

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFICACY OF DEBATE PARTICIPATION

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Over the past twenty years, the nature and benefits of interscholastic debate have come under scrutiny from administrators and others who question whether the investment of time, effort, and resources is justified. While some argue that debate improves a student's ability to communicate with an audience, conduct research, think quickly and critically, construct persuasive arguments, and successfully transfer these skills to other settings (Bellon, 2000), the question of whether or not debaters perceive the debate activity as enabling them to accomplish these objectives has received limited attention.

Williams et al. (2001) sought to ascertain the perceptions of collegiate debaters regarding the benefits and disadvantages of participating in competitive debate at a time characterized by the emergence of a variety of debate-sponsoring organizations.¹ They concluded that debaters, across all formats, perceived participation in collegiate debate to produce the same benefits and disadvantages as those found by debaters in earlier studies before the expansion of formats.²

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¹ The debate organizations cited by Williams et al. (2001) included the following: National Debate Tournament sponsored by the American Forensic Association, Cross Examination Debate Association, National Educational Debate Association, American Debate Association, International Public Debate Association, National Parliamentary Debate Association, and National Forensic Association. For a brief description of the different formats advocated by these organizations, see Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001).

² Benefits cited by Williams et al. included: Speaking Skills/Communication Skills; Analytical/Critical Skills; Social Life/Meet People; Research Skills; Knowledge/Education; Self-Esteem/Confidence; Argumentation; Travel; Learn about Issues; Organizational Skills; and

However, missing from their discussion of perceived benefits and disadvantages of debate was the inclusion of perceptions from high school debaters. In fact, very few manuscripts dealing with high school debate have been published in academic journals.

The absence of much recent scholarship pertaining to the high school debate community is perplexing, given the fact that similarities and relationships between high school and collegiate debate exist.³ However, the limited scholarship about high school debate during the last twenty years should not suggest that the high school debate community was not of interest to earlier scholars in the field of speech communication and/or forensics. While not excessive, early communication scholars investigated the nature of high school debate (Konigsberg, 1935; Turner, 1941; Larson, 1952; Barber, 1954, and Simonson & Strange, 1961), the characteristics of high school debaters (Thompson, 1931; Hargis, 1934; Hetlinger & Hildreth, 1961; Patton, 1962; Semlak and Shields, 1977; and Anderson & Matlon, 1974), relationships between high school and collegiate debate environments (Lewis, 1942; Hetlinger & Hil-

Thinking fast. Disadvantages cited included: Time; Hurts Academics; Health/sleep/frustration/stress; Affects Social Life; Financial Costs; Travel Time; Lack of Involvement in Other Campus Activities; Too competitive/Win Attitude; Loss of Work; and Workload.

³ For example, both high school and college debate tournaments follow similar formats and many collegiate debaters and coaches got their start in the high school debate environment. The high school debate community has often mirrored the practices of the collegiate community; as high school debaters adopt the practices, norms, and arguments of their collegiate counterparts. Many college students, who were former high school debaters, migrate back to the high school debate community as mentors and coaches. Further, in the public policy arena, as Fine (2000) suggested, "the fact that numerous public policy analysts, lawyers, and politicians began as high school debaters suggests that... such training serves them well."

dreth, 1961; Tucker, Koehler, & Mlady, 1967; King & Phifer, 1968; Stewart & Merchant, 1969; and Schug, 1954), and perceptions of high school debaters about the activity (Fine, 2000; and Fine, 1999).

Only two studies provided a methodology surveying high school debaters about their perceptions toward debate. Thomas (1965) surveyed coaches in selected Michigan high schools, and 70 debaters at the Michigan State University Forensic Institute, regarding their perceptions about participation in debate, the amount of time spent working alone or with a coach, and specific practice-related issues. The second study used a population of students participating in a summer debate institute at the University of Georgia (Pruett, 1972). Both sets of respondents inferred that experience at debate institutes contributed to their positive educational development and self-enhancement. While these two studies established a model for further exploration of the perceptions of high school debaters, no subsequent investigations resulted. In the absence of comparative studies considering the similarities and differences between the perceptions of high school and collegiate debaters about debate, this examination is timely and useful.

METHOD

The current study assessed high school student perceptions of debate and compared these perceptions with those generated at the collegiate level. The survey instrument modeled the one described by Williams et al. (2001) and included 15 items requesting demographic data and prior speech experience, experience in policy and Lincoln Douglas formats, perceptions of collegiate debate, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of debate.⁴

⁴ After its initial construction, the instrument was field-tested with former and current forensic coaches. Following the addition and clarification of several items, the instrument was field-tested with a group of high

school students in the National Forensic League were identified as a source of data since the NFL is a national high school organization with a significant number of debaters included among its members and the NFL has been a source of data for several earlier studies (Klopf & Rivers, 1965; Hensley, 1972; Anderson & Matlon, 1974; G. A. Fine, 2000). Following approval from the National Forensic League to collect data at its National Tournament held June 10–15, 2001, at the University of Oklahoma, surveys were made available to any high school student who met the requirements of the study.⁵

