

So you want to have a tournament

There are plenty of established tournaments already, but it is not unusual for some folks to want to run their own events. One often hears that schools in general need to get more rounds for their students, so on face it seems like a great thing that you want to help provide those rounds. Just keep in mind two very important things. First, you're probably not going to make money, especially when you're just starting out, and second, you are not going to get a TOC bid any time soon, if ever. Those are raw, hard truths. If you're okay with both of those things, we can get down to business.

A successful tournament serves the needs of the community. People are going to attend your tournament because there's something in it for them. So the first question to ask is, what does your community need? What service can you provide? Maybe there's not enough policy rounds in your region, or not enough LD. Or it might be that novices or JV in your area aren't getting enough rounds. (In reality, this is almost always true everywhere.) If the service you intend to offer is a varsity LD tournament in a region where there's already a TOC bid varsity LD tournament every other weekend, you are not going to get very far. (Remember our starting premise that you're not going to get a TOC bid any time soon, if ever.) Your goal should be to give the people what they need. Or more to the point, what they *really* need.

The second question to ask is, when is a good time to have your tournament? We'll assume we're talking about a weekend, one way or the other. There are two rules of thumb here. First, you shouldn't start too early in the school year, because people aren't ready yet, and second, you shouldn't run too late in the school year, because after a certain point, the season is over. Realistically, in most areas the span at its stretchiest is October through March. If you come up with the world's greatest tournament in May, you'll probably be holding it all by yourself.

The goal, therefore, is to fill gaps. Step one, as explained above, look for the gap that people need to fill in event and level offerings in your region, and step two, look for the gap on the calendar in your region that people will find agreeable to fill.

As a general rule, the least served students in the community are the younger ones, especially second-year debaters, who seldom have an

opportunity to debate at their own level. More often than not, they are up against seasoned varsity, with relatively little chance of success. For this and other reasons, second-years are the most likely to abandon the activity. “Academy” levels of debate might work for this group, and is something for you to consider when thinking about what your tournament will do. [<http://www.jimmenick.com/Academy.pdf>]

Another possibility is to consider your tournament as a prep to an upcoming high-level tournament. This is not the best strategy, because if the competition at the upcoming tournament is strongly circuit, and you’re simply local, you really aren’t a prep at all. Nevertheless, if there’s a new topic being run, or just a big gap since the last tournament, this might work in your area.

One nice thing about events limited to younger students is that the older students can judge them, reducing your need to acquire hired judges. Student judging can be an important part of the educational process for older students, and is often a better use of their energy than creating a division for them that is non-competitive and therefore under-registered. Some areas and leagues are prejudiced against student judging, and it is true that you need to train student judges carefully and keep an eye on them throughout, but the general advice to them to “be the judge you wish you had had when you were just starting out” sums it up. Most of them want to do a good job; why not let them?

When thinking about serving the needs of the community, don't necessarily do what *you* love: Do what sells. Just because your team only does LD doesn't mean you should only offer LD. Give the people what they want, or as pointed out above, what they need. And mix it up, if it makes sense. Some thoughts:

- Public Forum — You can charge twice as much for 2 people as you can with one-person LD, using the exact same amount of space. Duh.
- PF novice divisions remain, as of this writing, relatively rare, while PF as a whole is growing like wildfire. Hmmmm.
- If you don't think you can attract a large field of varsity students, attract a small one: Hold a Round Robin, perhaps before the main tournament. This brings a few people in to the RR itself and, hopefully, brings the rest of their teams to the main event later. Those RR debaters can go on to be judges if your regular tournament is all younger students.
- Congress — you may or may not do it at your school, but it has very light judge requirements and can hold 20 to a room. It may not fly,

and make sure you have someone running it who loves it and knows how to do it. Still, it's worth considering. One or two rooms, 30 or 40 entry fees...

- IEs — Sure, you're a debate school. But do the schools in your region do both, or are there speech schools in your community that are looking for rounds just like their debate cousins? Another thing worth thinking about.
- Parli — Some regions do a lot of Parli, and get ignored by the non-Parli folks. For instance, Connecticut schools have a thriving Parli community, and one of the few tournaments that cater to them outside of their own circuit is Yale. Is there a Parli community near you that you can hook into?
- Middle School events — Personally I don't like mixing high schools and middle schools in the same location, but that's just me. MS forensics is growing. Is there a MS community you could be serving?

One of our starting premises was not to expect to make money from your tournament. People don't want to pay much (if anything) for a new tournament, because as a general rule their budgets are already accounted for with their regular tournaments, covering the whole competitive year. When setting fees, just try to cover your costs: awards, snacks in the judges' lounge, meals for the competitors (if you're offering them). College tournaments make a lot of money because they're glorified vacations slash field trips to desirable locations for half the field, for which a lot of high schools save all year, and they have divisions that can number in the hundreds. You are none of those things. Most bid tournaments make some money, but they also have to spend a lot of it on hiring, transporting and lodging circuit-level judges, offering fancy awards beyond the norm, and all sorts of things you don't want to get into when you're just starting out. If you end up on the track to being bid-level (and we do reluctantly admit that, if the stars are aligned correctly, it can happen), all that stuff will come in its own sweet time. The bottom line starting out is, if you want a fundraiser, bake cakes, wash cars or sell pencils. Seeing a tournament as a fundraiser is misguided at best.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THIS ESSAY:

By the way, if you do hold a tournament, sooner or later someone, probably one of your parents, will suggest selling t-shirts. "They don't cost much and you'll make a fortune because our shirts will be snappy and funny and everyone will want one." Well, here's the thing: they can be the best shirts ever since the invention of shirts, and they can be the funniest

thing since the invention of funny, but no one is going to buy any of them and you will, to put it into the obviously correct context, lose your shirt in the transaction. In other words, don't even think about it.