



The Benefits of Debate for Minority Students



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In his article, "Forensics and College Admissions,"¹ Dr. Minh. A. Luong from Yale University writes about how doing debate is excellent preparation for college admissions and coursework. This essay suggests that not only is Dr. Luong correct about debate and college admissions in general, but *in particular*, minority high school students benefit immensely from competing in debate. Few activities are as useful as debate for minority students.

Too often minority students (based on race, class, or other traits) assume that they have nothing to contribute or gain from debate. My suggestion is that few claims could be further from the truth. I will make three points: first, that debate offers an avenue for minorities to express their own voices, and to learn how to vocalize their experiences in a supportive environment; second, that debate is a unique opportunity to help get into college (even for non-athletes), and third, that debate is the best preparation to assist minority students to handle high-level undergraduate coursework, especially when their high school training may not be up to par.

Debate as a method of expressing one's voice

Too often, minority students are told that there are limited ways they can express their point of view. Although hip-hop, dance, and entertainment avenues have been exceptional avenues for marginalized groups to make a

¹ Luong, Minh A. "Forensics and College Admissions." *Rostrum*, Nov 2000.



social impact—minority high school students incorrectly think that the way into college and to express their ideas should be limited solely to these realms. Debate is a unique alternative.

Debate engages both written and oral methods of expression. Like spoken-word poets, debate performers have a topic, write a script for their ideas (“cases”) and then orally perform it in front of an audience. Like rap freestylers, debate is an activity where students exchange arguments in a competition to compare and discuss different points of view. While many assert that the formal nature of debate makes it outside of the reach of minority debaters, such a view is ill-informed: teams such as Central High School in Kansas City (as per the book *Cross-X*²) and Newark High School have created minority debaters who have been successful at local, state and national levels—some of whom have placed in the top 20 nationally.

Debate is also an excellent venue for minority students to research their own experiences and to better understand them. Debate allows minority students to access literary and scholarly traditions which one’s high school may neither discuss nor permit. Critical race theory, feminism, black feminism, and intersectionality are just a few of the many traditions that are often discussed in undergraduate studies, and are often directly related and used in debate rounds in high school. These terms are often unknown to most high school students, but high school debaters frequent them. These common topics for debaters illustrate the intersection of personal and academic interests of minority students.

For example, on the 2007 September-October Lincoln-Douglas debate topic, “A just society ought not use the death penalty as a form of punishment,” a minority debater can research and educate people about the role of subtle forms of racism in the criminal justice system, and how it plays out in which murderers are chosen to live or die. Whereas such an argument may seldom be heard in a public school classroom discussion, in debate, such arguments are not only permitted, but relatively common.

Debate offers a safe environment for minority students to discuss the ideas which are important to them and to find a community that will give them time to do so.

Debate is a unique way to get into college

Much of the challenge of getting into top undergraduate schools is standing out from the rest of the competition. While minority students are a prime target for undergraduate schools, these students must still rack an impressive resume in order to get into top schools. Few activities are as useful as debate in this regard.

² Miller, Joe. *Cross-X*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.



Some minority students may be excellent athletes and get recruited. But the process of sports recruitment is highly competitive, and only a few minority students will go to college through this path. However, many excellent minority debaters have earned scholarships to college based on their performance in debate. Schools like the University of Louisville have recruited minority policy debaters who excelled in high school. And over 50 universities around the country offer scholarships for students who debate.

More important though, is that debate participation is *more* useful for minority students in terms of making an impressive application. Debate participation proves to a college that one has research skills and the ability to express oneself verbally with confidence and fluency (more on this in the next section). Competitive success in debate allows a student who may otherwise have limited college opportunities to look like a rare kind of student: to college admissions officers, this is a student who has overcome great obstacles to be able to compete against some of the smartest students in the country.