The population from which the sample was drawn included the 400 policy debaters and 229 Lincoln Douglas participants registered for competition at the 2001 NFL National Tournament. To attract as many of these debaters as possible to complete the survey, collection tables were set up in the areas where they picked up ballots and waited for results during the late afternoon and early evenings at the tournament site. In addition, during the times immediately preceding the final rounds for the CX Policy Debate, Lincoln Douglas, and the Barbara Jordan Debates, additional subjects meeting the requirements were offered the opportunity to participate. Ultimately, 193 surveys provided data for this study.⁶

school debaters with varying levels of experience. Any item prompting a question for clarification from the students was further refined. Once the clarity of the items was assured, the instrument's validity was accepted.

⁵ Participants were asked the following questions: "Are you 18 years of age?" "If so, were you a debater during the 2000–2001 school year?" "What state are you from?" "What is the name of your school?"

⁶ 196 subjects voluntarily completed the survey. Three subjects were later eliminated during the data analysis process when it became apparent by their responses that they had not competed in either policy or Lincoln Douglas debate during the 2000–2001 season. The researcher can conclude with a degree of certainty that the vast majority of the subjects completing the surveys actually debated at the National Tournament. However, due to the confidentiality afforded the subjects, names were not recorded. Only school and state were identified by the students when they returned their surveys to the researcher or assistants working on the

TABLE 1.
YEARS OF PARTICIPATION IN
INTERSCHOLASTIC DEBATE

Years	Frequency	Percent
1-2	32	16.58
3-4	152	78.75
5-6	9	4.66

N = 193

All subjects completing the survey qualified to participate in the NFL National Tournament in debate or another forensic event. As such, their responses may reflect those of a highly successful and competitive group of forensic participants. The demographic data support the suggestion that the subjects had considerable experience as debate participants.

The quality of the sample was high for a number of reasons. First, the level of debate experience was substantial. 106 subjects claimed to have debated in the CX Policy division and 111 students claimed LD experience during the 2000-2001 school year.⁷ The data suggest that 77 (72.64%) of the policy debaters and 73 (65.76%) of the LD debaters had more than 40 rounds of experience in their respective divisions during the 2000-2001 school year. Further, 67 (56.30%) of the 119 listing policy experience in previous years and 48 (47.05%) of the 102 listing Lincoln Douglas debate experience in previous years claimed more than 100 additional rounds of debate experience. 54 (27.97%) of the 193 respondents indicated that they competed in a debate division at a prior NFL

project. As such, a small percentage of the surveys may have been completed by subjects with considerable debate experience, but who did not qualify to participate in the NFL debate categories at the National Tournament. There is no evidence to suggest that the responses from this small group compromised the integrity of the results of the study. There were no surveys accepted from potential subjects whose school was not represented by at least one debate team/entry at the National Tournament.

⁷ Several students indicated they had both policy and Lincoln Douglas debate experience during the 2000-2001 school year.

National Tournament. As a reflection of their commitment to debate, 118 (61.13%) of the 193 subjects claimed to have attended at least one summer debate institute. The sample reflected the preponderance of male competitors entered in the debate categories at the National Tournament (135 males, 69.94%; 57 females, 29.53%; and one subject, .5%, who declined to self-identify sex).

The sample also was diverse in that it represented a wide range of schools and geographic areas. A total population of 313 schools were listed as having at least one debate participant competing in the 2001 NFL National Tournament. The sample for this study included 116 (37%) of these schools.⁸ Of the 44 states comprising the total population represented at the 2001 NFL National Tournament, 33 states (75%) were included in the study.⁹

The final two open-ended questions of the survey provided the data for this study: "Identify three perceived benefits gained by participation in debate" (Question 14) and "identify three perceived disadvantages resulting from participation in debate" (Question 15). To allow for the themes from the comments to emerge, the researcher combined similar responses into more general subject areas. For example, "better speaking skills" and "improved communication skills" were combined under the benefit category of Improved Speaking/Communication. Similarly, "more stress" and "pressure to live up to the standards of my coach" were combined into the disadvantage category of Causes Stress/Tension. Following the coding

⁸ The schools from which the subjects were drawn ranged in size from very large (Glenbrook North, IL) to very small (Deuel, SD); from private (Montgomery Bell Academy, AL) to public (Chesterton High School, IN); from urban (San Antonio Churchill, TX) to rural (Austin, MN); and from Atlantic (Ft. Lauderdale, FL) to Pacific (Central Valley, WA).

⁹ Data are taken from the 2001 NFL National Tournament Booklet published several weeks prior to the actual tournament. The number of schools and participants may vary somewhat from the actual number competing in the National Tournament held at the University of Oklahoma, June 10-15, 2001.

