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## Exploring Motivations for Intercollegiate Debate Participation

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# **EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS FOR INTERCOLLEGIATE DEBATE PARTICIPATION**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

Joe Hamaker

May 2019

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# **EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS FOR INTERCOLLEGIATE DEBATE PARTICIPATION**

Department of Communication

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Joe Hamaker

## **ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to use qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analytical methods to explore motivations for intercollegiate debate participation, as well as to update and expand existing research on the subject. This study found that students participate for a variety of reasons including an affinity for competition, enjoyment of the process of debate, the acquisition of skills and perspectives, and finding a sense of community within both their debate squads and the broader debate community. Further, this study found that students remain motivated to participate in debate despite competing demands on their time by strategizing completion of coursework, satisfying social needs within debate, and modifying existing extracurricular and familial commitments to best serve their needs. This study is limited by its small sample size and the corresponding limitation of perspectives. Despite its limitations, this study provided useful insights into how debaters communicate their motivation to join and stay involved in debate and offered explanations for motivating factors.

**KEYWORDS:** intercollegiate debate, grounded theory, social exchange theory, motivation, qualitative interviewing, NDT-CEDA

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A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
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May 2019

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

Intercollegiate debate is an extremely rigorous activity, demanding near-endless amounts of time and energy from its participants. Many researchers have studied the outcomes of debate participation, but a relatively small number of studies have been conducted about why debaters choose to participate in the activity. Universities invest significant resources on intercollegiate debate programs, including on coaching positions, travel budgets, and graduate assistantships. Considering this investment, it is important to assess why students choose to participate in this time-consuming, stressful, and rigorous activity.

Before delving into relevant competitive debate research, it is important to establish the general nature of debate. Snider and Schnurner (2006) define debate as “a communication event where the mode of operation is oral or written communication (a text debate) and serves as performance as well as a method of transmitting ideas and arguments” (p. 6). Debates feature topics to direct the discussion, and topics should be significant and interesting to the participants and the potential audience. Debates also consist of two or more sides. Debates are ever-present in society and can be observed in court proceedings, legislative bodies, between political candidates, on news media, and in everyday life situations like advocating for a deadline extension or persuading an interviewer about personal qualifications (Snider & Schnurer, 2006). Debates have played a significant role in American political culture, from the traveling debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas to the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates (Davis, Zorwick, Roland, & Wade, 2016).

Debate as an educational tool is over 2400 years old and can be traced back to Protagoras (Garrett, Schoener, & Hood, 1996). Competitive debate is prevalent in the United States, in



colleges, high schools, and, increasingly, middle schools. However, most students do not have an opportunity to participate in debate outside of competitive forums (Bellon, 2000).

Several distinct styles of intercollegiate debate have emerged in universities in the United States. Parliamentary debate and British Parliamentary debate feature new topics for every debate and teams of two partners (Snider, 2011). Lincoln-Douglas involves annual topics and one-on-one debates (Snider, 2011). Policy debate, referred to in this paper as National Debate Tournament-Cross Examination Debate Association (NDT-CEDA) debate, is characterized by two teams of two debaters affirming or negating an annual resolution (Snider, 2011).

In recent decades, demographic shifts within the intercollegiate debate community have corresponded with shifts in the content of some debate rounds away from “traditional” to “alternative” approaches. Dillard-Knox (2014) elaborates that “traditional” approaches are characterized by performances of reading large quantities of evidence rapidly and centering of the “hypothetical implementation of a particular policy” (p. 18).

In contrast, “alternative” approaches can include performances distinct from those used in “traditional” approaches (e.g. the use of rap music, poetry, and metaphors), challenging power structures through “the dissemination of subversive ideas,” and striving to “construct an ‘historical bloc’ – a coalition of oppositional groups united around these subversive ideas” (Dillard-Knox, 2014, p. 19). Dillard-Knox (2014) contends that these “alternative” approaches are a “method of validation” which “allows debaters to insert experiences and voices into debates that have traditionally been left out and/or marginalized” (p. 20).

