The role of Academic debate in the intellectual development of the university students

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The purpose of this document is to explore an effect of debate used in university education process on development of critical thinking. This study used a quasi-experimental research and involved two classes of students grouped into experimental group and control group. A tailored version of standardized critical thinking test inspired by Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, a test of controversy and a self-evaluation were used as research instruments. Even thought, that our results showed that a use of debate has no effect on development of critical thinking level and critical thinking drill has no effect on level of estimate in self-evaluation, there are some implications for educators, psychologists, methodologists and philosophers.
The intellectual development of university and college students has been investigated by a number of researchers. One widely-used model for understanding changes in how students learn, think, reason and understand was proposed by William Perry in 1970. Perry limited his investigation to male undergraduates. His model has since been modified by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1986) who explored women’s intellectual development and by Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) who conducted research with both male and female college students.
1. Debate teaches students to be successful in life.
2. Debate improves school and SAT performance.
3. Debate helps in competitive college admissions.
1. Debate teaches students to be successful in life.

We believe the most important thing that students can gain from an education in debate is the tools to become successful later in life. Debate opens up college and employment opportunities for students precisely because it teaches students vital skills in critical thinking, communication, research, and writing and improves their confidence in themselves. These skills help our students succeed, whether the field they enter is business, medicine, engineering, academia, or government.

The Huffington Post writes about the benefits of providing students with an education in debate:

Critical thinking and argument skills – the abilities to both generate and critique arguments – are crucial elements in decision-making… In all careers, academic classes, and relationships, argument skills can be used to enhance learning…It is imperative that high school students, of diverse personal, moral and intellectual commitments, become prepared to confront multiple perspectives on unclear and controversial issues when they move on to college and their careers. This is not only important for assuring students are equipped to compete in the marketplace of ideas but also to maximize their own cognitive development more broadly. (October 13, 2013).
2. Debate improves school and SAT performance.

By nature, debate trains students in several key skills needed to perform well in school and on the SAT. Our students lead their peers by at least one year in reading and writing (college-level English ability), research, and public speaking. As a result, students with this debate training stand out on assignments, tests, and presentations. Debate shapes students into powerful thinkers, improving their intellectual abilities.

As we know, the SAT was also recently changed to focus more on evidence-based argumentation, which are precisely the skills taught by debate. According to the New York Times:

"[The new SAT] had been redesigned with an eye to reinforce the skills and evidence-based thinking that students should be learning in high school...and move away from a need for test-taking tricks and strategies...Students will be asked not just to select the right answer, but to justify it by choosing the quote from a text that provides the best supporting evidence for their answer...[On] the revised essay...students will get a source document and be asked to analyze how its author used evidence, reasoning and stylistic elements to build an argument." (March 5, 2014).
3. Debate helps in competitive college admissions.

Colleges are looking for students with the critical thinking and communication skills that debate teaches. Good GPA and test scores are no longer enough to secure admission to a top university. Instead, students must be able to show colleges their potential to become future leaders and active citizens. This is why our coaches, who attend schools like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, often cite debate as a primary reason for their admission to these schools.

Yale Professor Minh A. Luong writes about the importance of debate for college admissions:

"Extracurricular activities like forensics are playing an increasingly important role in the college admissions as well as the scholarship awarding processes. Why? Grade inflation is rampant in both public and private secondary schools and test preparation programs are distorting the reliability of national standardized tests like the SAT and ACT. According to the Wall Street Journal, college admissions directors are relying less on grade point averages and standardized test scores, and are relying more on success in academically-related extracurricular activities such as speech and debate…

The world is changing rapidly and we must further develop our critical decision-making and communication skills in order to successfully compete in the expanding global economy. In my opinion, there is no better activity that will develop essential academic, professional, and life skills than dedicated involvement in speech and debate. Colleges and employers are actively seeking these skills…” (“Forensics and College Admissions”).
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