TABLE 2.
BENEFITS OF DEBATE PARTICIPATION

Item	Frequency	% of Total
Communication/Speaking Skills	144	22.32%
Knowledge/Education	111	17.20%
Social Life/Meet People	83	12.86%
Research Skills	73	11.31%
Self-Confidence/Handle Stress	50	7.59%
Critical/Analytical Skills	49	7.75%
Argumentation Skills	33	5.11%
Thinking Fast	25	3.87%
Improved Relational Communication/Teamwork	22	3.41%
College Admission	14	2.27%

N = 645

of the 645 benefit responses and the 562 disadvantage responses, coding reliability was checked with two independent coders.¹⁰ The data were entered into a SAS program for tabulation and statistical analysis. The following research questions emerged:

- RQ1: What benefits do high school students perceive from their participation in debate?
 RQ2: What disadvantages do high school students perceive from their participation in debate?
 RQ3: How do high school students' perceived benefits compare to those revealed in studies of collegiate debaters' perceptions?
 RQ4: How do high school students' perceived disadvantages compare to those revealed in studies of collegiate debaters' perceptions?

FINDINGS

Benefits of High School Debate Participation

Question 14 asked participants to list three benefits of participation in debate. There were 645 responses compiled into 28 categories. Thirteen of the categories had more than one response. The ten most frequently cited benefits of debate participation are listed.

Improving Communication/Speaking Skills was the most frequently cited benefit of participation in debate with 144 responses

(22.32%) of the total. Responses included comments, such as: "increased speaking skills" and "better ability to speak in public." There were sufficient responses to this item to justify further examination. Of the 144 responses, a nearly equal number of policy debaters (69) and Lincoln Douglas debaters (75) mentioned this benefit, suggesting that despite the delivery differences perceived by debaters and judges between policy and Lincoln Douglas divisions, a similar number of policy and Lincoln Douglas respondents noted that improved communication and speaking skills was a benefit of participation in debate.

The second highest category among the high school debaters, accounting for 111 responses (17.20%) of the total, was increased Knowledge/Education resulting from debate. The responses included in this category came from three related groups of comments: Increased knowledge, education/learning, and improved educational skills. Examples of comments from students suggesting increased knowledge included: "An amazing amount of knowledge" and "knowledge of world." The responses reflecting education/learning included: "Education beyond your peers" and "educational advancement." Those responses reflecting an improvement in specific educational skills included: "Better writing skills" and "increased reading comprehension." Sufficient

¹⁰ Any response without 100% agreement between the investigator and the two coders was individually discussed and consensus achieved before the response was placed in a category.

responses in this category provided the opportunity for further examination of the data. Fifty-six of those who mentioned this benefit were policy debaters; 55 were Lincoln Douglas debaters. Despite the evidence-based requirement of policy debate, nearly an equal number of responses came from debaters in both formats.

The respondents perceived the ability to have a social life and meet friends to be a benefit of participation in debate. Finishing as the third highest category of responses, 83 (12.86%) suggested that a benefit of debate included: "Meeting new friends" and "socializing with people with the same interests." Further analysis of the responses was possible by breaking down the findings based upon the sex of the respondent. Forty-eight (65.75%) of the responses in this category came from male debaters; 25 (34.24%) of the responses were offered by female debaters. Eight of the male respondents offered comments with sexual overtones, such as "hot girls" and "chicks," that were coded into this Social Life/Meeting People category. No female respondent provided suggestive comments about male debaters.

The fourth highest category of responses was Research Skills. The inclusion of this category supports the research-based nature of debate. Seventy-three responses (11.31%) were coded into this category. Student responses included: "Increased research ability" and "hard work ethic." Of the 73 responses in this category, 37 were offered by policy debaters and 36 came from Lincoln Douglas debaters. Again, despite the emphasis on evidence in policy debate, a similar number of responses from debaters in both formats suggested that research skills are not seen as more of a benefit by one group than another.

Self Confidence/Handle Stress had 50 (7.75%) responses as the fifth most frequently cited category. Comments provided by the participants included: "Increased self-confi-

dence" and "confidence in asserting oneself."

High school respondents viewed Analytical/Critical Skills as the sixth most common benefit. The researcher included only the responses that were specific to critical thinking and analytical thinking into this category. Examples of included responses were: "Critical thinking" and "analytical skills." Any response that involved a specific mention of inductive or deductive logic, constructing arguments, or weighing arguments/positions was grouped into the Argumentation Skills category. Responses that reflected an emphasis on argument included: "Learning how to point out flaws" and "ability to form logical arguments." Forty-nine (7.59%) of the responses were included in the Critical/Analytical Skills category. Roughly the same number of policy debaters (24) and Lincoln Douglas debaters (25) cited Improved Critical/Analytical Thinking as a benefit, suggesting that debaters in both formats valued this skill.

Of the remaining benefits in the top ten listed by the respondents, Argumentation Skills followed with 33 indications of these skills to be a benefit. Thinking Fast was next with 25 responses, including: "Thinking on your feet" and "quick thinking." Improved Relational Communication/Teamwork had 22 responses, citing: "more tolerant of others" and "improved interpersonal communication" as reasons why they viewed this category as a benefit.