Mabrey and Richards (2017) speculate that shifting argumentation practices and the associated rise in non-White, non-male debaters could be due to a number of factors. Topic construction, economic trends, and changing argumentation style are among the reasons which

could contribute to this demographic change (Loge, 1991; Mabrey & Richards, 2017). Mabrey and Richards (2017) suggest that “these shifts in debate participation are accompanied with changes in argument choices, even motivations for joining and staying in debate. The differences in demographics, argumentation, and motivation came to the fore recently with the successes of Towson University and Emporia State University.” (p. 3)

Recent changes in college policy debate practices have resulted in differences in both argument content and individuals who participate in college policy debate. These changes clearly suggest that research on motivations to participate require an update. This thesis strives to offer an updated explanation of why debaters participate in intercollegiate debate by allowing debate participants to speak for themselves in qualitative interviews. But first, existing research on motivations for debate participation, as well as observed outcomes from debate participation, merit a review.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Competitive debates' capacity to produce useful outcomes in debaters has been extensively researched. Research into the outcomes of debate participation is relevant to motivations in several distinct ways. One significant reason debaters initially become involved in debate is to access perceived benefits from debating (Jones, 1994). Additionally, debaters are pragmatic and wish to spend their time in an activity which will be useful to them in the future. Assessing the skills they have gained from debate is one way debaters can determine whether or not their continued participation in debate is worthwhile. Commonly studied outcomes include critical thinking skills, information processing, civic engagement, and conflict resolution. But first, a foray into the sociological theory of social exchange theory is necessary.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

To understand the motivations behind intercollegiate debate participation, it is important to understand the nature of motivation itself. Social exchange theory offers an attractive explanation of how motivation functions in intercollegiate debate. Broadly, social exchange is defined as “a joint activity of two or more actors in which each actor has something the other values” (Lawler, 2001, p. 322). Social exchange theory posits that actors seek to generate value from exchanges in which they participate. Value is broad, perception-based, and can encompass rewards, profits, valued goods, utility, and more (Lawler, 2001). When evaluating the potential to generate value, Lawler (2001) contends that actors are “both backward looking and forward looking” in that they consider both past and future costs and rewards (p. 324).

Lawler's (2001) affect theory encompasses the utilitarian cost-benefit analysis actors undertake but distinguishes itself from past theories of social exchange by emphasizing the importance of emotions. Social exchanges produce positive or negative emotional reactions and actors are motivated to reproduce positive emotions and avoid negative emotions (Lawler, 2001). Importantly, Lawler (2001) notes that actors seek to understand and attribute these emotions with reference to social groups, networks, or relations.

The affect theory of social exchange is valuable to understand intercollegiate debate motivations for several different reasons. First, intercollegiate debate is inherently a joint activity. Exchanges can occur within a pairing of two debaters, a debate round with two opposing pairings of debaters and one or more judges, a debate squad, and the broader debate community. Additionally, social exchange theory's understanding of value is useful for intercollegiate debate participation.

Value articulates itself in many different contexts within intercollegiate debate. Debaters can value wins and losses, attaining skills with perceived future benefits, a greater understanding of self and the world, relationships within debate squads and the broader debate community, and more. Social exchange theory helps to explain when and how debaters are motivated to seek these valued outcomes. Further, social exchange theory explains how debaters balance costs and benefits. Intercollegiate debate participation is highly demanding of debaters' limited time and energy. While social exchange theory does not contend that debaters are purely rational actors seeking to maximize rewards (Lawler, 2001), the theory still argues that debaters will seek to understand whether the value they will attain from participation overwhelms the costs. With this framework for understanding motivation for intercollegiate debate participation in mind, I will

now review research focused on some of the external and internal benefits which can be garnered from intercollegiate debate participation.

### **Research on Debate Outcomes**

Many researchers have sought to understand the valuable outcomes debate participation can produce. These studies are often conducted to support the continued funding of intercollegiate debate programs, especially given calls for accountability and assessment within higher education (Mabrey and Richards, 2017).

