



A BETTER INVESTMENT NOT FOUND ON WALL STREET

by
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Debate

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In early October, I moved to London to begin a new chapter in my life. During the process of adapting and adjusting, I reflected on the people and experiences, which helped me arrive here. And, of all the classes and extracurricular activities in which I have participated, it is easy to conclude that I am privileged to study in London largely because of my involvement in high school debate. While certainly, many events and conversations shaped who I am, I can state unequivocally that the single greatest educational investment I made were the hours I spent honing my skills as a debater.

Perhaps a bit of background would explain more. Like most 14-year olds, I was not immediately impressed with the idea of joining a debate team. Debate, especially in a Southern town driven by participation in sports, was not seen as the most useful way to maximize time. Besides, after eight hours of school per day, why add even more work to my plate of honor classes and extracurricular activities? However, I was impressed with the knowledge and intelligence exhibited by members of the Saint James debate team. While aspiring to make the varsity basketball team, I also thrived on talks about political affairs and current events, given that so many in my family were active in politics. So, in searching simply for an outlet to channel my ideas, I agreed to join the debate team on a part-time basis. My coach, Michele K. Coody, agreed to this initial setup, and so began my debate career.

Little did I know that within a year, debate would become my passion and basketball little more than a recreational event. As a novice debater, I performed very well, advancing to the elimination rounds of every tournament I entered. Yet, like most teenagers, I struggled throughout my ninth grade year to find my niche in school. My grades were less than what I wanted. Then midway through the basketball season, I tore ligaments in my ankle and was unable to play. When you are removed from the

two activities which dominate your time, you are given a chance to evaluate their importance. And it was then, at age 15, that I finally saw the importance of an activity, which I would use long after my final free throw or jump shot.

Consider the options. Throughout high school, college, and beyond, you as an individual are going to be required to constantly compete and prove yourself--your competence, your intelligence, your ability to complete tasks. Do you want to serve as an elected leader in high school? Get into an advanced level collegiate seminar that is application only? Work in a blue-chip law firm? All of these require the use of language and rhetoric to organize a persuasive set of ideas. While perhaps diligent academic studying might be enough to achieve certain goals, I cannot think of a single investment which will provide more lifelong meaning. To the contrary, Thomas Jefferson himself noted the importance of a strong mind and strong body. However, as life is limited by time and requires decisions to prioritize activities, I have to suggest debate first and foremost.

Discipline and Organization

To me, debate provides six academic virtues. *First, it instills a sense of discipline and organization.* Whether you are a national circuit debater or an occasional participant in local tournaments, this activity demands a meticulous attention to managing time. You cannot possibly travel two weekends a month, research and practice for hours after school, and maintain your grades and other commitments without being relentlessly organized and disciplined to finishing tasks. I remember missing school for over a week several times and going entire months without having a free weekend. Did Mrs. Coody allow me to skip school or turn in assignments late? Surely you jest. To the contrary, I learned at a very young age that the only way to survive was to not waste time.

Debate is a sure winner!

Theory and Evidence

Second, debate provides extra education in theory and evidence. You will be required to read works that most high school students do not see until their first year of college. Why is this important? Because, this exposure to ideas advances your education a step further, allowing you additional avenues to pursue in your academic plans. A college freshman who can enroll in a senior level philosophy class and perform well is going to stand out both in person and on paper. Understanding Hobbes or the causes of the Watergate scandal are important in holding a discussion on American government today. The sooner you learn about the philosophies and events which define our world, the sooner you can apply yourself as a policymaker.

Writing Skills

Third, the best writing course imaginable is high school debate. On a basic level, this activity requires two research papers per tournament. But this is a simple assessment. Most tournaments I attended required rewrites, revisions, and sometimes just starting over when preparing a case. You learn how to incorporate evidence and ideas into a general paper so that your writing flows smoothly, and more importantly, your thesis is clear. Additionally, the practice of writing cases increases your vocabulary and efficiency. I have found that many of my assigned tasks were given largely because I could draft memorandums or position papers which sounded credible when read by adults. Also, when I first started debate, it took me days to write an affirmative case. Now, I can write articles like this in under two hours. I will let you, the reader, decide if the entertainment value of this article is on par with my writing speed.

Speaking Skills

Fourth, debate, of course, makes you a better speaker. Since leaving high school and attending college, I have learned one great truth: everyone leads a busy life. Perhaps there are people out there, whom I

have not met, who wish to hear others talk at length about an assorted number of topics. However, my experience is that when you are talking to someone, it is important you make your point **fast**, before losing his or her attention. College professors hate students who ask two-minute questions. Scholarship committees do not pick candidates who take five minutes if you mumble through an interview or make poor eye contact. Instead, the competitive events in life are usually won by the good speaker who talks in a soothing but confident voice, makes quality eye contact, and establishes his or her point to keep the audience interested. The best place to practice this is in a debate round.

"Debate instills in teenagers the skills necessary to be competent adults."

Lifelong Friendships

Fifth, you meet an amazing group of friends and mentors through debate. When I first started applying to law schools, the first person I emailed was, naturally, my debate coach. If I have a specific question about a law school, chances are I will know someone at that school because of debate. Meeting people at tournaments and camps extends the collegiality and conversations you have with members of your debate team, while also allowing you to listen and learn from people who are more experienced and even wiser. Most importantly, the activity allows you to form lifelong relationships.

Adversity

And sixth, nothing teaches you about dealing with adversity like debate. My junior year, we traveled to the Bronx High School of Science Debate Tournament, where I promptly bombed and won only three rounds. Five days later, I started the Saint Marks Tournament in Dallas by los-

ing my first round. At that point, Mrs. Coody pulled me aside for a long walk, where basically she said, "Well, you can put what has happened behind you, or you can assume the worst is yet to come." Ten rounds and 36 hours later, I found myself the top speaker and winner of the tournament. The sheer competition of debate entails times when you think it cannot possibly become harder to win a round. Everyone has his or her streaks of poor performance. However, debate teaches you to turn obstacles into opportunities. As you progress through life, this skill is more and more vital, because whether it is bouncing back from losing your job or failing to win a motion in court, how failure is handled tells a great deal about someone. I have had myriad incidents where I did not achieve my initial goal, yet I have always tried to learn from my mistakes so that the next attempt is more successful.

In short, I believe that how you spend your time in high school affects your future development. I frankly do not think that I would be studying in London today, or even preparing for law school, if I had not debated in high school. Debate instills in teenagers the skills necessary to be competent adults. Moreover, it provides chances to travel and visit with others who hold similar educational values. Again, this is not to imply that pursuing different activities is a mistake or even a poor decision, for not everyone will be interested in the same events. Yet, when looking back to the 14-year old who was skeptical about debate, I realize that joining this activity is the best educational decision I have made to date. As investments go, this one is a sure winner.

(Jonathan E. Carr is a Fulbright Scholar at The London School of Economics. He debated four years at The Saint James School (AL), coached by Michele K. Coody. In 1996, he graduated as an NFL All-American and Four-Time Participant in the NFL National Tournament.)