Completing the list of top ten was College Admission where fourteen responses considered debate to be a benefit that would help them gain admission to the college of their choice or be an asset in garnering scholarships. Some of these responses included: "Looks good on college applications" and "better chance of getting into the college of choice." Notably absent in the top ten benefits listed by high school students were items related to winning contests, acquiring trophies or awards, and travel.

TABLE 3.
DISADVANTAGES OF DEBATE PARTICIPATION

Item	Frequency	% of Total
Takes Time from Other Things/Trade-Off	124	22.06%
Significant Time Commitment	77	13.70%
Causes Stress/Tension	49	8.71%
No Social Life/Isolation	45	8.00%
Fosters Unhealthy Habits/Choices	41	7.29%
Costly/Expensive	40	7.11%
Negative Stigma by Others	30	5.33%
Perception/Criticism of Self and Other Debaters	29	5.16%
Competition/Politics/Judging Issues	25	4.44%
Critical of the Nature of the Debate Activity	24	4.27%

N = 562

The categories of perceived benefits of debate, as indicated by high school debaters, corresponded with seven of the ten categories indicated by the collegiate debaters in the Williams et al. (2001) study.¹¹ When examining the nature of the categories mentioned by high school debaters, six were related to education (Communication/Speaking Skills, Knowledge/Education, Research Skills, Critical/Analytical Skills, Argumentation Skills, and Thinking Fast). Three categories indicated a perceived benefit derived from interaction with people in different contexts (Social Life/Meet People, Improved Relational Communication/Teamwork, and Improved Self-Confidence/Handle Stress). Finally, high school students saw debate as an asset contributing to their ability to gain admission into college and/or receive scholarships. In short, from the perspective of these high school debaters, being in debate was educational, provided social opportunities, and was advantageous when used as a marketing tool when applying to colleges and universities.

¹¹ Of the three categories that were different, Travel ranked 12th among the 12 high school categories with more than one response. The collegiate debaters listed organizational skills as a separate benefit. In the present study, comments pertaining to organization were included as they applied to specific educational skills. Finally, responses similar to the Learn About Issues category, found among the benefits cited in the collegiate study, were included within the Knowledge/Education category in the present study.

Disadvantages of High School Debate Participation

Question 15 generated 562 responses indicating disadvantages arising from participation in debate. These comments were grouped into 28 categories; 16 of which had more than one response. The ten most frequently cited responses are listed in Table 3.

Clearly, disadvantages stemming from the time required by debate and the tradeoffs that occur as a result of debate are the two most prevalent responses. 124 respondents (22.06%) cited debate as taking time away from other people and activities. Comments, such as, "Less time for social and school events" and "could not play sports and debate" reflected the trade-off. The fact that debate requires a significant time commitment warranted its own general category. Seventy-seven (13.70%) of the responses were comments that included the following: "Time commitment" and "time consumption." Also included within the responses was mention of long travel time and length of tournaments.

As separate categories, they were considerably larger than the next highest among the top five. In fact, if added together, 201 (35.76%) of the disadvantage responses listed by high school students involved time. This total was greater than the combined totals of the next four categories in the high school

study. Due to the size of the categories, further analysis based on the sex of the respondents and debate format was possible. Considering all 201 responses, 98 (48.75%) were policy debaters; 103 (51.24%) were Lincoln Douglas debaters. One hundred fifty-six (77.61%) of the responses were generated by male debaters; 65 (32.33%) of the responses came from female debaters.

The findings, sorted by debate format, should contradict the assumption that policy debate takes considerably more time than Lincoln Douglas debate. However, while Lincoln Douglas responses were greater, the number of responses offered by both groups were close enough to conclude that both policy and Lincoln Douglas debaters perceived time to be a major disadvantage associated with debate. When examining other categories in the top ten, time was a related factor. For example, Social Life/Isolation and Fosters Unhealthy Habits/Choices (which included lack of sleep) were related to Time Trade-off.

Increasing Tension/Stress was reported as the third greatest disadvantage with 49 (8.71%) of the responses reflecting negative beliefs about debate, such as: "Negative stressor" and "becoming more argumentative with friends and family." Comments related to tension and stress, but generating enough responses to warrant their own category, was the fifth disadvantage Fosters Unhealthy Habits/Choices. Forty-one (7.29%) responses included the following comments: "Lack of sleep," "drug abuse," and other health-related difficulties.

