

## Forensics (Debate & Speech) and College Admissions

**Professor Minh A. Luong**

**Yale University**

For nearly all high school seniors involved in forensics (Debate & Speech), this is a very busy time of the year. Between coursework, tournament preparation, and college applications, there is precious little time for much else. I began this academic year with a dozen email requests from former students for letters of recommendation and every week I receive several more. When I was a high school instructor, I wrote over twenty letters of recommendation every fall and compared to my colleagues who taught in public high schools, my commitment represented a relatively light load. Nearly every request for a recommendation that I receive is accompanied by a long list of extracurricular activities, community service projects, club memberships, and a transcript. Unfortunately, nearly all high school students make the erroneous assumption that participation in more activities is better than fewer and in an increasingly complex world that demands in-depth knowledge and expertise in a chosen field of study, colleges and universities are now preferring applicants who choose to be the best at single pursuit. "What counts," says Swarthmore College Dean of Admissions Robin Mamlet, "is how committed students are to an activity."

Extracurricular activities like forensics (Debate & Speech) are playing an increasingly important role in the college admissions as well as the scholarship awarding processes. Why? Grade inflation is rampant in both public and private secondary schools and test preparation programs are distorting the reliability of national standardized tests like the SAT and ACT. According to the Wall Street Journal (Interactive Edition, April 16, 1999), college admissions directors are relying less on grade point averages and standardized test scores, and are relying more on success in academically related extracurricular activities such as speech and debate as well as drama. Successful applicants to top schools still need to demonstrate academic success in their coursework as well as perform well on standardized tests, but the days of a 4.0 GPA and 1600 SAT score guaranteeing admission into a top school are gone. In 1998, Harvard University rejected over 50% of its applicants with perfect Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and 80% who

were valedictorians. Private and public institutions of higher learning, facing the reality of needing to train graduates for a global economy, are selecting applicants who can not only perform well academically but can also set themselves to an endeavor and succeed in extracurricular activities. After all, college students must select a major that concentrates on a particular field of study; why not select the students who have demonstrated success with that type of focus and dedication?

Colleges now acknowledge, based on years of experience, that students who demonstrate success in extracurricular activities which give them real-world skills like critical thinking, oral and written communication, and the ability to organize ideas and present them effectively perform better in college and turn out to be successful alumni who give back generously to their alma mater. What does this mean? According to Lee Stetson, Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, "We realized one of the better predictors of success is the ability to dedicate oneself to a task and do it well." But according to the Wall Street Journal's recent study of top universities and ten years of applicant, admissions, and scholarship data, "not all extracurricular activities are created equal." Two of the surprising findings were that participation in some of the more common sports in high school athletics, soccer, basketball, volleyball, horseback riding, skating, and baseball, did very little for applicants. Unless these students win state or national awards, there does not appear to be any significant benefit from participation in these activities. Second, the Wall Street Journal study noted that "although community service has been widely touted over the past decade as crucial to college admissions, our numbers suggest it matters much less than you might expect."

The Wall Street Journal report did specifically highlight a "consistent trend"—one that forensic coaches have known for a long time—that dedicated participation in drama and debate has significantly increased the success rate of college applicants at all schools which track such data. State and national award winners have a 22% to 30% higher acceptance rate at top tier colleges and being captain of the debate team "improved an applicant's chances by more than 60% compared with the rest of the pool," according to the report. This is significantly better than other extracurricular activities that tend to recruit from the same pool of students as forensic

teams such as school newspaper reporter (+3%), sports team captain (+5%), class president (+5%), and band (+3%). Even without winning major awards, participation in speech and debate develops valuable skills that colleges are seeking out and that is reflected in the above average acceptance rate (+4%). Colleges and universities today are looking for articulate thinkers and communicators who will become active citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

The National Forensic League, with its mission of "Training Youth for Leadership," is one of a handful of national high school organizations which leading colleges use as a "barometer of success." Qualification to NFL Nationals is viewed as a considerable accomplishment with late elimination round success being even more noteworthy. The fact that the NFL is also seen as the national high school speech and debate honor society is even more significant; with the higher degrees of membership and NFL Academic All-American status carrying more weight than ever in college admissions reviews. Schools that are not NFL members are literally cheating their students of the opportunity to receive credit for their training and accomplishments, and those students are at a disadvantage when they apply for college compared to other students who have distinguished themselves as NFL members. The key here is that real-world communication skills must be developed at the league and district levels, which selects qualifiers to NFL Nationals. Superior communication and persuasive skills are essential for success in both the college classroom and professional life.

