

Many of the instruments of power in our democratic society are more readily available to those with economic or political resources. But the driving power of logical persuasion is available equally to all who are interested in learning its secrets.

THINK RAPIDLY ON YOUR FEET

All forms of competitive debate involve cross-examination as a debater fires questions at an opponent. Debaters develop skills in framing questions and in answering them. This skill in managing cross-examination pays dividends both in the short term and in the long term. In the short term, it improves students' test-taking abilities. Essay examinations typically test the ability to think quickly and to organize persuasive answers. For me, the ultimate essay exam came when I completed the course work for my doctorate and I appeared before my doctoral committee for an oral defense of my dissertation. I approached this task with confidence because of my years of experience in competitive debate.

Over the long term, cross-examination prepares students for success in the "real world" beyond school. Sales presentations are often followed by questions from prospective buyers. Expert witnesses in the courtroom are questioned by an opposing attorney who is determined to discredit the testimony. Debaters learn to overcome attempts at intimidation and to frame persuasive responses.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Competitive debate offers a laboratory for the development of numerous communication competencies. Public speaking heads the list of communication skills developed through debate.

Confidence in public speaking comes only through experience. In the typical semester-long course in public speaking, students deliver five or six speeches at the most. In a single six-round debate tournament, a debater delivers twelve speeches (two per round). In an entire year, a typical debater will deliver seventy speeches—more than ten times the number of speeches in a public speaking course.

Small group and interpersonal communication skills are also byproducts of debate participation. This happens because debaters work with other members of a team, working together to prepare argument briefs and organize practice sessions. Interviewing skills, consisting of the asking and answering of questions, are cultivated as debaters participate in dozens of cross-examination periods.