The fourth most frequently cited category of responses was No Social Life/Isolation. Forty-five (8.00%) of the responses reflected a frustration about "no social life" and "difficulty relating to peers." Comments reflecting this disadvantage were generated more frequently by male debaters. Thirty-nine (86.84%) responses from male debaters cited no social life or isolation resulting from de-

bate, in comparison with 5 (10.52%) responses from female debaters.¹²

The remaining categories in the top ten disadvantages on the high school survey were related to the financial cost of debate, perceptions of debaters by themselves and others, and perceptions about competition and the nature of debate. The Costly/Expensive category accounted for 40 (7.11%) responses. Common responses included: "Costs a lot of money" and "rather expensive to compete on the national circuit." Of the 40 responses, 30 (88.23%) came from male debaters. Negative Stigma by Others took the form of comments, such as: "Labeled as a nerd" and "dorky image." A total of 30 (6.11%) responses focused on this category. Of the 30 responses, 20 (66.66%) were from male debaters; 10 (38.70%) came from female debaters. This was followed by the category of Perception/Criticism of Self and Other Debaters which had 29 (5.16%) responses. Again, considerably more responses from male debaters, 23 (79.31%), provided a negative picture of how debaters were viewed by themselves and other debaters. This category included comments, such as: "Overly competitive teammates" and "all my friends have been nerfified." The Competition/Politics/Judging Issues category had 25 (4.44%) responses. "Coaching politics" and "poor judging" were common among the comments from those respondents who viewed this category as a disadvantage. Rounding out the top ten was the Critical of the Nature of the Debate Activity category. Twenty-four (4.27%) responses cited such things as, "Eurocentric view" and "waste of time on philosophical arguments."

Missing from the ten disadvantages cited was a concern about hurting academics or classroom performance. Also considered of

¹² One respondent to the survey provided no answer when asked to reveal whether male or female. This respondent accounts for the remaining 2.64% of the responses in this variable.

limited concern was the promotion of poor speaking skills, too much work, and wasting paper. 14 responses specifically indicated that there were no disadvantages to debate. The number of disadvantage responses (562) compared with benefit responses (645) also reflected the inclination on the part of many respondents to view the activity more positively than negatively.

In summary, seven of the disadvantages cited by the respondents in this study were similar to those cited in the Williams et al. (2001) study (Takes Time/Trade-off, Significant Time Commitment, Causes Stress/Tension, Fosters Unhealthy Habits, No Social Life/Isolation, Costly/Expensive, and Competition/Politics/Judging Issues). Three disadvantages cited by the high school respondents that were not included among the top ten on the collegiate study reflected the negative stigma associated with debate, negative criticism of self and other debaters, and negative criticism of the debate activity. Essentially, based upon the responses from high school debaters, three themes can be identified: Debate takes a significant amount of time; debate negatively affects debaters psychologically, physically, socially, and economically; and debaters experience negative stigma coming from themselves, other debaters, and their peers outside of the debate activity.

DISCUSSION

The most obvious finding of this study is that the perceptions of high school debaters about the benefits and disadvantages of debate are very similar to those of collegiate debaters. The results of the present study reinforce the first conclusion drawn by Williams et al. (2001) that debaters across all levels and debate formats believe their communication skills are being enhanced through participation in debate. However, the data are not conclusive from high school

debaters regarding what they perceive good communication skills to be.

The present study also contributes to a better understanding of how debaters construct a social culture that is conducive to their well-being. Williams et al. (2001) concluded that college debaters today were more concerned about social lives than debaters in the past. This may be because college debaters are not viewed as positively today as they were in the past (Tucker, Koehler, & Mlady, 1967), fueled by the popular press and film industry casting debaters as "pocket-protector 'geeks'" (Hutchins, 1998, 18). Williams et al. (2001) concluded that one of the reasons why debaters have such strong social bonds with other debaters stems from the time they spend together. The data from the present study furthers this claim by suggesting that a social culture for debaters develops due to the positive self-concept that is inherent in the nature of debaters.

The third conflicting vision identified by Williams et al. (2001) reflected the "knowledge versus academic success tradeoff" (205). College debaters claimed that debate hurt their academic performance; high school debaters did not. Among the factors cited as having a negative impact on the academic success of collegiate debaters were: The flexible collegiate schedule; the absence of mandatory class attendance at the university-level; and the impact of being away from home or more self-reliant. As college debaters devote more of their time to debate, something must suffer; in this case, their academic performance. High school debaters, while able to miss school for tournaments, attend classes on a regular basis in order to remain academically eligible. The high school debaters reflected their sense that they had more knowledge than their peers and were better at reading, writing, and speaking. The existence of a social system, away from the academic environment, further motivated the high school debater to

TABLE 4.
COMPARISON OF HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE DEBATERS' RANKS OF BENEFITS OF DEBATE

Rank of Category by High School Debaters	Benefit Categories	Rank of Category by College Debaters
1	Communication/Speaking Skills	1
2	Knowledge/Education	5a
3	Social Life/Meet People	3
4	Research Skills	4b
5	Self Esteem/Confidence	6
6	Critical/Analytical Skills	2
7	Argumentation Skills	7
8	Thinking Fast	X
9	Improved Relational Communication/Teamwork	X
10	College Admission	X
X	Travel	8

a = Collegiate category Learn About Issues, ranked 9th, was included in high school category of Knowledge/Education.

b = Collegiate category Organizational Skills, ranked 10th, was included in high school category of Research Skills.

remain eligible to travel and interact with friends on a regular basis.

