%) being rated the best option and a third were unsure (26%) how seeding should be done (Table 14). Finally, respondents indicated they would be *somewhat likely* or *quite likely* to support using the same method for determining seeding in both preliminary and elimination rounds ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.1$).

Attitudes toward Debate Community Concerns

The third research question focused on the importance of certain issues for the collegiate policy debate community to address, participants were asked "How important are the following issues for the collegiate policy debate community to address?" (Table 15). An ANOVA revealed differences between undergraduates, coaches, and alumni for their attitude toward the importance of structural and institutional inequalities, $F(2,375) = 6.38$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Fisher LSD post hoc comparisons were used to follow up and showed that both undergraduates and coaches were significantly more likely than alumni to believe it was important. Another group difference was on the importance of having a non-U.S. federal government

topic, $F(2,375) = 4.10$, $p = .033$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Fisher LSD post hoc comparison revealed that students felt that having a non-U.S. federal government topic was more important than alumni. Two additional questions found students and alumni differing significantly on the importance of addressing community unity, separation, and/or identity, $F(2,375) = 5.95$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and tiebreaker for pairing rounds, $F(2,375) = 4.63$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .02$. In each case Fisher LSD follow-ups showed that students thought the issue was of greater importance than did alumni. The final significant group difference regarded the perception of factors beyond the debate round influencing competitive outcomes, $F(2,375) = 6.90$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Here, the Fisher LSD post hoc comparison showed that students felt the issue should be addressed more so than did the coaches. Video recording debates and card clipping were two issues where all three groups were in agreement. The use of video recordings were generally rated to be *a little important* or *somewhat important* and card clipping was *quite important* and *extremely important* to most participants.

Differences were found on the importance of certain issues for the collegiate policy debate community to address based on race and gender (Table 16), but no differences were found based sexual orientation or disability (Table 17). Responses measuring the importance of a given issue for the community to address were recorded on a 5 point Likert scale with 1 indicating *not at all important* and 5 being *extremely important*. For race, statistically significant differences were identified on structural and institutional racism, harassment and/or hostile debate environments, and perception of factors beyond round influencing competitive outcomes. A difference was found on addressing racism between those identifying as White

(*M*=3.97, *SD*=1.10) and those identifying as not White (*M*=3.66, *SD*=1.40); *t*(130.31) = 1.961, *p* = .05, d = .25). Another statistical difference was related to addressing hostile debate environments between those identifying as White (*M* = 4.40, *SD* = .91) and those identifying as not White (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = 1.10); *t*(376) = 2.621, *p* = .009, d =.29. The final difference was on addressing the perception of factors beyond the round influencing debates between those identifying as White (*M* = 3.01, *SD* = 1.10) and those identifying as not White (*M* = 3.32, *SD* = 1.20); *t*(376) = -2.203, *p* = .028, d = .26.

For gender identity, statistically significant differences existed in attitudes toward the importance of addressing harassment and/or hostile debate environments, community unity, separation and/or identity, tiebreaker for pairing rounds, and video recording/use of video recordings. Recall that the scale was 1-5 with a 5 indicating the issue was very important for the debate community to address. The first difference was on addressing hostile environments between those identifying as male (*M* = 4.21, *SD* = .97) and those identifying as not male (*M* = 4.52, *SD* = .93); *t*(376)=-3.094, *p*=.002, d=.33. Another difference was related to addressing community unity between those identifying as male (*M*=3.24, *SD*=1.20) and those identifying as not male (*M*=3.59, *SD*=1.10); *t*(376)=-2.746, *p*=.006, d=.29. A difference was also indicated in attitudes toward addressing tiebreakers for pairing between those identifying as male (*M* = 2.59, *SD* = 0.99) and those identifying as not male (*M* = 2.92, *SD* = 1.10); *t*(376) = -2.906, *p* = .004, d = .31. The last statistically significant difference was in attitudes toward addressing video recordings between those identifying as male (*M* = 2.67, *SD* = 1.08) and those identifying as not male (*M* = 2.96, *SD* = 1.10);

$t(376) = -2.517, p = .012, d = .26.$

Debate Participant Demographics & Motivations to Debate

An important element to this research (RQ4) was understanding who was participating in debate as debaters, coaches, and alumni who are still interested in debate (RQ5). These results can be found in Tables 1-4 which give detail on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. The most identified categories were white (69%), male (60%), heterosexual (72%), and having no disability (48%). But more than just who participated in debate, we also wanted to ask why were different participants motivated to be involved in the debate community.

