

The Power of Debate—Building the Five “C’s” for the 21st Century

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<http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/power-debatebuilding-five-cs-21st-century>

I am delighted to be here tonight because the value of debate teams is both so great and yet so under-recognized.

In America, education is the great equalizer. And in our urban high schools, competitive debate is one of the great equalizers of educational opportunity. Urban debate leagues help ensure that teens in the inner-city get the same exposure to academic rigor as teens in wealthy suburban schools—where competitive debate teams have long been a fixture.

Urban debate teams make it cool to be smart and work hard in the inner-city. And they are a fantastic outlet for harnessing the competitive instincts of young teens—and channeling them into building the skills they need to succeed in a knowledge-based, global economy.

Like other competitive sports, debate teams make school more engaging and challenging. They give kids a reason to be excited about coming to school.

My friend, John Sexton, the terrific president of New York University, has been one of the great proponents of urban debate teams. And I want to briefly recount a story here that he told me about the lasting impact of all those hours spend preparing and honing your skills at debate.

Before John became president of NYU, before he was a clerk to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he was a die-hard debate coach. He got hooked on debate in high school. And as soon as he graduated, he started coaching debate at his sister's high school, St. Brendan's High School in Brooklyn. For 15 years running, often working 100 hours a week, John was the debate team's coach.

Now, St. Brendan's was not a school that anyone would have picked to become a fiercely competitive, debate team powerhouse. It was an all-girls school—and this was back in the 1960s and early 1970s, when women had fewer opportunities than today.

The girls at St. Brendan's were not children of privilege. They were the daughters of cops, and firemen, and sanitation workers. They talked a little funny. They spoke in Brooklyn-eese. The debate team wasn't selective—anyone willing to do the work was accepted.

Yet during the next 15 years, the all-girls team from Brooklyn won the national championship five times. They decimated teams loaded with National Merit Scholarship boys. Three times they beat a team from Harriton High School from a Main Line suburb of Philadelphia. That team had a young prodigy on it named Larry Summers.

Harriton is among the top-ranked public schools in the country. And Larry Summers, as most of you know, went on to become a brilliant economist. He became the U.S. Treasury Secretary, and the president of Harvard University.

And he also became a big believer in the value of competitive debate—in fact, he is an honorary director of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues.

So, flash forward from those high school debate competitions in the late 1960s to 2002, more than 30 years later. John Sexton, the president of NYU, is seated next to Larry Summers, the president of Harvard University at a conference on higher education.

And guess what happens? Larry Summers starts protesting the judge's decision in the three debates with John's team. He names the girls from Brooklyn—by name—who beat him in the debates. He says he feels the judges' decision was erroneous. And John comes back at Larry by telling him that he had the raw talent—he just needed some coaching.

I have to add, as much as I love Larry, the judges may have wrong once or twice—but three times? I don't think so. I tell this story, and the good-natured ribbing that went on between John and Larry, because it's a great reminder of the indelible imprint that competitive debate can have on students.

John and Larry may have disagreed about who won the debate with the girls from Brooklyn. But they very much agree on **the power of competitive debate to change the trajectory of a young person's life.**

After being the president of NYU, after being the dean of the law school, and after being a professor for four decades, one of the accomplishments that John Sexton is proudest of to this day is that every one of the girls on his debate teams went to college on a scholarship.

Urban debate teams must be promoted and celebrated. And that's one reason I was glad to support the expansion of the Chicago Debate League and the founding of NAUDL when I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools.

In 2001, the Chicago Debate League was in 19 high schools and had about 350 students participating in competitive debate. By 2008, the number of high schools and students participating had doubled, to 39 schools and 725 students.

That same year, we also formed the Chicago Middle School Debate League. It's now in 22 schools and has about 400 students. In addition to expanding competitive urban debate in

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Remarks of Secretary Arne Duncan to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues 2012 Annual Dinner

CPS, we did something else that I think was important. We approved the first **rigorous study of the impact of urban debate leagues on student performance**.

That study, done jointly by the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago, examined ten years of data from the Chicago Debate League. It found that competitive debate significantly raises graduation rates, ACT scores, and students' GPA—and that's even after controlling for student self-selection in to competitive debate.