Clearly, the findings from this study support and further explain those identified by Williams et al (2001). Additionally, seven of the benefit categories and seven of the disadvantage categories listed by high school and collegiate debaters were included within the top ten for each group.¹³ Within these common perceptions of debate, additional insight may be gained by comparing how the categories of benefits and disadvantages were ranked by the two groups.

Comparison of the Perceived Benefits

In the benefit categories, the high school and collegiate ranks of Knowledge/Education and Critical/Analytical Skills were reversed. Knowledge/Education was ranked second by high school debaters and fifth by collegiate debaters. Critical/Analytical Skills was ranked sixth by high school debaters and second by collegiate debaters. This reversal of rankings offers an explanation for

¹³ When categories in the collegiate study included responses that would have fit into the high school categories, notes were provided to show the intended relationships.

the stages of the learning experienced by debaters.

As students advance in school, they find themselves being exposed to greater and greater amounts of information. While in high school, students receive a broad sampling of a wide range of subject areas which contributes to their overall knowledge base. At the university level, while students are still exposed to unfamiliar topics, the emphasis often shifts to learning how to analyze, synthesize, and use information. This is consistent with the decision-making process where knowledge of a topic or new idea comes first, followed by the formation of a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the idea, and activities leading to the adoption or rejection of the idea (Rogers, 1995, 20). Debaters at the high school level learn a great deal about the topics that are selected for use during a particular school year. For a four-year high school debater, the overlap between the topic areas is minimal and each year represents a significant amount of knowledge about a topic. For collegiate debaters, some of whom with multiple years of high school debate, there may be more back files and the overlapping of arguments. Hence, critically assessing the available in-

TABLE 5.
COMPARISON OF HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE DEBATERS' RANKS OF DISADVANTAGES OF DEBATE

Rank of Category by High School Debaters	Disadvantage Categories	Rank of Category by College Debaters
1	Takes Time/Trade Off	Xa
2	Significant Time Commitment	1b
3	Causes Stress/Tension	3
4	No Social Life/Isolation	4
5	Fosters Unhealthy Choices/Habits	Xc
6	Costly/Expensive	5
7	Negative Stigma by Others	X
8	Perceptions/Criticism of Self/Other Debaters	X
9	Competition/Politics/Judging Issues	8
10	Criticism of Nature of Debate Activity	X
X	Hurts Academics	2
X	Loss of Work	9

a = Collegiate categories were included in high school category: Travel Time was ranked 6th; Lack of involvement in other activities was ranked 7th.

b = Collegiate category Workload, ranked 10th, was included in high school category.

c = Collegiate category included Health/Lack of Sleep/Frustration.

formation may be perceived as a more valuable skill than simply gaining knowledge about the topic. Also, at the high school level, knowledge about the topic often provides the basis for settling disputes about whether or not claims are true or false. However, at the collegiate level, more advanced levels of argumentation result in debaters challenging the theoretical premises upon which the debate activity is based. The reliance on analytical arguments over fact-based claims also could contribute to the higher rank for critical/analytical thinking among collegiate debaters.

Comparison of the Perceived Disadvantages

For the disadvantage categories, the high school and collegiate debaters were similar in their rankings. However, the inclusion of three categories in the high school survey that were not in the top ten categories of the Williams et al. (2001) study deserves discussion.

High school debaters included comments about the negative stigma debaters feel from others, perceptions and criticisms of themselves and other debaters by high school

debaters, and comments reflecting criticisms of the debate activity itself. These three categories reflect a state of mind among high school debaters that is clearly in an evaluative mode.¹⁴ The majority of the respondents liked debating and knew the benefits derived from the activity, but they were concerned about their identity, the way others saw them, and how the activity was perceived by those outside of the debate community. Studies in adolescent growth and development are consistent in their findings that how children see themselves, and how children believe they are seen by their peers, can have a significant effect on the creation of their self-identity. Gergen (1991) found that "...relationships make possible the concept of self... we are manifestations of relatedness" (170). The awareness and concern about how high school debaters are perceived by others reflected this trait. When debaters perceive themselves to be separated from their peers by negative ste-

¹⁴ It is useful to note that for those who indicated they had been in debate the longest, particularly for five or six years, none listed any disadvantages in the categories: Negative Stigma by Others; Perceptions/Criticism of Self/Other Debaters; or Criticism of Nature of Debate Activity.

reotypes, their sense of self is affected. Self-deprecation is a by-product of the negative stereotyping. If debaters perceive themselves in a negative way, based upon how they think that others see them, they tend to criticize themselves. Some of the high school responses were distinctly negative: "I'm a loser" and "I hate my life." Similarly, just as high school debaters question whether the stereotyping about them is accurate, it would not be unreasonable to question whether the activity in which they invested so much time was worth the effort. The comments reflected such observations as: "Debate forces you to prostitute your views" and "debate gives you a warped sense of morality."