**Critical Thinking.** Debate's connection to critical thinking has been the focus of several studies (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Brembeck, 1949; Colbert, 1995; Colbert, 1987). Critical thinking skills are broadly useful, particularly for enhancing communication and the capacity to scrutinize and process information (Mazer et al., 2008). Allen et. al (1999) produced a comprehensive examination of the relationship between critical thinking, communication activities, and debate participation to date. In a meta-analysis which aggregates multiple assessments of critical thinking and contextualizes forensics participants to a broader population, Allen et. al (1999) found that all communication activities have a positive effect on critical thinking. However, not all communication experiences had the same effect. Participation in competitive debate and forensics had the greatest effect, followed by argumentation class and public speaking class, respectively.

**Information Processing.** Information processing is a specific mode of critical thinking which debate encourages. With the rise of the internet and new media, students have access to more information than ever before. Debate activities can be an effective tool to decipher and process this ever-increasing tide of information (Winkler, 2016). In researching a debate

argument, students view an issue from a multiplicity of perspectives to find the most persuasive positions so that they might beat their competitor. This evaluative process trains students to manage large amounts of information and to view challenges in probabilistic, uncertain terms (Winkler, 2016).

**Engagement with Power Structures.** Debate has a history in encouraging engagement with power structures. Major civil rights activists, including Ida B. Wells, Pauli Murray, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and James Farmer, used their debate training towards a goal of liberation (Cooper, 2016). Noting debate's importance, Cooper (2016) stated, "no great movement for social justice has ever been achieved without debate" (paragraph 28). Debate's ability to train students to solve hard problems and foster dissatisfaction with easy answers underlie its potential in encouraging activism (Cooper, 2016).

Several studies have been recently conducted focusing on educator's perceptions on the effect debate has on civic literacy. Zorwick and Wade (2016) asked middle and high school teachers who also coach debate and forensic activities to rate abilities relevant to the subject area they primarily teach. Zorwick and Wade (2016) found that classroom advocacy, argumentation, and debate strengthen civic education skills.

McIntosh and Milam (2016) sought to understand debate's ability to impact community engagement. The article reviews the rise of middle and elementary school debate and debate participation demographics, noting the recent push for diverse recruitment efforts through initiatives like urban debate leagues. McIntosh and Milam (2016) asked open-ended questions of eight debate educators about debate's role in civic education, community involvement, and high school readiness. Respondents generally felt that debate was a positive form of civic education, supported common core standards, enhanced analytical skills, but some noted that debate should

focus more on teaching students the civic importance of debate. These results suggest that debate should be examined from more angles (technological literacy, community involvement, etc.) and debate education should foreground the reasons why it is important to civic society.

Taken together, these results support the role of argumentation education in developing an engaged public through discussions of public policy, consideration of alternative perspectives, and engagement with power structures (Cooper, 2016; McIntosh & Milam, 2016; Zorwick & Wade, 2016). Debate coaches would be wise to emphasize civic engagement because of its prevalence in university general education goals (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). Connecting debate programs to broader university goals can build institutional support and increase program longevity.

**Conclusions.** Overall, skills-focused research demonstrates that college debate participation can produce a litany of valuable outcomes. However, outcomes-oriented research generally does not assess whether debaters are motivated to participate to achieve these outcomes. The following section will review studies which focus specifically on why students participate in debate.

### **Research on Debater Motivations**

The tradition of researching the experience of debate participation is distinct from outcomes-focused research. Instead of emphasizing benefits produced by debate after debate experiences have subsided, experience-focused research seeks to learn the motivations about why individuals participate in debate. In the following section, I will review studies which sought to assess reasons why students participate in debate. First, I will review studies focused

on classroom debate activities. Then, I will review studies which focus on motivations for intercollegiate debate participation.

**Classroom Debate.** Given the small number of comprehensive studies of intercollegiate debater motivations, literature which assesses student perceptions on classroom debate activities is a good starting point. There are several key distinctions between participating in classroom debate activities and intercollegiate debate. Intercollegiate debate requires significantly more time and effort than classroom debates, as classroom debates generally occur over a few class periods and intercollegiate debaters can travel to over ten tournaments between September and April. Another distinction is that intercollegiate debates are always adjudicated with a win and a loss, whereas some classroom debate activities lack this competitive incentive in favor of holistic grading.

