

# HOW TO CHOOSE AN LD INSTITUTE

by Jason Baldwin

Ahh, sweet springtime, and with it, a *Rostrum* full of ads for LD summer institutes! Students who wish to attend a workshop but have never done so before may find the choice a bit overwhelming. Every year, it seems, the number of LD summer options increases, and all the ads and brochures promise so very, very much. Who should attend an LD summer program? How should students and coaches choose the place to go? No one, including your author, can offer final answers to these questions, but my experiences as a workshop student and teacher suggest some principles to bear in mind. I attended three LD workshops at two institutes as a student and have since taught a total of eight workshops at four institutes. By way of disclosure, I should note that I have spent the past four summers teaching and directing the LD division of the Kentucky National Debate Institute, where I plan to teach again this year. While I naturally believe Kentucky offers superior LD instruction, this article is not intended, and should not be interpreted, as an attempt to commend any particular workshop(s) over others.

## Who Should Go

Summer LD institutes can be incredible educational bargains: for prices that average between five and fifteen dollars per hour, debaters can receive informed, personalized instruction from accomplished LD coaches and from some of the brightest college students around, plus room and board. But regardless of how much value a given student receives from a workshop, the costs are significant, and students should carefully consider whether such programs are a wise investment of their time and money.

Two types of students stand to gain the most from an institute. The first is the student who does not have an active or experienced LD coach during the school year. For such a student, a summer workshop offers a comprehensive overview of LD theory and a chance to receive the expert coaching needed to improve as a debater. Young teams or teams in transition may wish to send one or a few of their members to workshops with the expectation that these students can return home and pass along the knowledge and skills they have gained.

The second type of student most helped by an institute is the experienced debater who wants to work intensively on some particular area(s) of debate skill or philosophy. In any case, students who arrive with clear and specific goals will probably have the most productive and satisfying workshop experiences.

By implication, workshops generally have less to offer to young students from established teams with strong, active LD coaches at home. While I have taught a number of such students who came to workshops because they enjoyed the intellectual camaraderie and because their parents could afford to send them, there is no good reason most students need to attend a debate institute every summer. In fact, the dramatic decline in the number of competitive policy debate schools may be traced, in part, to the transformation of costly summer institutes from an extra help or luxury to a competitive necessity.

I believe it is a mistake for students to attend a workshop with the expectation that the experience will transform them from poor to average or from average to good debaters. Many students shell out thousands of dollars every summer in the unrewarded faith that some institute or other has a magic formula to grow their debate ability. In reality, most institutes do not make a great deal of competitive difference for most students. While a few students do make great progress over the summer (some of which must be due to simple maturation), the most talented debaters of a given year would have been the most talented whether they attended a workshop or not, and the same goes for the least talented. No institute can push students far beyond the ability and motivation they bring with them, though good institutes can inform and refine eager raw talent.

Students of slight physical or emotional constitution should probably think twice about traveling away from home to study debate. While most workshops offer conscientious adult supervision, the best demand quite a lot and are inevitably stressful for students. It should go without saying that debaters who think of workshops as places to flirt, smoke, or snort away from parents should stay home; institute staff

do not take kindly to such time wasters and will gladly send them packing as soon as they are caught in some form of mischief.

## How to Choose: Staff

Once you have decided that an LD workshop is the way you want to spend two or three weeks of your summer, you must decide where to go. As with choosing a college, the single most important factor in choosing a debate institute is the teaching staff. Students who have yet to attend a summer program may think of it as an organization or institution, but students who have attended a workshop invariably remember it as the staff members who taught them.

In addition to whatever lectures, practice rounds, and large-group instruction they offer, almost all LD workshops place students in small "lab groups" under the direction of a single staff member to supervise individual work. This so-called lab leader often defines a student's institute experience, so wise shoppers will naturally want to choose the workshop where they have the greatest chance of working under an outstanding lab leader. While it is possible to request a certain lab leader, such requests are often ignored, and most labs are assigned based on experience, region, gender, and other factors. It is therefore unwise to choose a workshop based on the presence of one or two staff members. Instead, you should select an institute with a staff you trust as a group, thus maximizing your chance of studying with a satisfactory teacher. To whatever extent possible, you should choose an institute by choosing a staff.