For the high school debaters in this study, concern about how debaters and the debate activity are perceived may have been the reason why, when asked if they intended to debate in college, 57 said yes, 66 responded no, and 70 were unsure. It should be noted that 89 of the 193 respondents had a favorable or very favorable attitude toward college debate, as opposed to 41 respondents had an unfavorable or very unfavorable impression of collegiate debate. Sixty-two respondents were unsure of how they felt about collegiate debate.

Comparison of Perceived Benefits and Disadvantages

Two additional areas for further discussion emerged from a comparison of the perceived benefits and disadvantages identified by the high school and collegiate debaters: First, the contrast between the educational benefits of debate versus the time commitment portrays a struggle between enhancing the mind at the expense of the body; and second, the feeling of isolation versus the creation of a social life revolving around the debate community demonstrates the ability of high school debaters to create a culture in which they can thrive.

Initially, the most frequently cited perceived advantages reflected an emphasis on improved speaking skills, education and knowledge acquisition, research skills, and critical/analytical abilities. The infrequent mention of the disadvantage of harming or negatively affecting academic growth confirmed a consistency level among the respondents that debate provided them with educational benefits. Conflicting with the perception of these benefits were the overwhelming number of responses identifying Significant Time Requirement and Takes Time/Trade-Off, along with the increased stress, tension, and unhealthy habits. In other words, high school debaters felt that their participation in debate was beneficial, contributing to their academic skills and performance; but the benefits were coming with a significant cost in terms of lost time, added stress, and unhealthy habits.

A second aspect of the findings focused on the conflicting responses over having or not having a social life. Some of those citing isolation from family, friends, and school-related activities as a disadvantage suggested that they felt left out and lonely. The negative responses about being labeled a "nerd," or being stereotyped by those outside of the debate community, also suggested a sense of isolation that was not welcomed. However, a sizable number of responses cited participation in debate as a benefit because debaters meet people and make friends with students from other schools and other areas of the country. This reflected a cosmopolitan trait that Rogers (1995) perceived to be a positive personal characteristic (27).

One theory relating perceived ability to self-concept, developed by Hamachek (1995) and others (Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Byrne, 1974; Marsh, 1990; and Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988), contributed insight to the initial discussion of debate's academic benefit versus personal and physical harms. These studies concluded that positive student perceptions of their abilities contrib-

uted to positive self-concepts, which in turn, increased academic performance. By citing the acquisition of skills to help them to be more successful thinkers, researchers, intelligent, and persuasive speakers, the high school debaters demonstrated positive perceptions of their abilities. If Hamachek's claim is true, this positive perception should contribute to a positive self-concept.

In his *Informal Self-Concept Assessment Inventory*, Hamachek (1995) provided fourteen inventory items comparing students with a positive versus a negative self-concept.¹⁵ An examination of these items supports the underlying conclusion that high school debaters have a positive self-concept which sustains them through the difficulties they experience in the activity. Based upon the responses from debaters in this study, the respondents tended not to be self-disparaging. They liked meeting new people and making friends at tournaments. Despite the time commitment, they perceived themselves as benefiting from debate by learning research skills, argument construction, and acquiring broader knowledge than their peers on a wide range of topics. The debaters preferred to win their rounds, making success in competition a goal; and their persistence in debating was reflected in the fact that 161 out of 193 claimed three or more

years of debate experience, doing significant amounts of work alone, with their coach, and in the off-season at debate institutes, often attending more than one.¹⁶ Many respondents planned to continue debating in college and viewed themselves as successful or good at debating. Respondents also indicated their self-confidence and interest in trying other forensic events.¹⁷ Clearly, the data suggest that the high school debaters in this study had positive self-concepts. This enabled them to weigh the benefits against the negative factors of debate and to decide that their continued involvement in debate was advantageous.

This positive self-concept also was related to the second factor of having or not having a social life as a consequence of participation in debate. Researchers claim that people gain their sense of self primarily through their social interactions and the roles they play in various social contexts (Mead, 1934; Gecas, 1982). Erikson (1968) further suggested that adolescents spend a significant amount of time creating their "identity construct," or a set of values, belief systems, goals, and attitudes that provide them with a sense of coherence and continuity in their lives. High school debaters who spend considerable time away from their homes, family, friends, classes, and school activities can feel isolated and alone. However, the inherent, positive self-concept that debaters possess may provide the means by which they

¹⁵ Hamachek suggested that students with a positive self concept reflected the following traits: Their behaviors are more upbeat than self-disparaging; they tend to be popular and have better interpersonal relationships; they are motivated and interested in engaging in difficult tasks; they attribute their success to ability and effort rather than luck; they are more likely to establish reachable goals; they are more assertive and confident in their interpersonal communication skills; they have more success than failure experiences; they are more task-persistent and willing to invest whatever time and effort necessary to successfully complete difficult tasks; they believe they were more capable than their classmates and capable of working harder; they are more able to work with minimal supervision; they possess the desire to master difficult and complex tasks; they tend to prefer work that is challenging and mind-stretching; they believe they are more cognitively competent, thus intrinsically motivated to do well; the presence of parents or role-models to provide support makes them more likely to succeed.