Despite these important distinctions, understanding how students perceive classroom debate activities can shed light on why some intercollegiate debaters enjoy debate generally. Most importantly, classroom debate activities primarily feature students with little to no debate experience at all. Understanding what inexperienced students like and dislike about debate could be informative for intercollegiate debate teams that seek to recruit students who lack previous debate experience.

Early assessments of student perceptions of debate activities were positive. Smith (1990) surveyed student perceptions on classroom debates conducted in his Advanced General Psychology course, finding that students had a generally positive outlook on the debates and felt like they learned from them. Cronin's (1990) assessments of student perceptions of debates across the curriculum found that students generally enjoyed the activity (65%), believed that it



bolstered oral communication skills (74%), and thought they would have learned less in the course without the debate activity (66%).

Goodwin (2003) also sought to measure student perspectives on classroom debate activities. Previous studies support debate's ability to enhance understanding of content and argumentation, but Goodwin (2003) noted that in-class debate activities could evoke hostility, intimidation, and resistance to the unfamiliar. To study student perceptions of debate activities, Goodwin (2003) solicited feedback her introductory rhetorical traditions course about their experience in the weekly classroom debate. The feedback was in the form of a brief essay on whether and how debate exercises helped them learn. The responses were mostly positive (98%), though many (48%) reported concerns along with benefits, including negative interpersonal qualities, intimidation, or unfamiliarity. Several students (33%) noted relative advantages of debate compared to normal forms of discussion. All but one student reported that the debates were a positive experience overall, but 48% of respondents commented on problems with the debate. Some students expressed that listening to debates in which they did not participate was uninformative. Others noted that the questions debated were unclear or favored a particular side. Students also desired more feedback and voiced a sense of frustration with the lack of clear resolution of the issues contested.

Goodwin's (2003) study suggests that students participating in in-class debate activities enjoyed their debate experiences but would be motivated to do more work if they perceived more equitable topics and, most importantly, if a winner and loser was assigned for each debate. However, intercollegiate competitive debate has somewhat equitable topics and a clear winner and loser. Goodwin's (2003) observed student desires seem to hold true for competitive debate as well, as studies on intercollegiate debate motivations feature competition as a reason for

participation (Hill, 1982; Wood & Rowland-Morin, 1989; Jones, 1994; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001).

**Intercollegiate Debate.** Researchers have made relatively few attempts to empirically study intercollegiate debate motivations for participation. Much of the research focuses on the tension between striving to educate and striving to win. Hill (1982) provided a starting point for motivation research by being the first to study debater motives for participation. Using a questionnaire which asked debaters to order reasons why they participate in debate, Hill (1982) identified six major factors: educational, social, competitive, career preparation, miscellaneous, and financial. The most frequent single response was competition, but the most significant categorical response was educational. Wood and Rowland-Morin (1989) replicated Hill's (1982) investigation using a 5-point Likert scale, solidifying the conclusion that educational goals are broadly more important than competitive goals.

Jones (1994) conducted the first qualitative inquiry of student experience in intercollegiate debate. Jones (1994) interviewed and observed ninety-eight intercollegiate debaters at six intercollegiate debate tournaments. Jones (1994) found the most prominent reasons to debate were cerebral, including developing logical skills, enjoyment of arguing, and intellectual stimulation. The second-most prominent reasons were competition, stemming from the enjoyment of winning and the challenge of competition. Additionally, there were heuristic reasons, defined by the enjoyment of learning and research skills. A final motivator was social and tied to feelings of camaraderie among teammates, the pleasure of travel, and general fun from debate.

Shortly after the turn of the century, further quantitative inquiry was conducted in the spirit of Hill (1983) and Wood and Rowland-Morin (1989). Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001)

sought to evaluate whether the recently-growing number of debate formats changed student perceptions of the activity and whether different formats produce the same sorts of skills.