There are two sensible ways to evaluate prospective workshop teachers. The first (and best) is by their teaching records. Subjectively, you can talk with students and coaches who have worked with the staff member in the past. While these word-of-mouth recommendations can be very helpful, bear in mind that students sometimes idolize their lab leaders and leave workshops with exaggerated pictures of the intellectual prowess and teaching ability of their own instructors. You should be especially wary of recommenders who focus on how "cool" a staff member is; rapport with students is part of good teaching, but excessive chumminess can also be a cover for sloppy

or lightweight instruction. Somewhat more objectively, you can evaluate potential teachers by looking at the achievements of their past students, yet this information can be hard to come by. You may have to settle for a list of accomplishments of recent workshop graduates. Obviously, a consistently-praised teacher of many successful students is the safest bet.

The second sensible way to evaluate prospective workshop teachers, especially former debaters, is by their own competitive records. Every region has its hierarchy of tournament prestige, and if you have your eyes fixed on performing well at certain regional tournaments, you may want to attend a local or regional institute with a staff accomplished at those particular tournaments. Many *Rostrum*-advertising workshops aspire to teach a more national style of LD, or at least a style likely to be successful at such "national circuit" tournaments as St. Mark's, the Glenbrooks, Emory, and the TOC. The debate achievements of staff members will often be highlights in printed materials and can also be had for the asking from most institute directors. Search for specific achievements; "cleared at many major tournaments" could mean almost anything. Generally, excellent debaters make good teachers. However, debate ability is not a perfect predictor of teaching ability, and the two finest institute teachers I have taught with are people with good, but not astounding, competitive records.

If you are interested in a particular workshop's announced staff, you need to get on the telephone and find out, as best you can, who the real staff will be. Most workshops try to advertise their staffs accurately; some, however, routinely list past staff members who have no intention of returning or big names they would like to hire. In 1999, one LD institute advertised with a group staff picture at least three years old, implying these same people would return to teach again; most did not. Because of the *Rostrum's* early deadlines, even the most reputable workshops must print highly-provisional lists of staff based on projected enrollments and on the oft-changing plans of college students. You should probably call potential institutes in March and ask the director who the confirmed staff members are. You may even wish to ask for e-mail addresses for those people so that you yourself can confirm their intents to teach at a given institute.

#### **How to Choose: Cost**

After staff, the next most important

factor in a good workshop decision is cost. You may decide that any one of several institutes could be a good educational experience; the next step is to find the best value. Assuming you are comparing truly comparable staffs, the best way to figure workshops' values is to calculate their costs per instructional day. First, add up the total projected cost. Most two-week institutes will charge at least \$900 for room, board, tuition, and required fees, but some may charge \$1500 or more. In addition to the announced charges, you should probably plan to bring \$75 per week for copies, laundry, snacks, and other unforeseen expenses. Transportation can be a major part of your final institute bill, and you should definitely include travel in your total projected cost.

Next, you need to figure the number of instructional days. Count up the total advertised days for a workshop. Subtract the first and last days. Nothing too educational will happen at those times. Subtract all Sundays; most workshops take Sunday mornings off, and you can expect that, on average, another half-day per week will be spent doing something recreational or not especially productive. Lastly, subtract any days at the end of the institute devoted to a practice tournament. While many students seem to enjoy such tournaments, they typically require judging by other students or by unreliable locals, and they are notoriously poor predictors of school-year success. I have been party to seven workshop tournaments as a student and teacher, and they were not very instructional. After all this subtraction, you should be left with a good estimate of how many instructional days you can expect. You may be surprised to find that two ostensibly two-week institutes offer very different amounts of instruction. For example, an arrive-on-Friday, leave-on-Sunday workshop without a tournament yields 13 instructional days; whereas an arrive-on-Sunday, leave-on-Friday workshop with a tournament yields only 8 instructional days. Now you need only divide an institute's total projected cost by its number of instructional days to arrive at its cost per instructional day. Comparing these numbers for well-staffed workshops may be your best guide to value.