As a former policy and Lincoln-Douglas debater as well as student congress and individual events competitor, I appreciate the different skill sets that each event emphasizes, as well as the shared lessons on research methods and critical thinking skills. As a college professor, I note that my top students are most often former high school debaters who actively participate in class discussions and articulate persuasive arguments both in class and on written assignments. The Ethics, Politics, and Economics (EP&E) major at Yale College is an elite course of study which requires special application prior to the junior year to be admitted into the program. It is often known as the "debate major" because most of the students in the program are former high school debaters and/or members of the Yale debating team who are some of the brightest undergraduates at Yale. It is no surprise that many of my students are entering their senior year

of college with multiple employment offers already in hand and quite a few of them already own their own companies. One of my graduating seniors, who is in the process of taking his company public, told me that his debate experience was a critical factor in persuading investors to support his business venture.

As a corporate advisor, I see the skills developed in forensics (Debate & Speech) paying rich dividends as I work with talented managers at client companies and on teams with other consultants. Over the years, I have had discussions with many senior executives and managers, nearly all of whom identify effective communication, persuasion, and leadership skills as "absolutely essential" for success and advancement in their respective organizations. Many of these successful business executives, government leaders, and non-profit directors do not directly attribute their graduate degrees to their own achievements but rather they point to the life skills and work ethic learned in high school speech and debate that started them down the road to success. One vice president told me that "my Ivy-League MBA got me my first job here but my forensics (Debate & Speech) experience gave me the tools to be effective which led to my promotion into my present position."

From someone who is active in both the academic and professional realms, I have some advice for high school students (and their parents) who are interested in pursuing their studies at a top college or university:

First, select an activity based on what you need to develop as a person, not necessarily what might look good on a college application or what your friends are doing. Consider the many benefits derived from participation in speech and debate that can help develop both personal and professional skills.

Second, parents should assist their children in selecting an activity as early in their high school career as possible but they must support them for the right reasons. Living vicariously through your children or forcing your children into an activity that is intended primarily to impress friends and college admissions directors will not yield the intended results.

Third, pursue your selected activity with true passion and seek to be the very best to the outer limits of your abilities. In the case of speech and debate, it will most likely mean focusing on improving your oral and written communication skills as well as your critical thinking skills. It also means working with your coach as much as possible and even seeking additional training and practice during the summer.

Fourth, document your successes and what you have learned. Many colleges will accept portfolios of work where you can demonstrate your intellectual development and progress. Do not merely list on your college application form the forensic awards that you have won but instead discuss in your personal statement or essay how you have developed your intellectual curiosity and enhanced your ability to pursue your academic interests through participation in forensics (Debate & Speech). How has dedication in forensics (Debate & Speech) made you a better person ready to pursue more advanced intellectual and professional challenges?

Finally, keep in mind that colleges have a mission to train future active citizens and leaders. Concentrate on enhancing your passion for speech and debate by developing your communication, work ethic, time management, networking, and social as well as professional skills as your primary objectives. If you develop your abilities in these areas first, competitive success will inevitably follow.

The world is changing rapidly and we as Americans must further develop our critical decision-making and communication skills in order to successfully compete in the expanding global economy. In my opinion, there is no better activity that will develop essential academic, professional, and life skills than dedicated involvement in speech and debate. Colleges and employers are actively seeking these skills and when it comes to selecting extracurricular activities, like many other things in life, those savvy high school students who will win admission to the best schools will select quality over quantity.

---

MINH A. LUONG is Assistant Professor in the Ethics, Politics, & Economics Program at Yale University and International Affairs Fellow at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies where he teaches both graduate and senior seminar courses. A sought-after corporate consultant, Professor Luong advises multinational corporations in the financial services, telecommunications, insurance, and professional services fields on human resources, training & development, operations, crisis management, class-action lawsuits, and merger & acquisition (M&A) issues. He continues to be active in the forensic community as he is the volunteer director of the National Debate Education Project, an organization that offers affordable, non-commercialized forensic education seminars across the country. He is member of the Tournament of Champions Advisory Committee and is serving his eighth year as the Director of Lincoln-Douglas debate at the TOC. He has served as Chairperson of the Communications Studies Department at Pinewood College Preparatory School (CA), Director of Debate at San Francisco State University, and Director of Forensics (Debate & Speech) at the University of California at Berkeley. Minh is the only person to have won the National Collegiate Lincoln-Douglas Debate Championship title both as a competitor and coach. He serves as the Academic Director and Senior Instructor at the National Debate Forum held at the University of Minnesota and previously served as Curriculum Director at the Stanford, Berkeley, and Austin National Forensic Institutes. Professor Luong can be reached at his National Debate Education Project address at [NDEP@hotmail.com](mailto:NDEP@hotmail.com).