Williams et. al (2001) explicitly asked about disadvantages of debate participating, finding factors like time, suffering academic performance, health/stress/sleep/frustration, and social life as the most prominent drawbacks. Their study did not find a significant difference in perceived advantages or disadvantages across different debate formats, but caution that the small number of non-NDT-CEDA respondents limit Williams et. al's (2001) comparative utility.

Mabrey and Richards' (2017) call for assessment of NDT-CEDA found that participants found that students were motivated by resume building, education, and, for the first time in debate motivations research, students reported being motivated by debate as a site of activism. Moreover, Mabrey and Richards (2017) found that coaches overestimated the importance of education as a motivating factor. While Mabrey and Richards (2017) conducted the most recent study of debate participation, the study lacked a depth of explanation in why certain motivating factors are important. To achieve a deeper understanding of factors which motivate debate participation, this thesis uses qualitative methods which allow debaters to speak in great depth about why they debate.

The review of literature has led to the following research question:

RQ1: What are the primary motivational factors for intercollegiate debate participation?

Previous research has partially answered this question by identifying competitive, social, intellectual and academic reasons for debate participation. However, several of the categories lack extrapolation. Most recently, Mabrey and Richards (2017) surveyed NDT-CEDA debaters and found that activism was a motivator for participation in current debaters but much less so for alumni. The emergence of activist motivations reflects perceived changes in argumentative style

in NDT-CEDA debate as the prevalence of arguments centering topics such as racial justice, gender identity, and disability studies have proliferated. Assessing debater motivations was only a small portion of Mabrey and Richards' (2017) study, but the responses they found suggest that further exploration is needed. In this study, I will seek to account for the primary motivational factors for intercollegiate debate participation and update the now-dated understanding offered by previous inquiries.

Another major and under-researched factor affecting motivation involves balancing debate with other priorities. Intercollegiate debate participation is time-intensive and often trades off with academic, work, social, and familial obligations. The ways that debaters balance their other priorities and intercollegiate debate participation can reveal, in context, how important debate is to them. For these reasons, this study also seeks to understand how participants perceive the potential costs resulting from this balancing act in relation to the benefits of intercollegiate debate participation.

## METHOD

This study made use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with current NDT-CEDA debaters. The data were analyzed using a modified version of grounded theory. In this section, I will describe the interview participants and procedures. Then, I will explain how grounded theory was used to analyze the data.

### Participants

After obtaining IRB approval (IRB-FY2019-122) on October 17, 2018 (see Appendix), I interviewed ten debaters who attended NDT-CEDA debate tournaments in the 2018-2019 season. I interviewed debaters who are actively participating in NDT-CEDA debate because they were more capable of recalling recent memories and understandings relating to their motivations than former debaters. Additionally, limiting participation to current debaters accounted for recently-emerging trends in intercollegiate policy debate.

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods. Invitation methods included flyers distributed at tournaments, an announcement during the awards ceremony of a major college debate tournament, and individual invitations via e-mail and at tournaments. Despite the variety of recruitment methods employed, all participants were found via individual invitations over email and at tournaments.

Participants were encouraged to report demographic data through an internet survey. Participants varied based on academic year, gender identity, and racial identity. Five participants were seniors, one participant was a junior, one participant was a sophomore, and three participants were first-years. Responding to the question on gender identity, seven participants

identified as male, two participants identified as female, and one participant identified as nonbinary. Additionally, five participants identified as White, three participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two participants identified as Asian, two participants identified as Native American, and one participant identified as Black/African. Participants could select more than one ethnicity. Of the three participants who selected multiple ethnicities, one participant identified as White and Native American, one participant identified as Asian and White, and one participant identified as Hispanic/Latinx and Native American. To preserve participant anonymity, I assigned each participant a pseudonym and redacted information that could be identifying. Further, some participant quotes contain bracketed information to clarify meaning.

## **Procedures**

I conducted ten individual interviews to gather data for this study. I conducted three interviews in-person at a debate tournament, one interview over a video call, and six interviews over the phone.

