

**WE HAVE A JOB TO DO: AN EXAMINATION OF THE COACH'S ROLE IN  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATION**

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In 2000, the University of Louisville's Malcolm X debate team set out to change the face of intercollegiate policy debate (IPD) by making it their mission to "increase meaningful black participation" in the activity. The result was two-fold: 1) there has been a significant increase in diversity within intercollegiate policy debate since the start of the "Louisville Project" and 2) there is still work to be done in making debate "meaningful" for this new population of students. This essay intends to initiate a dialogue with coaches regarding our role in making black participation in intercollegiate policy debate meaningful. Meaningful, in this instance, should be understood beyond the scope of competition and more in terms of the preparation of students for life beyond debate. With this in mind, this essay seeks to examine three areas for consideration, the impact of the "Louisville Project" on meaningful black debate participation, student background—such as, first-generation student status, race, class, etc.—and best practices for student development beyond debate competition.

*Keywords:* Debate, argumentation, first-generation college student, black student experience, Louisville Project, diversity

### Introduction

In addressing the “Louisville Project,” the first thing that needs to be examined is the impact that the “Louisville Project” has had on increasing meaningful Black participation in IPD. Targeted recruitment and the development of alternative means of engaging in debate argumentation and performance have had a significant impact on increasing diversity within IPD. Black debaters and coaches have achieved much over the past two decades. However, the struggle to make debate *meaningful* is on-going and deserves more attention. While the development of alternative methodologies has provided students with the motivation to participate in debate, the consistent backlash against the increase in representation and competitive success of Black debaters and coaches has become increasingly exhausting. Therefore, it is necessary to define meaningful outside of the realm of competition and reorient students’ relationship to debate as a means to highlight the lesser known aspect of the “Louisville Project,” competition plus purpose.

In order to help students find their purpose, we must first understand who the students are that we recruit into our programs. As such, it is important to examine the background of this new student population. Considering that a great deal of these students are first generation college students who are moving away from home for the first time, we as coaches need to begin to assess the needs of these students beyond just offering them scholarship money to attend college. Most of these students come to our universities with little or no understanding of how to navigate the bureaucracy of academic institutions. Additionally, these students come to college with minimal access to external resources, including extra financial resources, a network of non-financial resources and a host of other necessities that will ensure a successful collegiate experience. These students come into our programs with whatever social and political issues that impact their mental health, be it typical growing pains associated with “finding themselves” or broader concerns relating to navigating the impacts of structural antiblackness. For most of these students, the culture shock associated with attending a predominately white institution produces real trauma. All of these things are significant variables that impact our students’ progress.

Lastly, we as a community need to begin a dialogue on best practices for preparing our students to succeed in and beyond their collegiate debate careers. As someone who has been a part of the “Louisville Project” since its inception and coaching for the last fourteen years, I offer

four strategies for creating individualized student success plans. First, prioritize academics over debate. Second, initiate the “who do you want to be when you grow up” conversation during students’ first year. Third, find out from students what their needs are and help them gain access to the necessary resources. Finally, set goals with your students and develop a 4-year plan towards accomplishing these goals. Just as we have been intentional in our efforts to bring diverse students into the activity, we must be equally intentional in helping them succeed beyond debate.

During the late 1980’s Urban Debate initiatives were started in Atlanta, Detroit and Philadelphia. By the early 2000’s Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) were popping up in urban centers all over the country, from Chicago, Boston and Baltimore to Los Angeles, Oakland and many places in between. According to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues’ (NAUDL) website, 84% of the students who participate in the leagues identify as students of color with 37% and 32% being African American and Hispanic/Latino students, respectively. Additionally, 72% of the overall student participants qualify for either free or reduced lunch.

Unfortunately, prior to the “Louisville Project,” not many of these students were transitioning from the UDL high school programs to the intercollegiate policy debate circuit. In an examination of Black participation in CEDA Debate by Peter Loge (1991) a survey was sent out to the Fall 1989 CEDA mailing list in an attempt to assess the participation of Blacks in Debate. The study found that only 3.69% (25 out of a total of 677) of the debaters at predominately white institutions were black. Of that percentage, less than one percent was deemed competitively successful, where competitive success was defined as participation in late elimination rounds at large tournaments. The Commission on Women and Minorities, a committee charged with increasing the number of women and minorities in CEDA, began developing a demographic questionnaire in 1991 asking for gender and race of all directors, coaches, and competitors. All schools participating in the national CEDA tournament were asked to complete the questionnaire. The data, over the course of five years (1991-1995), included: “390 directors of debate, 421 coaches of debate, and 1,943 debate competitors (p. 177).” Debate theorist Pamela Stepp (1997) compiled the data and found that, during this time, there was an increase in minority male directors, decrease in minority female directors, decrease in minority male coaches, more minority female coaches than directors, and an increase in overall minority participation of competitors. The total average participation for minority debaters during this time was 13%. However, the study acknowledged that the increase is far from representative of the