Participants were asked about their participation in debate and potential reasons that motivated their decision to be involved with debate. Three of the questions resulted in significant differences, regarding the importance of an aspect of debate, and those were education, resume building, and debate as a form of activism (Table 18). Students and coaches differed significantly on education as a potential motivator for debate participation, $F(2,375) = 5.31, p = .005, \eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed coaches rated the educational importance of debate higher than students. The importance of debate and resume building showed significant differences between coaches and alumni as well as coaches and students, $F(2,375) = 15.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. Fisher LSD post hoc comparisons showed that alumni and current undergraduates felt that participating in debate was important for their resumes; coaches on the other hand did not rate this as an important reason for being involved in debate. The final group difference was between students and alumni on the importance of

activism for motivating debate participation, $F(2,375)$ = 3.76, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc comparison using the Fisher LSD test revealed that alumni rated this as significantly less important than students.

Differences were also found on motivating reasons to debate based on demographic variables (Table 19). These reasons for participating in debate were measured on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being *not at all important* and 5 being *extremely important*. For gender, statistically significant differences were identified on social, education, and activism as reasons for participating in debate. A significant difference was found for social factors driving participation between those identifying as male ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.14$) and those identifying as not male ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.09$); $t(376) = -3.313$, $p < .001$, d = .35. Another difference was on education between those identifying as male ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .91$) and those identifying as not male ($M = 4.48$, $SD = .79$); $t(376) = -2.937$, $p = .004$, d = .32. The final significant difference for reasons to participate in debate was debate as a form of activism between those identifying as male ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.16$) and those identifying as not male ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.34$); $t(264.89) = -3.285$, $p < .001$, d = .35. The last demographic variable driving statistically significant differences for motivations to debate was sexual orientation. A difference was found on competitiveness between those identifying as heterosexual ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .85$) and those identifying as not heterosexual ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .96$); $t(376) = 2.624$, $p = .009$, d = .0.29. A significant difference was identified regarding debate as a form of activism, as a reason for participating, between those identifying as heterosexual ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.20$) and those identifying as not heterosexual ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.40$); $t(156.74) = -2.590$, $p = .01$, d = .31).

Overall Satisfaction with College Policy Debate

The final research question investigated the satisfaction of current debate participants. Survey participants were asked two questions on a 1-5 Likert scale with 1 being not *satisfied* and 5 being *quite satisfied* and four open-ended questions about the overall state of debate. Respondents indicated they were *somewhat* or *quite satisfied* with debate (M = 3.21, SD = 1.1) while *a little bit* or *somewhat satisfied* with the NDT/CEDA college debate community (M = 2.72, SD = .98). Data from the two satisfaction items were summed to create a composite score with acceptable reliability (α =.74). Respondents reported slightly above ambivalent satisfaction on this new composite score using the 5-point composite scale (M = 2.97, SD = .92). No statistically significant differences existed on these two debate satisfaction questions or the composite score between undergraduate students, coaches, and alumni (Table 20). Differences did exist among some demographic groups in regards to their satisfaction and these results follow (Table 21).

For race, a significant difference was found in satisfaction with debate between Whites (M = 3.29, SD = 1.04) and non-Whites (M = 2.99, SD = 1.14); $t(376)$ = 2.323, p = .021, d = .28. Additionally, a significant difference was found on the composite satisfaction score between Whites (M = 3.03, SD = .89) and non-Whites (M = 2.78, SD = .98); $t(376)$ = 2.322, p = .021, d = .27. For sexual orientation, a significant difference was found on the composite satisfaction score between those identifying as heterosexual (M = 3.03, SD = 0.93) and those identifying as not heterosexual (M = 2.82, SD = .87); $t(376)$ = 2.012, p = .045, d = .24. For disability, a significant difference was found in satisfaction with the NDT/CEDA college debate community as those with no disability (M

= 2.81, *SD* = .96) were more satisfied than those identifying as having a disability (*M* = 2.61, *SD* = 1.00); $t(349.55)$ = 1.971, p = .05, d = .20.

