

CURRENT DEBATE AND PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

Michael Hall

In recent years intercollegiate debating has de-emphasized some traditional techniques of public speaking in favor of a greater stress on the presentation of research data and on policy analysis. A debate round between college teams no longer sounds like a televised debate between popular political advocates. Form and content have become too complex and sophisticated for the general public. Academic debate has become more academic.

As debate has altered its role in speech education, some university departments have developed new, less rigorous and less competitive debate activities to supplement their curricular offerings. Much of debate's former educational role within the speech communication field has been shifted to other competitive forensic activities. These activities often concentrate on the pleasing, persuasive communication of very generalized concepts and values. At the same time, embattled debate coaches are continually confronted with criticism of current debating techniques. With justification, these critics argue that debating shows an increasing lack of concern for pleasing and persuasive communication of

ideas. Despite the assurances of some debate coaches, it seems clear that contemporary debating indeed does not teach the same techniques with the same effectiveness as did traditional intercollegiate debating.

An adequate defense of current academic debating must be based on an evaluation of the techniques and activities that are now emphasized. Tournament debating today focuses on a complex, and often highly technical evaluation of alternative policy systems. Beyond the more traditional appeals to basic cultural values, current debate centers more on quantifying and qualifying the impact of the various aspects of public policy on those values. If debaters today sound less like politicians, it is because they sound more like public policy analysts. Academic debate has undergone important changes in emphasis. And these changes perhaps have made debate training an even more vital part of the educational process. The purpose of this article is to suggest some important relationships between public policy analysis and intercollegiate debating as it has evolved. In addition, the article will conclude with a discussion of the expanded educational objectives that are being met by intercollegiate debating as it is now practiced.

The concerns and activities of public policy analysts are very similar to those of current college debaters. The analysis of public policy has attracted increased attention

among social scientists and government officials in recent years. Beyond the realm of ideology and partisan politics, policy analysts seek to determine the actual outputs of government and private actions. In addition to documenting the effects of existing policy, analysts attempt to determine the most desirable future policy. These determinations arise from intensive studies using many different kinds and sources of data.

Public policy analysis draws most heavily on the disciplines of political science and economics, although the expertise from other fields is often required for the completion of projects. Political scientists contribute knowledge of American government and politics, public administration, law, and normative political values. Economists offer insight into public and private finance, economic development, and resource allocation.

Traditional academic debate was often thought of as the training ground for students who might enter politics. Correspondingly, the techniques emphasized in traditional debate were those considered most useful to the public speaker who was involved in partisan political advocacy. Changes in academic debate, however, have made it less akin to political advocacy designed for the general public. Current academic debate emphasizes a framework for analysis more similar to the activities of the professional policy analyst. Undergraduate debaters

rely on research in the same fields of knowledge as do professional analysts. In examining policy options, many considerations must be weighed before an optimum course or courses of action can be recommended. Both debaters and policy analysts have a strong interest in the features of politics and government in the United States. Any policy system will be integrated into the larger political system. The outputs of a single policy will be greatly affected by its environment.

To be sure, analysts must be more sensitive to political considerations in recommending policy alternatives to political and bureaucratic leaders than debaters need be in arguing their cases before debate judges. Clearly many affirmative cases would not win the approval of the electorate. Nevertheless, debaters must still be cognizant of the political barriers to the adoption of the affirmative proposal. For example, affirmative solvency often depends on an understanding of the political forces that the affirmative fiat circumvents. Unlike the would-be-technocratic role of the debater, policy analysts in universities, institutes, consulting firms, and bureaucracies cannot assume implementation of their recommendations. Still, policy analysts have a distinctively different outlook than officials who establish and carry out policies. Even though analysts take into account some political considerations, the nature of their role is to retain a more "objective,"

less-compromised viewpoint about policy. In this respect, then, analysts share an important common ground with debaters.

Analysts and debaters also share a common concern for implementation problems that may occur in the administration of programs. Debaters usually show the greatest concern over agencies that have been "captured" by interest groups. Policy analysts are often more concerned with the rigidity of programs or the lack of central control over the implementation of programs. Both groups are quick to research any hint of deficiencies in manpower, facilities, training, or funding. Both are interested in administrative regulations that hamper program effectiveness.

The legal framework is of great interest to debaters who must provide a "structural change" in the system by the affirmative plan. Even when the indicted structure is not a law, debaters often must alter associated laws or regulations to effect the change. Policy analysts similarly are many times concerned with legislative changes in programs they review.

Unlike debaters, policy analysts look carefully at the level of current funding in evaluating a program. Laws appropriating funds for programs are a major consideration for decision makers who must balance the benefits of programs that compete for limited revenues. On the other hand, debaters most often face a choice between a program and no program. Thus, while the cost issue is rarely decisive in a debate, it is often a

a primary concern for policy-makers and policy analysts.