Interviews are a knowledge-producing instrument which generally attain “concrete descriptions rather than abstract reflections or theorizations” (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 580). Descriptions of interviews as completely unstructured are misguided because some degree of structure is inevitable due to the preconceived notions of the researcher. Conversely, fully structured interviews are unattainable because of the complexity of human interaction and the tendency of participants to speak beyond rigid boundaries and before or after the recorder has been activated (Brinkmann, 2017). However, it is possible and desirable for interviews to “provide a conversational structure that is flexible enough for interviewees to be able to raise

questions and concerns in their own words and from their own perspectives” (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 579).

I used semi-structured interviews in this study because their flexibility enabled me to explore novel topics that emerged in interviews while remaining focused on key, pre-determined issues that I wanted to explore. Brinkmann (2017) describes semi-structured interviews as an effective middle path between structured and unstructured interviewing which avoid the pitfalls and contradictions inherent to those methods. Semi-structured interviewing allows for follow-ups on angles deemed important by the interviewee and offers the interviewer a more active role as a “knowledge-producing participant” (Brinkmann, 2017). Semi-structured interviewing’s space for follow-up questions was essential for this study because of the wide variety of perspectives that intercollegiate debaters possess in regards to their motivations for participation.

A diversity of question types will be used to learn about why interviewees participate in debate activities. Questions were nondirective, which Lindlof and Taylor (2017) describe as “a broad category of questioning that gives subjects the freedom to define the scope and terms of their responses.” Nondirective questions were critical in this study because of the centrality of debaters’ perceptions of their own experiences to the research questions. I also used time-line questions. These question types are useful because they can highlight stories associated with debaters’ lives and experiences with intercollegiate debate (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). An example of a timeline question used was, “How did you first get involved in debate?”

I used an interview guide to prompt myself to cover pre-determined topics which I deemed important and relevant. Lindlof and Taylor (2017) observe that interview guides are a flexible way to remind researchers to cover significant questions while also responding to the interpersonal dynamics of the interview. Questions can be dropped, added, or re-ordered based

on what occurs in a given interview. Interview questions included topics like historical involvement in debate, reasons behind choosing their argumentative style, and how they balanced debate and competing demands for time.

Interview length ranged from 15 minutes to one hour. Interviews were recorded and recordings were used to create transcripts. The transcribed interviews totaled 151 pages.

## **Analysis**

After I transcribed the interviews, I used a modified version of grounded theory to analyze the data. Broadly, grounded theory seeks to explain “what is going on” in the data. Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) describe grounded theory as “a systematic method for constructing a theoretical analysis from data” (p. 347). My analysis proceeded by assigning initial codes to each line of the interview transcripts, assigning focused codes which conglomerate initial codes, then assigning theoretical codes which link categories found through focused coding.

First, I read transcripts and coded line-by-line. This process of initial coding stuck closely to the data and focused on actions described within the transcript (Charmaz, 2006). During the initial coding process, I wrote memos to keep track of and describe emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Following the initial coding process, I re-read transcripts and assigned focused codes based on emerging themes. Focused codes use “the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” and function to “determine the adequacy of those codes” and “which initial codes make the most analytical sense” to categorize the data completely (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 57-58).



Then, I read the transcripts a final time in a process of theoretical coding. Theoretical coding identifies links between categories and helps “tell an analytic story that has coherence” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Codes remained malleable throughout the process and changed significantly as categories were created, merged, and eliminated.

## FINDINGS

Six consistent themes emerged from the analysis. Of course, motivations varied widely from participant to participant. However, I identified several widely discussed factors, including scholarship access, competition, affinity of the debate process, desire to acquire debate-related skills, perspective-expansion, and appreciation of debate squad and the broader debate community. Additionally, debaters explained how they remained motivated to debate despite competing demands for their time. In this section, I will demonstrate how participants described these motivating factors.

### **Scholarships**

Five participants identified that one reason for their participation in intercollegiate debate was to access scholarships that fund all or part of their college tuition. Debate scholarships can allow college attendance at an affordable price. Some participants decided to debate in college regardless of where they attend so that they could access scholarships. Comparing his desire to participate in intercollegiate debate and his ability to access scholarship money, Theodore said, “[school] was free for me just because of scholarship. So like debate was obviously important but being able to go to school for free was probably more important than that.” Theodore’s response suggests that he wanted to debate in college regardless of scholarship access, but he viewed the ability to access scholarships as more important than the desirability of participating in intercollegiate debate.

