

COLLEGE LD

THE NEXT STEP?

by
Jason Gordon

When the National Forensics League pioneered Lincoln Douglas debate in the early 80's, no one had any idea that it would be as successful as it is today. Lincoln Douglas debate is offered at many schools around the nation, and is debated at the three national tournaments. On local and national circuits alike, it is paired side by side with policy debate. My experience with LD has been from the ground up.

As a freshman at Glenbrook North, I knew very little about debate, or the school's success. LD was virtually non-existent when Cheryl Niehaus, then LD coach at GBN approached me to come after school one day in November. She introduced me to an activity that she participated in at Isidore Newman when she was in high school: value debate. At the time, I was uncertain of what debate was, but I decided to take part in the new activity. After a few tournaments, I decided LD was very fitting, and I continued to work at it.

As spring neared, I was told that I could go to debate camp. Debate camp? They have camps for debate? That summer, I attended the Summer Institute in Forensics at the University of Iowa. I was amazed to see how much I had to learn. I came back excited to participate, and called Cheryl as soon as I got back. Ted Belch, head coach at GBN recognized that I was serious to take this program to new levels. He asked me if I would be interested in traveling with the policy team, and as a sophomore, I began going to national circuit tournaments.

Four years later, I got word that the first LD debater from GBN was invited to the MBA Round Robin. To imagine that a program that started from nothing is enjoying some success today is unfathomable. My experiences working with Ted, Cheryl, and new coach Fred Noyes were amazing. Though my success as a debater was limited, I learned how to build a program from nothing. I attribute the success of the activity at GBN to Ted. His willingness to try new things, and take risks make the LD program what it is today. Dr. David Hingstman

and Paul Bellus at the University of Iowa recognized these experiences I had, and approached me when I came to Iowa.

Coming to Iowa, I realized that I could only debate NDT, because that was the activity offered by the program. Dr. Dave, Paul Slappey and I sat down to dinner one night, and Dr. Dave told us his mission. "Jason, I would like to start an LD program on the college level, and I want you to help me do it." I was flattered to be asked to pioneer an activity I love on the collegiate level.

After gathering information from students around the country, I have realized there is a need for collegiate LD as it is debated on the high school level. There exist other forms of debate, which appear as feeders for high school LDers, none of which come close to LD debate. However, I found that most LDers stop debating after high school. It's not that they don't want to debate (though this might be the case for a few) but that they don't have an activity which is similar to the one in which they participated in high school.

That spring, we hosted the first Baird Collegiate LD Round Robin, with Michelin Massey from the University of Colorado-Boulder defeating Jowei Chen from Yale on a 2-1 decision, with Professors Nelson and Farrell on top, and Professor Slappey in dissent. While this tournament was a large step toward a national program, it also shed some light on the challenges that the activity faces as we move forward.

The first challenge is funding. Some students need to be able to go to their existing speech clubs in college and ask for money to participate in college LD. This becomes troublesome. While some organizations are small and tight for money, I have found others that are too selfish to give it up their existing funds. I spoke with an ex-LDer now on one of the largest NDT team in the country, and asked her if her coach was interested in traveling debaters to our tournament. The coach said she could not justify the expense, because she felt the money would be better spent on NDT. I

was offended that these same individuals would host LD at their tournaments for high school, but not be willing to put their money where their mouth is.

At this point, I want to commend Dr. David Hingstman and Paul Bellus for reaching out, as Ted Belch did when I was in high school. All of them have had very successful policy teams in recent years, and yet they still want to branch out. I thank them for their willingness to explore other forms of debate.

That being said, there are some students who wish to participate in college LD without speech clubs at their respective colleges and universities. These individuals must work through their student governments to receive funding. Without a budget, it becomes hard for these individuals to travel. Learning how to request funding from student governments may be the largest bit of red tape some debaters face. When they go at it alone, this burden would deter a great number of individuals from trying to travel.

The second challenge is convincing existing programs to open their arms to new debate. As noted from the unnamed coaches response above, some programs may feel LD is not something they want to pursue. I ask them why? I have yet to get a sufficient response. I will admit that some programs fear my attempts to start college LD, as they feel it will take away students from their existing infrastructure, but I argue that this activity will bring new kids to the program, not steal theirs. [Regardless, I cannot comprehend why so many are scared of a new program. Maybe it's because they don't want to spend the money on it, but I am offended at such a response] I should note that some of the participants at our round robin paid for it out of their own pocket.

The third challenge is forming a national organization. After this is accomplished, we see many other challenges becoming easier. Membership to a national organization could allow students to form local chapters and request funding. Fur-

thermore, regional contests could attract students who cannot travel far. Finally, the activity could be held at tournaments side by side with NDT, as Policy and LD are on the high school circuit.

At this point, some questions still remain. First, why not participate in parliamentary debate, instead of Lincoln Douglas? The answer to this question is rooted in the fundamentals of Lincoln Douglas debate. LD is a unique activity that encourages careful preparation. LD requires extensive research on a topic, and careful preparation. I am finding more frequently, that high school debaters who do extensive research are those with well-developed arguments. Students moving away from the stock evidence towards quality literature are those debaters who are in the later elimination debates. Further, with the changing of topics on a frequent basis, LD debaters gain a greater depth of knowledge on different current issues.

Lincoln Douglas debate also allows individuals to participate in an activity which individuals can make quick decisions on their toes. Unlike policy, or parliamentary debate, judges and debaters hold unique weight to the cross-examination period. Conceding arguments, trapping opponents, and setting up responses become

very important in cross ex, and are unique to LD debate. Unlike collegiate parliamentary debate, collegiate LD forces individuals to make quick decisions about which arguments to emphasize in rebuttals, time allocation, word economy, and flow coverage. Finally, LD provides a unique activity that discusses issues of value. The development of a value premise, criteria and arguments that circulate around a central thesis are all distinctive to LD.

The second question that many are asking is why participate in Collegiate LD at all, instead of focusing more on academics. My response is that LD has a close relationship with academic research, writing and learning in the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, topics including philosophy, political science, political theory, communication studies, journalism, fine arts, history and sociology. Students who debate are exposed to core issues in all of these fields. As noted above, LD forces students to research extensively. Not just the ability to research effectively, but the topics being researched for debate directly permeate the issues being discussed in the class. Ultimately, the more informed student is the student who writes the better papers, and essays on exams.

Collegiate Lincoln Douglas, similar to NDT, forces students to think a certain way.

Critical thinking serves an important function in the fields of academics, business, law, medicine, and many other professional fields. My point here is simple, continuing to think this way, through debate, will allow success in both undergraduate, and post undergraduate experiences.

Ultimately, it is each student's decision to debate in a post high school atmosphere. My argument is simple. Despite the initial hurdles that the activity faces, a greater benefit exists to the student, both in academics, and as an alternative to parliamentary debate. Collegiate LD serves unique functions in the fields of research, critical thinking skills, and breadth of knowledge that students would not be exposed to otherwise.

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