To be very clear, the experience of competing on an urban debate team boosts your college readiness—and your chance to succeed in life.

But beyond the data, the most telling testaments of the power of competitive debate to change students' lives come from students themselves. Benicio Ramalho, who graduated from Emmett Conrad High School in Dallas, was tardy for school so much as a junior that he actually had to go to truancy court and got fined \$175. But after he got introduced to debate, he started arriving early at school to get involved in the morning practice for the team.

In debate, he learned how to work with people he barely knew. He learned how to have confidence in his ideas—and present them in a logical fashion. He learned how to get work done under pressure—and how to logically evaluate everything presented to you, even in an unfamiliar situation. He learned how to keep his cool.

Anthony Salazar, another student from Dallas, had little interest in school. He admits he couldn't have cared less about his grades. But then he, too, got involved in competitive debate. And debate opened his eyes to all sorts of issues that had never crossed his mind. Each year at the end of school, Anthony felt like he had acquired expertise on whatever resolution was accepted for debate that year. Suddenly, writing English papers was easy. Math no longer dragged down his GPA.

Anthony is a sophomore now at Southern Methodist University. And he says that if it wasn't for his debate team experience, he would have never made it to a four-year college.

And I love what Samantha Srock of Milwaukee wrote in her application this year to participate in the UDL National tournament here in Washington DC. Through debate, Samantha learned how to organize an effective response to her opponent's argument in eleven minutes. Those skills helped her take notes and read assignments in class in a compressed time frame.

Through debate, she learned not only how to do research on public policy issues but that she wanted to stay abreast of current events because she "wants to be connected with the rest of the world."

Through debate, she learned to travel independently. She took a 13-hour Greyhound bus ride by herself to Nebraska, where she spent eight days and nights debating. Through debate, she learned that she was—and I quote her—"not just another ignorant teenage girl." Samantha, could you stand to be recognized for your accomplishments?

All of these students' stories vividly reveal how competitive debate helps prepare students for college. But just as important, that training gives inner-city students equitable access to a well-rounded and rigorous education.

In a number of respects, **competitive urban debate is almost uniquely suited to building what's been called the "Four C's" of 21st century skills**—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. And to that list I might add a fifth "C"—for civic awareness and engagement.

As everyone here knows, preparation for debate not only involves intensive research but advanced critical thinking. Because debate is a contest of ideas—and because students have to switch sides during the debate from arguing against a proposition to defending it—debate forces students to anticipate their opponents' strongest arguments and rebut them with evidence.

That forces students to think deeply about both sides of an issue—and it teaches them to be good listeners. You can't refute an argument if you don't understand it. And I have to add, if more folks in Congress displayed these skills and discipline, our country would be better served.

At the same time, developing an argument pushes student debaters to set a goal and a series of intermediate steps to reach it. Like great leaders, great debaters—to paraphrase the Confucian metaphor—know how to move a mountain one spoonful at a time.

To succeed in debate, you also have to be a creative thinker. You have to spot the gaps that other people don't see—and then fill in those gaps.

Finally, you have to communicate your position clearly and persuasively to judges from different backgrounds and perspectives—whether they are teachers, parents, community leaders, or college students. And you have to communicate in a collaborative manner. You work with your team.

It's so important that our youth increase their global competencies and become globally-aware citizens in the 21st century—and debate is one fantastic means of doing so.

In the end, education is about so much more than what you read in a book or the name-brand of the college that you attend. It is about becoming an engaged citizen—and an active member of the community. The way we educate our children speaks volumes about the values that we want them to uphold.

Educators and parents alike want education to promote civic engagement in the community and civic awareness of the challenges facing America in the 21st century. **By engaging students in real, complex public policy questions, competitive debate is nurturing a new generation of engaged, committed citizens.** I can't tell you how hopeful that makes me feel.

I thank all of the leaders of the urban debate league movement, and all the debate coaches here tonight, for moving us one step closer to that vision of providing every child with a world-class education. You are literally helping to lead, not just our students, but our nation, where we need to go.