#### **Other Factors**

These two factors--staff and cost--should dominate your choice of institute. One factor whose influence you should seek to minimize is the slickness of the ads and mailings. In our consumer culture, it is very easy to be taken in by flashy layouts and

colorful pictures. But in the case of debate institutes, these say more about desktop-publishing savvy or marketing dollars than about product quality. The plainest photocopied brochure may announce a superb staff, while a fancy bound "prospectus" may trumpet the virtues of a very average workshop. Many institutes' ads will contain lots of glittering generalities which you should mostly ignore as you attempt a rational comparison; puffery is the norm.

Your own summer schedule will have much to do with the workshops you consider. Parents and coaches may also be concerned about the quality of supervision students will receive while away from home. Most institutes operate under a set of tightly enforced rules, and a list is often available from a workshop director well in advance. While the majority of workshop teachers are college students, most of these (especially, frankly, in LD) are quite responsible. Nonetheless, workshops led by adults with institutional affiliations to high schools or universities may offer an extra degree of stability. Debate institutes are generally run either as official summer programs of a university or as private enterprises which rent dormitory and classroom space from universities. Those institutes which are official university programs may receive an extra measure of administrative oversight and are also often closely connected with university medical and security services.

Students planning their first extended stays away from home may be tempted to follow friends or teammates to workshops for social reasons. While there is nothing wrong with a team attending a single institute, the team may gain more from members who attend different programs with different strengths and emphases. Most workshop students arrive knowing few or no other participants, and in two or three days, they have made a new set of friends. Debate provides an obvious common ground, and one of the most rewarding parts of institute for many students is the chance to get to know debaters from other parts of the country. With a very few exceptions, workshop students make easy (and sometimes lasting) connections quickly.

You should probably not pay much attention to a workshop's claims about food, housing, and recreation. College dorms and college food are about the same everywhere; they're not what you would choose for the rest of your life, but you can learn to tolerate them. It is standard practice for in-

stitutes to include brief recreational times to help students unwind, but some institutes make a great to-do about day trips to beaches, theme parks, or the like. These represent expenses that will be passed on to students but that do not result in any educational benefit. Some institute locations may seem especially appealing (or unappealing), but students should bear in mind that their workshop experiences will take place mostly within university buildings. Geographic settings are incidental, and a good institute's schedule will keep students too busy with debate to take in much local culture.

#### **After You Choose**

When you have settled on a first-choice institute, apply as early as possible; the best programs limit enrollment to ensure a low student-to-staff ratio. As workshop time approaches, you should get plenty of rest; institutes are fun but exhausting. And in addition to whatever the workshop recommends, you should be sure to bring a prepaid phone card, two or three rolls of quarters, shower sandals, pre-measured laundry detergent, rain gear, and towels (university-provided towels, when available, are not very nice). You may also want to bring your own pillow and linens, ear plugs (for noisy roommates), a tape recorder (for lectures), and a frisbee, soccer ball, or tennis racket.

When you are in the thick of battle, remind yourself how much you (or, more likely, your parents) are paying for your experience, so that you will make the most of every day's opportunities. Take copious notes. Ask questions and even pester staff members for extra help. At the same time, remember that summer workshops are for practice and experimentation. Apart from gross misconduct, nothing you do at the institute can make or break you in the debate year ahead. You should not worry about your performance, real or perceived; summer students with something to prove alienate more people than they impress. Finally, when the institute ends, take time to write down the most important things you have learned. Review this list, along with notes from specific lectures and lab meetings, throughout the school year, and you will earn continued returns on your summer investment.

*(Jason Baldwin won the TOC L/D. He coaches at Vestavia HILLS (AL) HS.)*