Some may say that it is difficult for minority debaters to compete at a local, state or national level: that other students are just more prepared, more polished and are better speakers. However, that is a function of a lack of access and practice, not a function of a lack of ability. Groups such as *Perspectives* and the *Urban Debate League* have made tremendous strides in making debate accessible for minority students—offering mentorship, coaching and role modeling. If anything, this is a reason more students should become involved in debate and overcome obstacles to participation, because the need to access such a valuable activity is too great to ignore.

Debate as the best preparation for doing well in college

Many minority students who do enter undergraduate studies may feel underprepared, facing culture shock, and surprised at the workloads they encounter in college. Debate is the best way to curb these issues. In terms of preparation, high school debate helps minorities because it teaches students how to read large volumes of text, analyze them, and dissect the most important parts. College demands a different kind of academic study than high school; whereas in high school, the emphasis is on memorization and recall, college forces students to read, to make choices about the text and to synthesize information. Because debaters learn to research many topics in depth, and to learn to respond to arguments on the fly in a round, minority students entering college, if they did debate, would be more than ready to handle the pressure.

Many debaters in their freshman year report to me that their freshman classes are very easy because they are already used to the reading and writing requirements of college. From case writing, they know how to write a well



structured, argumentative essay—a skill required in almost any undergraduate writing course. From researching for evidence, debaters learn how to take a 50 – 100 page book chapter and quickly find the main talking points from it within 1 or 2 hours (at most).

The in-round speaking practice of debate is also invaluable. Many college courses require that students present for their weekly discussion sections and give a 5-10 minute speech on the reading. Debaters who are able to do a 1AR (the First Affirmative Rebuttal in Lincoln-Douglas Debates, widely considered the most challenging speech) will not only find such an assignment easy, but can quickly impress a TA or professor with their organization, fluency, level of depth of analysis and their ability to speak within strict time limits. For example, in one class I had to give a speech under a very strict 7 minute time limit about my freshman term paper. My time allocation skills from doing 1AR speeches allowed me to say all of the points I needed to without speaking quickly or stuttering once. Debate skills even help with foreign language classes: very often students will have to give full 15-20 minute speeches with few if any notes. The ability to speak and maintain eye contact while discussing unusual ideas and material turn such a scary assignment into one well within someone's control.

Cross-examination skills are also a premium for minority debate students. Many times during presentations, students will face questioning from not only a professor but perhaps the entire class. The CX skills from Lincoln-Douglas Debate allow one to maintain confidence and competence at asking and responding to good questions. While many undergraduates may feel intimidated by the confrontation inherent in Q/A sessions, debaters arrive well practiced.

Minority debaters, *in particular*, should see debate as a necessary part of their high school education. Many of these students may come from schools which do not adequately teach reading, writing and speaking skills—especially in inner-city or under-supported neighborhoods. Debate offers a unique framework for these students to catch up and feel ready to handle college level work.

Conclusion

Minority students have often excelled in academics, earning spots into college based on their abilities on a track field, a basketball court or a football field. Success in college however, requires performance in the classroom. Minority students who want a voice to express their ideas, avenues to get into college, or the confidence and skill to survive the toughest colleges in the United States should seriously consider debate as a tool for their future success. Few activities are more valuable.



About the Author

Anthony Berryhill is a Ph.D. student in political science at Yale University focusing on antidiscrimination law. He completed his undergraduate studies at Stanford University, majoring in political science and completing minors in psychology and Stanford's Ethics in Society program.

Anthony was a nationally competitive debater for Isidore Newman High School in New Orleans, LA. He qualified for NFL Nationals in Lincoln-Douglas Debate and Senate Student Congress and was a Tournament of Champions participant in Lincoln-Douglas Debate in 2000. Anthony helped start several nationally competitive squads during his time at Stanford, including Mission San Jose (CA), the Menlo School (CA), and currently is an assistant coach at Harker Academy (CA). Anthony has taught at more than ten summer debate camps, including the National Debate Forum in Boston, the Yale Ivy Scholars Program, and the Stanford Forensics Institute.