

2018

Debate Students Have a Lesson for the Rest of Us

Christian Feuerstein
Linfield College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

Feuerstein, Christian (2018) "Debate Students Have a Lesson for the Rest of Us," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 14 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol14/iss2/11

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

Debate students have a lesson for the rest of us

“If you’re going to be good at debate, the single most important skill you have to develop is good listening.”

— *Jackson Miller, associate dean of faculty and professor of communication arts*

Resolved: That the cow is more useful than the horse.” That, laughs Jackson Miller, Linfield’s associate dean of faculty and a professor of communication arts, is one of the earliest examples he’s been able to find of a topic that was debated at Linfield College. It was argued as part of a speech and debate program on campus in September 1896.

It wasn’t, however, a critically important issue. “The momentous question,” sniffed Roy Mahaffey ’28, pioneer of forensics education and Linfield professor, in a 1956 book commemorating Linfield’s centenary, “clearly showed that college students... were just as inclined to frivolity as those of the present day.”

In addition to teaching debate and forensics at Linfield, Miller has led courses for inmates at the Oregon State Penitentiary and presents debate workshops around the world in places like China, Guatemala, Mexico and Turkey. He believes the listening skills, critical thinking and formulation of arguments required in collegiate debate are increasingly important at a time when the broader culture is becoming less civil all the time.

Paul Deards, deputy head of school at Speyer Legacy School, an elementary and middle school for gifted students in New York City, agrees.

“If we want future generations of students to see beyond the haze of 24-hour news punditry and to use critical thinking to get to the heart of what’s important, if we want them to go beyond participating in a conversation to actually raising the level of na-

tional discourse... we had better start teaching them the means to do so,” he says.

Linfield has long been a place where debate education flourished. In the 86 years the college has held the Mahaffey Memorial Forensics Tournament – one of the nation’s longest continuous “streaks” for hosting an intercollegiate speech and debate competition – the scope of debate motions has widened considerably. Topics now include whether climate change is a greater threat to national security than terrorism; forced child marriage in the United States; and Facebook’s effect on society.

Members of the Linfield debate team in December went to the 2018 World University Debate Championship in Mexico City, where they explored topics as varied as time limits for museums to display works of art, the prohibition of out-of-court settlements for workplace discrimination and whether to support job-security legislation.

Tomeka Robinson, associate professor and the director of forensics at Hofstra University, is also the president of the Pi Kappa Delta National Forensics Honorary Association. She says it’s important for students to ponder a wide variety of issues, and to research the pros and cons of each.

“One of the things students have to learn is to argue both sides,” she says. “You can have more civil and informed dialogue with this skill set.”

Diana Vazquez Duque ’19, a member of Linfield’s debate

team, said she has learned that you can't – and shouldn't try – to change someone's mind unless and until you understand his or her position.

“One thing [debate] taught me is to go into every single conversation, particularly political ones, with an open mind,” Vazquez Duque says. “I'm saying, ‘OK, I'm going to listen in a very open way to whatever you have to say, but you have to back it up with logic, with evidence and with civility. And if you're unable to do that, you're going to be unable to change my mind.’”

Miller says the point of debate is learning how to question and challenge one another.

“The spirit of debate should always be about thinking about your side of the issue and defending that, but also focusing on having the most educational and robust discussion about both sides of the issue,” he says. “That's what you're there to try to do.”

College debaters can also bring civil discourse to their local communities. Robinson notes that Hofstra holds many dialogues open to the public: from the first Trump-Clinton debate to an exhibition debate that addressed the economy.

“The entire campus and the public was invited, with the audience asking questions,” Robinson says. “These students are able to put issues into a format that's more accessible than a snippet on the news.”

Experienced debaters also learn how to quickly learn about issues, rather than responding emotionally to a topic or argument.

“One resolution at the Pan American Debate Championship was about robots, and the robot tax,” says Vazquez Duque. “I don't know anything about the robot tax!”

She quickly found an article in the *Economist* that gave her enough information to discuss the robot tax intelligently. And that, says Miller, is another important point: debate skills are life skills.

“All colleges value graduates who have critical thinking skills,” he says. “Debate provides an amazing opportunity to work on those skills.”

First and foremost, debate students work on active listening. “If you're going to be good at debate, the single most important skill you have to develop is good listening,” says Miller. “You've got to take in and understand the other side's argument, otherwise your response to them isn't going to make sense. Most of what you do in a debate is taking in and processing what your opponent is saying, and then formulating a response to it.”

Students also hone superb writing skills as they prepare dozens of debate briefs, summaries both for and against a sample debate motion.

“Students might do 25-30 one-page briefs a year. It's a pretty intense amount of critical thinking,” Miller explains. “So much of presenting an argument is organization of the argument, and clearly laying out your evidence.”

Ultimately, collegiate debate does more than prepare students for careers and promote healthier campus conversations. It prepares them for the rest of their lives.

“Students find themselves through argument,” Miller says. “Debate is a transformative experience.”

– *Christian Feuerstein*

 linfield.edu/spring-2018-videos

Linfield chosen for national institute

Linfield is one of only two West Coast colleges or universities selected to participate in the Council for Independent Colleges Diversity, Civility and the Liberal Arts Institute this summer.

The gathering includes teams from 25 institutions across the country to address issues that drive unrest on campuses, taking advantage of teaching and learning approaches used in the liberal arts. Director Beverly Tatum is a nationally recognized authority on race and education in America. The institute is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Linfield's eight participants will bring lessons they learn back to our campuses and integrate them in classes and in programming through the Program for Liberal Arts and Civil Engagement (PLACE) program.

“We are pleased to be in the company of the other participants as well as with the incredible institute scholars,” said Susan Agre-Kippenhan, vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. “We hope to both learn and contribute.”