Discussion

Debate Participant Demographics & Motivations to Debate

The demographic data collected supports the position that collegiate policy debate is largely made up of identified heterosexual White men, answering research question four about who is currently participating in debate. These numbers are contrary to the overall enrollment in higher education. In 2012, just under 60% (56.51%) of those enrolled in college were women while the current survey reported only 26.6% of student debaters identified as women. The racial landscape of universities are changing and the debate community is lagging behind as 14.1% of students were Black and 15.2% identified as Hispanic in 2013 (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Within the demographic data gathered here, only 4.8% of students identified as Black, while 7.6% reported identifying as Hispanic. While racial identification and gender identity seems to be lacking representation within the community, sexual orientation and disability status represent a substantial portion of the overall diversity within college policy debate. This data should provide evidence for meaningful deliberation about policy and norm changes regarding contemporary debate practices, helping address research question two regarding improving current debate practices. For example, tournament directors may want to ensure that gender-neutral restrooms are available or that participants with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations. Additionally program

directors and debate organizations may want to expand educational programming to offer safe zone trainings, ability privilege workshops, and other awareness raising initiatives.

The changing debate background experience also warrants further considerations. Many programs and even national debate organizations seem to operate under the assumption that most college debaters debated policy debate in high school. The data collected here suggests the trends are changing. For a multitude of reasons, fewer and fewer students are participating in policy debate in high school. Colleges are traveling debaters who have no prior debate experience or may have participated in Lincoln-Douglass, public forum, or the growing Worlds format for debate. Recall that this survey reported 21% of participants having had no high school policy debate experience while 41% of participants had at least one high school semester of debate in a format other than policy debate. Programs and organizations should take this into consideration when developing their own programming and recruiting debaters. Organizations like CEDA and the NDT could do more to support the recruitment, transition, and retention of college debaters with no high school experience or non-policy debate participation.

Attitudes toward Topic and Resolution Norms

The data on attitudes toward the resolution provided some important guidance going forward for the policy debate community and helped answer research question one regarding attitudes toward contemporary debate practices. For example, the community as a whole seems to prioritize competitive motivations for crafting resolutions rather than other possible characteristics. Opportunities for public engagement and personal relevance were by far the

least important elements to consider when creating a policy debate resolution. When looking at the competitive reasons, ground balance and season sustainability were the highest rated characteristics. Another clear attitude was that most proposed resolution experiments are a non-starter. Only the proposition that a single resolution with a non-USFG agent gathered support greater than two on a 5-point Likert scale. Although it was higher than a two, it was still in the middle of the scale and would not be considered something that was supported. This finding is supported by the NDT/CEDA debate community adopting a resolution with the U.S. rather than USFG as the resolution agent the last two years. Of course, what is meant by non-USFG agent and whether a U.S. agent satisfies this proposition requires further research and discussion.

Attitudes toward Improving Contemporary Tournament Practices

Participant responses on tournament administration and norms provided pathways for tournament hosts and program directors to consider, providing more evidence to answer research question two on improving debate practices. The data suggests that community members are in favor of tournament experimentation and additional incentives to encourage cross debate format participation. The only caveat seemed to be so long as tournament experimentation did not impact NDT qualification or earning national sweepstakes points. Given the other data on community hostility, identity and varying participant motivations for debating, community leaders should consider hosting other debate events to experiment with debate norms, non-competitive programming, and other debate formats. One could look to the Madison Cup, Lafayette Debates, University of Southern California online debates,

Binghamton University online tournament, University of California Irvine tournament & conference, and others for inspiration.

The lack of support for changing the competitive season was one surprising outcome. Respondents did not show much support for either shortening or lengthening the current competitive policy debate season. If community members believe there should be a change in the length of the current competitive season, more discussion needs to happen to persuade others that such a change is desirable.