number of minorities at American colleges and universities. Unfortunately, Stepp's research does not distinguish between the various populations making up the classification of "minority." All persons of color or people who did not identify as white are all grouped together into a category called minorities. Stepp, along with Beth Gardner (2001) conducted a similar analysis of Stepp's 1997 study to examine the participation of women and minorities at the national CEDA debate tournament over the course of a decade, 1991-2000. They found that minority directors increased from 1% to 11%. They noted that this increase was due almost entirely to the increase in minority male directors. There was also a statistically significant increase in minority coaches. Finally, the percentage of minority debaters increased from 11% to 15%. Again, while these numbers have been on the rise, they are still lower than the percentage of minorities that make up the minority population at colleges and universities, 55.8% women and 26.2% minorities (Nation, 1999). Regrettably, this research also does not specifically distinguish between minority populations in debate. While the data has revealed a lot about the issue of diversity in Debate, it is important to note that most of the demographic studies do not offer specifics in terms of Black participation in Debate. Aside from Loge's analysis, the other studies group all people of color into one category. Loge has done the most comprehensive analysis of Black participation in IPD. However, that study is over two decades old and updated numbers would be useful in assessing how far the community has come with regards to Black participation in Debate.

A few years prior to the Stepp and Gardner study in, *A Vision for the Future: Collegiate Debate in the Twenty-First Century*<sup>1</sup>, the Director of Debate at the University of Louisville Ede Warner (1998) argued:

The art of recruiting is a final challenge for the new millennium; and not just recruiting talented debaters, but attracting a diversity woefully lacking [sic] in the participation levels of collegiate debate. Improving the numbers of women and people of color cannot solely be measured just in terms of debate participation, although that is a starting point. We must also develop and cultivate numbers in the graduate assistant ranks, the coaching ranks, and alumni of the "long gray line" who have demonstrated a career of excellence in the activity. Collegiate debate programs coordinate a variety of activities<sup>2</sup> with area

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from the 51<sup>st</sup> NDT Tournament Booklet

<sup>2</sup> The activities referred to here are UDLs.

high schools in cities like Detroit, Atlanta, and Birmingham and summer institutes like Iowa, Michigan, and Vermont work tirelessly to find resources to improve diversity among the high school ranks. But that must only be a starting point.

The second stage of the construction must be to find solutions to the barriers which prevent diversity from reaching the upper competitive echelon, without compromising the standards of excellence that tradition has bestowed on collegiate debate. A sincere commitment to excellence through diversity must be the long-term priority, if debate is willing to fight the stereotypes association [sic] with providing equal opportunity. To believe that equal opportunity presently exists in competitive debate, is to ignore the socio-economic institutional factors which have stopped diversity in its tracks (n.p.).

Therefore, Warner chose to actualize that vision by shifting the University of Louisville Debate Program's mission to "increase meaningful black participation in intercollegiate policy debate" beginning with the targeted recruitment of black students. The team was built around the one Black returning UDL alumnus as opposed to the white, nationally competitive debaters that filled the team the year before. The goal was to increase diversity in college policy debate and provide access to all of the benefits that IPD provides. These benefits range from college scholarships, networks and resources during and post college graduation, and increased academic skills such as research and critical thinking. Additionally, IPD has produced some of the world's most influential leaders who have held positions in presidential cabinets, on corporate boards, executive leadership teams, law firms, and so on.

Although recruitment was significant to the goals of increasing diversity, the Louisville squad quickly learned that the activity needed to undergo significant change in the way that the game was played, specifically at the varsity level. Studies showed that there were cultural barriers to black participation in debate such as, perceptions of "selling out" (Loge, 1991) and motivation based on cultural differences (Hill, 1997). Additionally, Loge found that the significant time commitment required in order to acquire the arcane skills and jargon necessary to achieve success in IPD prevented debaters from maintaining a job, which is often a necessity for Black students with limited economic resources. As such, the Louisville team devised a strategy for engaging in debates that would off-set some of these barriers to participation. Specifically, the "Louisville Project" was at the forefront of the development of what is now known as the three-tier process.

