The Benefits of Debate
Why Supporting High School Debate is a Worthwhile Project

The core of competitive high school debate is to examine every side of important and controversial issues in an atmosphere of reasoned argument and respectful discourse. The enormous effort that students put forth to succeed in this intellectually exciting activity is truly inspiring. They devote a huge number of hours to research, discussion, case writing, and practicing for competitions. They spend countless evenings and weekends at tournaments competing for their schools and teammates. The benefits they accrue as a result of all their hard work are numerous. Here are just a few:

Rigorous and Critical Thinking

Perhaps the most important skill debaters learn is the ability to think rigorously and critically. A number of studies have reported that participation in debate increasing the critical thinking of debate students.[1] Debate participation promotes problem solving and innovative thinking, and helps students to build links between words and ideas that make concepts more meaningful.[2] Debate students are taught to synthesize wide bodies of complex information, and to exercise creativity and implement different ways of knowing.[3] Learning to think well has far reaching effects into every aspect of a student's life.

Academic Skills

Many studies show marked improvement in a wide variety of academic skills as a result of participation in competitive debate. Debate students excel in written and oral communication, and greatly improve their reading comprehension (sometimes 25% more than their peers). [4] Students become comfortable with new concepts and unfamiliar language, and gain access to a wide array of new information such as college-level philosophy, history, public policy and current events.[5] Perhaps most importantly, debaters become self-directed learners, allowing them to take control of their education experience and continue to learn throughout their lives.[6] This makes competitive debate a particularly affective vehicle for gifted and talented education.[7]

Mental and Emotional Maturity

Debate requires students to engage serious subject matter in a mature and professional environment. Debate students show more maturity in the face of adversity and tend to develop stronger relationships with peers and mentors than the average student.[8] Debate teaches students to recognize how others think, which improves their ability to cooperate and resolve conflicts.[9] This makes debate one of the most successful vehicles for providing affective education to at-risk students.[10] Ultimately, debate increases students' self-confidence by helping to teach them the skills necessary to become competent adults.[11]

Academic and Occupational Achievement

All of these skills ultimately lead debate students to notable academic achievement. Debate students consistently receive impressive grades throughout high school and college. The average debate team has a GPA of 3.75 (and it is often higher), and the average debate student is in the top 10% of his or her high school class.[12] Improvement in academic performance is common to all debate students, regardless of their level of academic achievement prior to joining the activity. Debate students also score better on the ACT and SAT than their peers,[13] and are consistently admitted to prestigious post-secondary institutions.[14] A stunning 98.58% of debate students attend college, and debate participation increases the chances of being offered college scholarships.[15] Many debate students go on to earn advanced degrees.

Beyond their academic careers, debaters tend to enjoy success in the world of work. Many top corporate executives and high-ranking officials in all branches of government are former high school debaters.[16] Debate students tend to become leaders in their schools and communities because they develop strong listening skills, tact, self-confidence, and often take on strong leadership roles within their teams.[17] Finally, debate students tend to be politically active and have high levels of civic engagement. This is particularly true for women and students of color, because debate skills help to break down traditional barriers to civic engagement.[18]

All considered, it is not surprising that many students report that participation in competitive debate was the most educational and rewarding aspect of their high school careers.

The Benefits of Debate
Why Supporting High School Debate is a Worthwhile Project

References

[1] Allen, Mike, Sandra Berkowitz, Steve Hunt, and Allan Louden, "A Meta-analysis of the Impact of Forensics and Communication Education on Critical Thinking," *Communication Education,* 48, January 1999

Bellon, J. (2000). A research-based justification for debate across the curriculum. Argumentation and Advocacy, 36(3), 161-176.

Bradley, Bert E. "Debate – A Practical Training for Gifted Students." *The Speech Teacher* 7 (1959): 134-38.

Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers. "The Forum: Why Should We Support Debate?" *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (Spring 1985): 237-40.

Deasy, Richard, ed. *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*. Washington, D.C.: Arts Education Partnership, 2002.

Fine, G.A. (2001). Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Retrieved September 20, 2007 from Questia database.

Greenstreet, Robert. "Academic Debate and Critical Thinking: A Look at the Evidence." *National Forensic Journal* 11 (Summer 1993): 13-28.

Korcok, Michael, "The Effect of Intercollegiate Debating on Critical Thinking Ability", Copyright 1997 http://mailer.fsu.edu/~ewotring/com5312/critical.html (research proposal)

Luong, M. (2000, November). Forensics and College Admissions. Rostrum, 75(3), 5-6.

Dr. Minch, Kevin, "The Value of Speech, Debate, and Theatre Activities: Making the Case for Forensics," *The Rostrum*, Vol. 81, No. 4, December 2006

[2] Bellon, J. (2000).

National Center on Education and the Economy. (2007). Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission of the Skills of the American Workforce. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[3] Bellon, J. (2000).

Sellnow. (1994).

[4] Catterall,, James S. "Essay: Research on Drama and Theatre Education." In Richard Deasy, ed. *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*. Washington, D.C.: Arts Education Partnership, 2002.

Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers, 1985.

Deasy, Richard, (2002).

Open Society Institute (2004, May 13). National study finds debate can dramatically increase student reading skills. Retrieved online February 25, 2008 from http://www.soros.org/initiatives/youth/news/study_20040513

"Oral Communication Poses Largest Chasm Between High School Learning and College Expectations." *Spectra* (May 2005): 16.

[5] Carr, J. E. (2002, January). A better investment not found on Wall Street. Rostrum, 76(5), 25-26.

Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers, (1985).

Tucker, E. & Phipps, K. (2002, May). Advocacy tool kit. Rostrum, 76(9), 17, 20-21.

[6] Carroll, R. C. (2007, February). Forensics participation as gifted and talented education. Rostrum, 81(6), 31, 34-36.

[7] Carroll, R. C. (2007, February).

Minch (2006).

[8] Carr, J. E. (2002, January).

Fine, G.A. (2001).

[9] Infante, D. A., &Wigley, C. J., III. (1986). Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure. Communication Monographs: 53, 61-69.

[10] Billman, J. & Christiensen, H. (2008). [Short survey responses from NFL Alumni]. Unpublished raw data.

Deasy, Richard, (2002).

Glanton, D. (2005, November 28). Urban schools argue in favor of debate teams. The Chicago Tribune. Retrieved September 20, 2007 from http://atlantahousingauth.org/pressroom/printpubs_print.cfm?id=107

Hoover, E. (2003). Resolved: Change happens. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 49(6), A28-29

Infante, D. A., &Wigley, C. J., III. (1986).

Minch (2006).

[11] Carr, J. E. (2002, January).

Fine, G.A. (2001).

[12] Billman, J. & Christiensen, H. (2008).

Fine, G.A. (2001).

Minch (2006).

[13] Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers, (1985).

Deasy, Richard, (2002).

[14] Luong, M. (2000, November).

[15] Billman, J. & Christiensen, H. (2008).

Luong, M. (2000, November).

Minch (2006).

[16] Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers, (1985).

[17] Bradley, Bert E. "Debate – A Practical Training for Gifted Students." *The Speech Teacher* 7 (1959): 134-38.

Colbert, Kent and Thompson Biggers, (1985).

Windes, Jr., Russel R. "Competitive Debating: The Speech Program, the Individual, and Society." *The Speech Teacher* 9 (1960): 99-108.

[18] Bellon, J. (2000).