Other tournament recommendations had general agreement. For example, regional tournaments should have six preliminary debate rounds while national tournaments should offer eight. Most supported tournaments offering some sort of banquet or social gathering opportunity for tournament participants. Very little support existed for clearing half of the competitive field with a winning record. Tournament seeding was one area where there was some confusion. Over one-fourth of respondents were not sure what procedure should be used for seeding preliminary or elimination round debates. This is not terribly surprising as many debate community members (mostly students but some coaches too) do not have access to or participate in conversations about tournament seeding or other similar administrative concerns. This uncertainty, in addition to the variance among other responses, suggests that more conversation needs to happen about seeding practices. These deliberations should not only be about best practices, but they should also be educating members of the community on different seeding options. Increasing awareness about and participation in tournament administration would help train future coaches and improve best practices through different perspectives.

Attitudes toward Debate Community Concerns

Survey participants provided unique insights about debate participation motivations and issues facing the community that hopefully will spark further discussion and reflection. The answers to these questions addressed research question three which was interested in understanding concerns regarding the overall debate community. They also increased understanding of how former debate participants felt about contemporary debate practices (RQ5). For example, the differences that existed between current debate participants and their coaches highlights opportunities for coaches to engage students in what matters most to them. This would involve helping students translate debate experiences into meaningful elements for their resume. Students reported that building their resume was important and coaches did not agree, by changing their stance on this topic, coaches may attract more participants and increase their current team satisfaction. Surprisingly, students did not participate in debate for the educational experience, though this was important to coaches. Coaches should work with students to demonstrate the educational benefits of debate as the skills they are learning are lifelong skills that could improve their chances of meeting current and future educational or professional goals. This emphasis on education is important because the debate is a learning experience and students should be made aware of the educational benefits they are receiving. Understanding the motivation of both coaches and students can help to improve the recruiting process, increase the participation, and satisfaction of all members involved.

That demographic populations prioritized debate motivations differently should not come as a surprise. It would seem natural that different groups of people may participate in debate for different reasons. It was

surprising that only two (of the four) demographic variables showed statistically significant differences within those grouping variables on the question of debate motivation. Gender and sexual orientation were the only populations where the majority demographic (male, heterosexual) had statistically significant different motivations than the non-majority demographic (non-male, non-heterosexual). The differences themselves might provide evidence for continued conversation and decision-making about how to create debate opportunities for participants. As debate demographics, participants, and practices continue to change the debate community must look at what is motivating individuals

The importance of varying issues facing the debate community also drew important disagreements. Interestingly, many of these initial differences juxtaposed alumni against coaches and students or just alumni and students. Coaches and students found structural and institutional inequalities significantly more important than alumni. Students alone found community unity and a non-USFG resolution actor as more important than alumni. Again, this speaks to the importance of reaching out to alumni and engaging in conversations on these important topics. Beyond conversations, programs and national organizations would do well to invite alumni to meet, collaborate, and maybe even debate with current debate participants. Respondents did not disagree on everything. Video recording and card clipping found universal agreement among alumni, students, and coaches. This agreement suggests that community members should seek out norms and possibly policies on the use of video recordings and prohibitions against card clipping.

Demographic population differences, again, provide important points for future conversations and

decision-making about what issues face the debate community. The only statistically significant differences were based on race and gender. Along gender identity, non-males ranked hostility and community identity higher than males. This was not surprising given the rest of the data on issues of harassment and assault within the community. What was surprising was that Whites ranked addressing racism and hostility higher than non-Whites while non-Whites ranked factors outside the round influencing competition as more important than Whites. These factors might include expectations that judges set forth in their judging philosophy, and subsequent discussions over them. Concerns over outside influences are not limited to the expectations set forth by judges. Another issue influencing competitive outcomes outside of the competitive round are the conversations taking place among different community members on social media and face to face at tournaments. A fear or perception is that these interactions outside of the debate round might impact decisions in a given competitive round. While on the surface this might seem shocking, one way to read this suggests these seemingly incongruous attitudes are actually different concerns over the same racial inequalities. Non-White participants might be expressing concern that argumentative or racial bias outside of competition might be influencing things that happen within competitive rounds, like judge placement, tournament structure, or even decisions themselves. White participants concerns over hostility may reflect a perception that conversations over argumentative style and racial inequalities may not meet their expectation of civility. These findings suggest that more research and conversation is needed to better understand these attitudes so that the community may improve decision-making going forward for the collegiate policy debate community.