According to Latonia Green<sup>3</sup>, the goal of the three-tier process is to “challenge the relationship between social power and knowledge.” Debate theorist and communication studies scholar, Dr. Shanara Reid-Brinkley (2008) explains, “those with social power within the debate community are able to produce and determine ‘legitimate’ knowledge. These legitimating practices usually function to maintain the dominance of normative knowledge-making practices, while crowding out or directly excluding alternative knowledge-making practices.” Therefore, the Louisville Project offered an alternative method of engagement that was grounded in Black rhetorical traditions, engaged “traditional” scholarship, and allowed students to connect their arguments to their lived experiences. Debate theorist, Dana Polson (2012) argues that this epistemological alternative “provides meta-ground for their [Black students] inclusion in debate” by way of giving the students agentic voice related to their lived experience, as well as a sense of community through “Black Debate.”

This space created by the Louisville Malcolm X Debate program within IPD led to a proliferation of Black debaters at the collegiate level. Those debaters that existed in large numbers in the Urban Debate Leagues were beginning to matriculate into the college ranks in large numbers. Success at the highest levels soon followed evidenced by several “firsts” by Black debaters and coaches. The first team in the history of CEDA and NDT to “unite the crowns<sup>4</sup>” was Black and Queer. In 2013, a Black woman won the Rebecca Galentine Award<sup>5</sup> for the first time. Black students have also been awarded the Top Speaker honors at both the CEDA National Tournament and the National Debate Tournament championships. These are just a few of the many first-time accomplishments of Black debaters in the history of tournament style college policy debate.

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<sup>3</sup> Green was a member of the Louisville team, cited in “The Harsh Realities of Acting Black: How African-American Policy Debaters Negotiate Representation Through Racial Performance and Style”, a dissertation by Shanara Reid-Brinkley, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Uniting the Crowns is a phrase used when a team wins both national championships (CEDA/NDT) in a single season.

<sup>5</sup> According to the CEDA website, the annual award named in honor of Rebecca Galentine is designed to recognize an outstanding female debate coach in CEDA. The ideal candidate can demonstrate service to programs and the organization, community building and competitive success.

Despite these successes and others, there is still work to be done in the way of making IPD “meaningful” to this new population of students. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘meaningful’ as “serious, important, or worthwhile.” Winning awards in debate is exciting and satisfying but debate should be a means to an end, not an end itself. Therefore, the question that needs to be asked is what makes participation in debate important and worthwhile external to competitive success? I would argue that what students do once their debate careers end is more reflective of how meaningful their time in debate was in contrast to how many awards they won. Additionally, it is the job of directors and coaches of programs who recruit Black students to ensure that these students have a plan post-debate and are equipped with the skills and resources to see that plan through. While recognizing the importance of student accountability, there are also structural impediments to Black students’ success in college and directors and coaches have an obligation to students beyond debate.

Understanding the needs and characteristics of the new student population entering into IPD is central to developing strategies for their success once their debate careers have ended. Based on the data of the student population within UDLs—one of the major sources of college recruitment for diverse students—low family income status is highly represented among the pool of incoming debaters. Additionally, a large portion of these students hold first generation status, meaning that neither of their parents have earned a bachelor’s degree. This is significant because studies show that these two dimensions of disadvantage have negative association with degree attainment. Thomas Mortenson (1998) conducted a study that predicted graduation rates based on a measure of academic preparedness (SAT scores). His analysis shows that students from families in lower income quartiles are far less likely than those in higher income quartiles to earn a bachelor’s degree by the age of 24. Akerheilm, et al. (1998) confirm the influence of family income on degree completion, even when controlling for academic ability. Studies regarding first generation status found that these students enter college with lower pre-college critical thinking levels, significantly lower SAT scores and high school grade point averages (Pascarella et al., 1995; Riehl, 1994). Even though participation in debate has been proven to increase critical thinking skills and academic performance, first generation students are still likely to have limited access to information about the college experience. This could include things such as; lack of knowledge of time management, college finances and budget management, and the bureaucratic operations of higher education (Richardson and Skinner, 1992).

