

Academy Debate

We need a division of debate that recognizes that while every student can benefit from forensics, not every student wishes to make it their life's work. Additionally, we need to provide a better link from beginner to varsity, regardless of a student's commitment to the activity. And finally, we need to insure that all our regional tournaments provide the community with appropriate levels of competition and engagement, so that our rich competitive calendar continues to thrive.

Academy Debate answers all those needs.

There are three main facets of Academy Debate:

- Academy Debate is, primarily, a specific level of competition in Policy, LD and PF. Academy is intended for sophomores and juniors, and is not open to seniors or students past their third year of debate (i.e., juniors who debated in middle school who are now in their fourth year are not eligible to participate at the Academy Debate level, and while ambitious first-years would be welcome, they are already well-served in the community with our present novice level tournaments).
- Academy Debate rounds can be judged by seniors in their fourth year of debate. In fact, seniors in their fourth year are urged to judge, and will be considered not only judges but instructors at tournaments that embrace the Academy Debate designation. We have many students at the senior level who have a lot to give at a tournament beyond their ability to adjudicate rounds less expensively than college students (although one advantage of Academy is indeed less expensive judging requirements). Academy Debate can use those other skills of our upperclassmen.
- Finally, if a tournament adopts an Academy Debate structure, a program of educational activities beyond the rounds can be interwoven into the tournament. Beyond-the-Rounds activities can include lectures and brainstorming on new resolutions, demo rounds by TOC-level seniors with commentary, stop rounds (judging watching a round can break in at any time with advice and questions), background lectures by coaches and student instructors (e.g., a unit on sovereignty or due process or whatever), etc. The intention is to slot maybe two or three of these special events into a tournament, during down time and even in lieu of a round.

In a nutshell, Academy Debate will invigorate tournaments that do not have TOC bids by making them appealing to younger students, who can come and actually learn something and enjoy the competition, and to older students, who can come and, quite frankly, show off their skills. Additionally, it will make those tournaments more affordable by reducing the need to obtain and house hired college judges.

The educational modules: Any tournament can find educational material that would be of great interest in the Academy Debate model, depending on the time of year. There are always new resolutions to explore and new techniques to learn. For instance, look at January in the northeast. On Martin Luther King weekend we have Big Lex, a triple-threat TOC-level tournament with heavy competition in each division. Additionally, for

most LDers this is the first TOC-level shot at the Jan-Feb resolution that will also be the TOC resolution and the NDCA resolution. In our present system:

- Seniors and TOC-level hopefuls are working hard on their cases, and have little interest in “prepping for Lex” at a tournament with competition not at their own level.
- Younger students, especially sophomores (if they are even able to register), are preparing to have their heads handed to them at Lexington, starting for some what might be the inglorious end of their careers because they are not interested in continuing at high stakes TOC-level competition. We all know the drop-off rate in forensics after sophomore year, and the inaccessibility and high cost of buy-in at the varsity level is one very big reason for this.
- Nobody knows what material other schools are going to be running, and everybody finds out during the competition. If you happen to be running something totally illogical that sounded really good back home, well, it’s too late now.

These apply fairly equally across the debate activities, but of course with different ramifications. January in PF, for instance, is rich with competitive opportunities, but again, is it best to dive into a TOC bid tournament with a new case filled with untested ideas?

Well, what if there were an Academy Debate tournament the week before Big Lex?

- Seniors in LD and PF who are working hard on their cases would not have to present a finished case in competition, but as judges they could hear what other folks are running and maybe get some ideas therefrom.
- Seniors who have been working hard their entire careers will get a chance to lecture and brainstorm their ideas.
- A coach or two might do a half hour unit on background for both the PF and LD divisions.
- A “lab” might do a training session on CX for all divisions.
- Students not at the level of a TOC Quarters Bid tournament will not have to face those who are at that level, and will therefore have a chance for meaningful competition.