Implicit in the study of public policy is the cultural values of the society that the policy is to serve. Analysts must weigh the relative good of a policy's various outputs. Undesirable side effects must also enter into any decision. Debaters must defend a system of normative values when they appeal to the judge to vote for the "better" policy system. Affirmative cases with a philosophical justification make a normative social or political value the central consideration in the contest. Cases without an overt philosophical justification assume an implicit value system as a framework for debate. In the case of both analysts and debaters, much consideration of society's values goes into the final product of their efforts.

In summary, the professional policy analyst, in dealing with public policy systems and alternatives, is joined by experts from other fields. Traditional areas in the discipline of political science provide data and basic concepts. Economics is also a basic resource discipline for the analyst. Depending on the type of policy question being considered, other social scientists, historians, and natural scientists may contribute. Debaters look to this same interdisciplinary group in researching policy questions. Moreover, both policy analysts and debaters synthesize the findings of many disciplines in pursuing their crafts. Thus, in many

important ways, current debate operates much like professional policy analysis, and provides students with training in the same kinds of research, data selection, synthesis, and reporting techniques.

The techniques that are being learned in contemporary academic debating have much worth to students from many disciplines. Clearly future public policy analysts would profit from a background in current intercollegiate debating. And while future political advocates may find that techniques of argumentation learned on the current college debate team are less useful on the hustings than techniques of more traditional debate might have been, they may also find that once they achieve positions of influence they will now have the tools to better understand and evaluate professional policy recommendations that come to their desks. Political science students concerned with American politics and government, public administration, and normative political theory also stand to gain by the intense training now provided in academic debate. Moreover, current debating techniques have not diminished the traditional appeal of forensic training for students who plan careers in law. Quite the contrary, the expansion of government and accompanying legislation into so many new areas of public affairs has placed an even greater emphasis on the need for the student of law to be able to deal with all manners of public policy considerations.

A long-standing tradition of undergraduate forensic programs has been the strong support they provide to other academic disciplines within the university. Participation in debate has often been a springboard for additional student interest and effort in non-speech subject areas. The new practices in current debating are not alien to this tradition. Current debate participants must read widely from the literature of many disciplines in preparation for competition. The constant need to synthesize arguments forces debate participants to relate knowledge from one subject area to another. Thus, today's forensics remains a truly interdisciplinary educational experience.

While debating continues to benefit students in many of the traditional ways, the changes that have evolved in the nature of the activity place greater emphasis on developing students' abilities to engage in intensive research, careful analysis, and sophisticated synthesis. This kind of training may well make debate more valuable to more students than ever before. No other kind of activity in higher education provides students with the intensified and continued learning experience as does academic debate as it is now practiced. Today's college debaters profit from the following educational benefits of forensic training:

1. Students are introduced to a major public policy area each academic year. They become aware of important issues that face the nation. And they become

well-informed about the policy area, and often remain interested in the subjects debated years after leaving their undergraduate forensic programs.

2. Debaters learn to research effectively. The research demands of current academic debating are insatiable. Learning the techniques of efficient library research is a valuable lesson for school and for later life. For students who go on to graduate and professional schools, these skills may be more important than the specific knowledge gained.
3. Current debating requires careful synthesis of arguments prior to competition. The need to respond effectively to a great variety of approaches to resolutions requires the student to develop skills to relate concepts and data from many diverse fields, and to use the information in a clearly organized manner employing sophisticated analysis.
4. Even with relentless research efforts and careful "blocking" of arguments, current debating guarantees that negative teams will inevitably be faced with some cases which they have not anticipated. This means that debaters, while operating in a highly competitive and intellectually-demanding confrontation situation, must think quickly and respond effectively to interpretations of resolutions and accompanying specific arguments that they had not considered in their preparation. This kind of valuable learning experience was rarely provided in traditional debating. And today no other activity in higher education provides students with similar training and experiences.
5. Even with the alleged "non-persuasive" aspects of current debating, participants must evaluate the relative importance of the large numbers of arguments in constructive speeches and then synthesize a winning position to present to the critic-judge in rebuttals. This is a demanding and useful exercise in critical thinking and involves on a more intense level the same kinds of analyses that have always been a part of effective advocacy.

Current debating can be evaluated fairly only by judging the usefulness to students of the techniques that are now taught. With the present emphasis on policy alternative comparisons, debate now offers the student broad knowledge

in a particular significant problem area, intensive training in research methods, training in complex policy analysis, opportunities to develop the ability to respond quickly and effectively to unfamiliar arguments and ideas, and experiences in efficiently synthesizing voting issues from numerous constructive positions. These skills are important to students who will attend graduate and professional schools, and later move into occupations in the policy-making or the policy-evaluating process; or to perhaps a greater number of students who simply wish to become well-informed citizens capable of dealing with complex problems and making intelligent contributions to self-government. It seems true that some useful public speaking techniques have been sacrificed in the changing nature of academic debate, but the techniques of public policy analysis continue to make debate one of the most important educational experiences available to undergraduate students.

Michael Hall is a political science graduate student at Vanderbilt University. He received his undergraduate degree from Middle Tennessee State University where he was a participant in the debating program.