In addition to the above obstacles for first generation, low income students, most of these debaters are leaving home for an unfamiliar academic setting and entering into a physical and social environment that they are unaccustomed to experiencing. This is further compounded by the impacts of being a black student attending a predominately white institution (PWI). For Black students' adjustment—the ability to adapt successfully to the expectations of college—into a PWI comprises two domains, academic and social. Although debate increases the likelihood for Black students to adjust academically, debate can also be isolating from the larger institutional environment due the extensive travel and significant amount of time spent in squad rooms. The effects of isolation can significantly impact students' ability to adjust socially. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that social adjustment significantly affects students' overall college adjustment. Additionally, studies show that problems with social adjustment can be detrimental to Black students' success at PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin et al., 1996). Factors that influence social adjustment include social support networks, experiences of isolation and alienation, faculty-student relations, and the overall college environment. Finally, Black students are less likely to feel a sense of belonging due to negative cross-racial interactions (Allen, 1985, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996).

The above data indicates that there is a significant need for the development of strategies for student support for first generation, low income, Black students in order to ensure that former UDL students are earning degrees upon completion of their collegiate debate careers. It is not enough for coaches to be satisfied knowing they gave urban debaters the opportunity to attend and debate in college. As such, it is time to begin a community conversation of best practices if we are to ever make debate “meaningful” to this population of students. The literature surrounding student support services suggests structured first year programs and learning communities as part of a national discussion of best practices. The very nature of being a part of a debate team *should* provide the benefits of learning communities, but debate coaches should consider developing structured first year programs tailored specifically to first generation, low income, Black students. Research indicates that what works for this population will work across the board, but the inverse is not true (Thayer, 2000).

Based on my experience as a debate coach a structured program should include regular one on one meetings with students and should not be limited to students' first year. The first meeting should be spent getting to know students outside of the debate context, probing for



information regarding the student's goals and needs. Often first years don't really know what they want to do post-graduation so asking about their interests and offering suggestions based on those responses is a great start. Even those who have an idea don't know all the ins and outs of pursuing that career. As such, all students should leave the first meeting with an informal research task that is taken up at the follow-up meeting. There should be as few as three meetings per semester and as many as needed.

Follow-up meetings should be used to check-in on students' well-being, academically and generally. It may seem like a strange set of questions but each of my follow-up meetings begin with, "are you eating?" and "are you sleeping?" One would be shocked at how often the answer to one or both of these questions is "no." Other things that make these meetings useful is that you can pre-emptively set up tutoring before it becomes too late, offer students advice on how to engage with professors, provide study and note taking tips, help them navigate the university system, etc. These things make the student feel as though they have a support network that is an influential factor of adjusting to a new environment with a very complicated bureaucratic system. By the end of the first year, students should have an academic plan that guides the one on one meetings and the general well-being questions should continue, as well. These meetings should continue throughout the student's undergraduate career, developing goals each year that aid students' progress toward their post-graduation plans.

The benefits of having a structured program for this population of students and coaches are numerous. In addition to helping students matriculate to degree completion with post-graduation plans, the regular meetings have the potential to create an open line of communication between coach and debater. This open line of communication helps coaches learn more about their students which can lead to the possibility of having a more inclusive squad room environment. Additionally, coaches are better able to assist student's in managing their time between debate and the classroom. For example, if a student is struggling to balance the high workload of a particular class, the regular meetings can ensure that coaches become aware early in order to make necessary adjustments such as cutting back on that student's debate assignments or tournaments. There are a host of other benefits from increased student confidence to graduate school/career readiness.

### **Conclusion**

It is great to acknowledge and celebrate the impact that the “Louisville Project” has had on debate over the last twenty years. Nevertheless, it is time to assess the work that is needed moving forward. Making debate meaningful, particularly for Black students, is an on-going venture that should be guided by the needs of the students. We as coaches are responsible for that. It is our job to ensure that the students we recruit are given the necessary resources to be successful beyond debate. As we uproot them out of their ready-made networks and drop them off into an unknown, often unwelcoming, space; we should do so with the intent to provide an alternative network of resources and support. Additionally, it is equally important for students that we, as a community, increase the number of black coaches within IPD. I am not arguing that non-Black coaches would not find the above strategies productive and useful, however, the community must increase efforts to recruit and retain black coaches. It is important for these students to have mentors that look like them. Additionally, the labor burden that currently exists on the few black coaches present in IPD to mentor the ever-increasing population of debaters is untenable. Even though it has been nearly two decades since the actual numbers of Black debate coaches and judges have been assessed, the current judging pool offers a snapshot of the work still to be done in this area. Moving forward, developing and sharing best practices for Black student development beyond debate and the intentional recruitment and retention of Black coaches are two places to begin our next phase of making IPD meaningful for Black student participants.

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