The nature of non-Bid tournaments: Some tournaments, especially those without TOC bids, do not get the attendance they deserve, despite the fact that one often hears among coaches a longing for more rounds for their younger students. And the likelihood that any non-bid tournament will somehow work its way up to attaining bids is very slight, given the politics of TOC. And for that matter, do we really want to live in a world where the only tournaments worth attending are perceived as nothing more than gateways to the TOC? The problem is, whether or not a tournament has bids, once you have to travel and hire judges, the costs are easily the same.

- The removal of the need to provide a lot of hired college judges for sophomore and junior debaters seriously reduces the cost of debate for the attendees.
- At the same time, there is a big issue that we want younger students to remain in the activity if at all possible without becoming dispirited. A tournament without bids will naturally draw competitors of a similar level, excluding bid trawlers and the like who can put a serious dent in a young debater’s self-esteem. Also, there will be less emphasis on

hardcore circuit style debate with the younger Academy field. Academy is a promising way to hold longer on to our borderline debaters.

- For large programs, there becomes a logical way to split the squad between events. If you always send your top debaters to the bid events, here's a place to send your non-top debaters (except for those you send as judges).

What Academy isn't: Academy is not aimed at changing the present debate activities. It is not any sort of new debate activity, nor is it somehow a preventative against or a curative for certain practices that some coaches might find displeasing. This is not the intention. Academy, as it relates to actual debating, should be seen as no different than the connotation of novice or varsity or junior varsity levels as they relate to their particular brand of debate. Although we specify who can do it and who can judge it, we do not attempt to interfere with the actual content, nor make claims for any new content of debate.

Benefits to tournaments: Speaking frankly, there are some tournaments in my region that are in trouble, or will be in trouble, and Academy might be the help they're looking for. In my region, the Northeast, it seems that there's about one big relatively local TOC-qual tournament every month, and there's a lot of jockeying around attending those. They anchor a team's calendar at the varsity end. Then there's the regular one-dayers provided by the local CFL. There's two of these, and they anchor the team's calendar at the other, younger end. And then there's the handful of tournaments with no bids, and maybe no plans for trying to get bids. The bid-seeking varsity debaters aren't very interested in these, not only because of the lack of bids but because the competition won't be at their level. Monticello is the perfect example of this. It comes between Yale and Big Bronx, and used to have bids, but lost them over the years for one reason or another. It's a very welcoming venue, with great amenities for judges and coaches. It's also big enough to hold the Winter Olympics (and, in Monticello, it is always winter). But after it lost its TOC bids a few years ago, programs seemed to lose interest in it. What programs presumably didn't do, on the other hand, was lose interest in developing their sophomores and juniors, many of whom might not debate at the bracketing tournaments of Yale and Bronx because of entry limits. But since Monticello had no lure for the top varsity, and since divisions that were called varsity (or open) that had to be judged by paid adjudicators, the tournament became much less attractive. It was one thing to get some rounds for lightly seasoned debaters when you also had the chance to pick up a bid, and another thing altogether to get some rounds for lightly seasoned debaters between the expensive Yale and Bronx events, at the same cost. Over the last couple of years attendance has declined steadily at Monticello, and the tournament runs the risk of disappearing, yet it is a venue that has proven it can hold a tournament of great size successfully year after year, which is no easy feat. If it were to disappear, someone else would probably grab the weekend, but the same issues would ensue. The bracketing tournaments determine that this weekend will always be what it is, tucked between Yale and Bronx. So we are faced with the possibility of lightly seasoned debaters losing an opportunity for rounds on this weekend. As a community, we can let the weekend expire, or we can try to revitalize it. Academy is seen, at the moment, as a way of revitalizing it.

Since Academy Debate was proposed, it has not taken off. The same complaints about the lack of rounds for teams are still being aired, while at the same time smaller, non-bid

tournaments simply aren't getting the respect they deserve. Can Academy fix that? Maybe not. But when we don't fix it, and we lose competent tournaments that offer good opportunities for younger debaters, while at the same time we focus all our time (and budget) aiming at the TOC, we are, in my opinion, simply shooting ourselves in the foot.