¹⁶ Of 193 respondents, when asked how much time they worked each week alone or with a partner, 61 spent 5-10 hours and 78 spent more than 10 hours. When asked how much time they worked each week with their coach(es), 94 spent 0-5 hours, 66 spent 5-10 hours, and 29 spent more than 10 hours. When asked how much time they worked each week during the off-season, 125 indicated 0-5 hours, 36 spent 5-10 hours; and 25 answered more than 10 hours.

¹⁷ Of the 193 respondents, the following percentages reflect the number of debaters who had competed in other forensic events for at least one year: 79.27% competed in Student Congress; 72.54% competed in Public Address events; 39.90% competed in Oral Interpretation events; and 76.17% were in Limited Prep events.

channel their efforts to create a social system or culture of their own.

In a study exploring the impact of culture on the individual, Markus and Kitayama (1991) noted that the independent self remained separate from others in a cultural context; while the interdependent self sought connections to others within the social system. While the independent self was perceived to be "unitary and stable" and focused on "private and internal psychological states;" the interdependent self was "flexible . . . varied, and employed 'an external locus of attention with more public expression'" (on-line). For the high school students in this study, the interdependent nature of debate created a flexible and varied culture in which their interconnected self functioned and allowed itself to be governed by audiences interested in what it had to say. Further, Cushman (1995) suggested that the self "is a product of specific cultural values." The labeling and stereotyping cited by the respondents contributed to the cohesiveness of the social system that debaters created for themselves. Termed "embeddedness"—the "interdependence between individuals and their psychological, social, historical, and cultural contexts" (Blustein, 1994; Josselson, 1988, 1992; Lerner, Skinner & Sorrel, 1980; and Vondracek et al., 1986)—debaters created for themselves an image of them as bright, persuasive, and scholarship material for colleges and universities with national debate programs. The embedded identity enabled debaters to draw upon their common experiences and perceptions stemming from the debate activity itself. Within this culture, debaters demonstrate and practice all of the social skills they perceive their peers to be experiencing. They meet new people, make friends, and develop positive relationships with their teammates, coaches, and judges.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study yields significant insight into how high school debaters perceive their involvement in debate. As one of the very few studies that has surveyed the opinions of senior-level high school policy and Lincoln-Douglas debaters, the data should contribute to a better understanding of high school debaters and how they view this time consuming activity. As the only comparative study of the similarities and differences between the perceptions of high school and collegiate debaters, this data should be useful to debate teachers and coaches called upon to justify their programs to supervisors and administrators since both groups identified many aspects of debate contributing to their education. The quality of this sample was high and the data corresponded with the collegiate study conducted by Williams et al. (2001), further adding to its reliability.

Another conclusion supported by this study suggests that knowledge acquisition and critical thinking in debate follows a linear process. High school debaters valued debate because it exposed them to a wide range of topics, giving them more knowledge of subject areas than their non-debate classmates. However, collegiate debaters viewed debate as providing them with a means by which they could demonstrate their critical thinking skills through the analysis and synthesis of ideas and theories. These related perspectives illustrate the difficulty some debaters may experience when they have an understanding of the topic but make little sense of complicated theory arguments. Future studies should pursue this aspect to more clearly identify the differences between knowledge acquisition and critical thinking for debaters.

The fact that high school debaters are more concerned than college debaters about the negative stigma some have associated with the debate persona and the debate ac-

tivity itself should not be taken lightly by collegiate debate teachers and coaches. The image of collegiate debaters, as reflected by college coaches and the college debaters who return to the high school circuit as judges, may need to portray a more positive picture of the activity if college debate programs are going to continue to attract bright students who view debate as a positive dimension to their activity, but who do not want to be themselves cast in a negative light.

While contributing to conclusions similar to those drawn by Williams et al. (2001), the nature of the comments from the high school debaters in this study reflected their state of mind as participants in the National Forensic League's National Tournament. These debaters had considerable expertise and familiarity with the activity and their comments supported the conclusion that they had positive self-concepts and had created their own social culture in which they functioned to meet people and make friends. Future studies should explore the perceptions of debaters from different segments of the debate community. For example, those who do not qualify to compete at the national tournament or students in their first year of debate should be surveyed or interviewed to determine if the level of self-confidence experienced by those at the National Tournament was present at the local, state, or regional levels. Despite the restrictions on particular survey methodologies due to the age of the high school subjects, scholars should continue to explore different ways to get in touch with this important group of young debaters.

Finally, the role of the coaches and teachers in the lives of debaters should be more thoroughly explored. The positive self-concepts of the debaters in this study enabled them to deal with the negative stigma of debaters as "nerds," to manage the negative comments of other debaters about debaters, and to remain in an activity with its own set

of drawbacks. However, the role debate coaches and teachers played in helping high school debaters to deal with these issues may be considerable. Longitudinal studies pertaining to the influence of high school coaches and forensic educators on the self-concept and subsequent lives of their students may provide rich data for analysis.

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