Overall Satisfaction with College Policy Debate

Research question six was interested in understanding how satisfied members are with college policy debate. Overall, the respondents were more satisfied with debate than they were with the NDT/ CEDA debate community. The difference is between debate as the activity and debate as the NDT/CEDA community. Another way of thinking about this is the difference between the satisfaction gained from participating in policy debate generally and the satisfaction gained (or lost) through how the NDT/ CEDA debate community operationalizes, governs, and practices policy debate. While respondents may like and be satisfied with debate, the issues of hostility, harassment, racism, role of resolution, and other issues diminish the satisfaction of participating in NDT/CEDA policy debate.

Perhaps a more striking difference on debate satisfaction is how different groups report experiencing debate. The data indicated that statistically significant differences exist on overall debate satisfaction along racial lines with Whites indicating more satisfaction than non-Whites. On the question of satisfaction with the NDT/CEDA community, significant differences existed with those identifying a disability showing lower satisfaction than those indicating no disability. Moreover, those with a disability reported the lowest satisfaction among different demographic variables. All of this is troubling for the debate community at large and NDT/CEDA community more specifically. Participants, coaches, programs, and organizations should be concerned that certain populations, especially traditionally marginalized groups, are not experiencing the same satisfaction as others. Concerned members of the community should attempt to identify why these kinds of asymmetrical experiences are happening.

Moreover, understanding and exploration is not enough. Institutions need to take meaningful actions to ensure that certain groups, here identified as non-White and/or disabled, do not experience hostile and less satisfying debate participation.

Limitations and Future Research

The current project set out to collect data and provide evidence to improve decision-making about and for the collegiate policy debate community. Of course, this research and subsequent recommendations provided are not themselves unproblematic. One limitation was that 25% of those who started the survey did not finish. Understanding what caused individuals to start and not finish the survey would strengthen the study. When looking at those who did respond, sufficient data did not exist to conclude with confidence that this sample is truly representative of the college policy debate community. For example, the survey was distributed via electric means and social media, narrowing the audience who would have known of the survey. Furthermore, because the national debate organizations do not have good records of current or prior participation, we are not able to report how many of a given group (students, coaches, alumni, or of a particular identity-based demographic) responded compared to their respective total population.

The difference in attitudes toward resolutions based on one's demographic variables also requires further research and discussion. It would be beneficial to understand why non-Whites rank resolution agent statistically significantly higher than Whites. Understanding this finding could help to improve how resolutions are constructed and debated, negotiating the fairly substantial divide in debate practices regarding topic affirmation.

Another limitation was the instrument itself. As with any new measure in development, there are issues of clarity that could be improved upon for the next iteration. Due to limited research on the topic it was difficult to create reliable scales and therefore single items were used to measure a given attitude. The work done here and data provided would go a long way toward developing scales that could be used in subsequent data collection efforts.

A final limitation is that the discussion and recommendations reported here represents just one interpretation. This is a necessary limit as not all interpretations and perspectives could be included in this essay. In doing so, this research has attempted to fill (or update in some instances) gaps in the literature about who participates in policy debate and the attitudes these participants have toward a variety of community policies, practices, and norms. More importantly, the research conducted here has identified more gaps, questions, and issues that demand further research, conversations, and deliberations. We hope this research and recommendations provided serve as an additional point to spark further conversation and evidence to improve decision-making. Finally, this was an attempt to establish and model a new regular data collection mechanism. This instrument could be used every year for the first 2-4 years to establish a baseline and then every 2-3 years to assess shifts and changes. While this survey provided a snapshot of current demographics and attitudes, continued collection of this information would provide valuable insights in changes over time.

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