In addition, several participants used debate scholarship availability as a major factor in deciding which university to attend. Wallace narrowed his search down to three schools and

ultimately decided to attend “the place that was the cheapest and gave me the most money for debate.” For Robert, scholarship availability was the most significant factor in choosing a school. Robert strived to balance financial aid opportunities with school and debate team quality and was ultimately “able to go to a higher quality institution for like a more affordable price” than he would have been capable of without access to debate scholarships

One participant compared their debate scholarships to being paid for a traditional job. Explaining why he prioritizes debate work over his job, Zac notes that, “debate pays me more. I get paid, like, pretty. I mean, I get all my out of state fees waived every semester. That's more money than I get paid yearly working my job. So, in my mind, like debate is, is a job and it pays better. So I'm going to do that.”

While most descriptions of scholarship access were positive, one participant described issues related to scholarship access. Finn initially did not plan to debate in college but walked on to the debate team during their first year and therefore did not initially receive a debate scholarship. Throughout their first year, Finn described a situation in which there were “scholarships being dangled in front of me” contingent on “weird terms,” and because of their argument preferences, they were “scripted . . . like a, for lack of a better word, to pull from our 1AC, a deviant trans” by their coaching staff. For their sophomore year, Finn received a “full tuition scholarship” for debate, which they identified as “largely the reason I came for a second year . . . a scholarship that changed my life, frankly.” Finn’s situation highlights the importance of scholarship access for debater retention. However, Finn’s situation also demonstrates how basing scholarship access on vague conditions can be frustrating, although Finn was the only participant to describe problems with conditional scholarships or scholarships in general.

## **Competition**

Nine participants discussed competition as a reason why they are motivated to debate. Debate is an inherently competitive activity. Teams are ranked throughout the year and selective round-robins invite only debate teams with a certain level of competitive success. Debate's direct competitive features set it apart from other intellectual pursuits which debaters might pursue instead of or as well as debate. Participants described several distinct ways competition functions to keep them motivated.

**Satisfaction.** Two participants reported that they debate because they felt the need for some form of competitive activity and debate was the most attractive competitive activity to satisfy that need. Comparing competition in debate and academia, Theodore explains that "academic works fine, but you know, it's like you submit an article to a journal and you like you hear back in like nine months. And so it's like I really just like the competition." While Theodore feels he could participate in other competitive academic pursuits, such as submitting articles to selective journals, debate is unique in that it offers an immediate satisfaction of competitive needs because a decision is rendered immediately following the debate.

Another participant described debate participation as the satisfaction of a competitive need. Alton also felt the need for an academic activity with a "competitive nature" after discovering his college lacked an academic decathlon team. Responses from Alton and Theodore suggest that some debaters participate because they enjoy competition generally and debate is an attractive outlet to satisfy that enjoyment.

**Recognition.** Two participants discussed feelings of recognition stemming from winning debates. Wallace said that debate fulfilled his "desire to succeed in something" and was unique because "other people implicitly tell you you're smart in a way that you don't always get."

Wallace named this phenomenon “recognition politics,” and although he qualified it with suggesting he was being “pretentious” in naming it as a reason he enjoyed debating, the desire to be recognized was one reason he continues to participate in the activity.

Another participant described receiving affirmation from their team after a significant victory. Remarking on one of their favorite memories from their debate career, Finn described beating a highly-ranked team without knowing the significance of the round as a “wholesome memory” because “in hindsight, especially now that [my teammates] have lost to them like three times, it’s nice, it feels good.” Finn enjoyed the support of coaches and teammates “because it was like the first time that I like had a big win and everyone was super happy.” These responses suggest that feelings of intellectual validation and support from teammates after victories can encourage debaters to strive for competitive success.

One participant’s response suggests the drive for recognition might not remain stable over the course of a debate career. Theodore, a senior, remembered that the social significance of winning used to be more important to him. Answering a question about what winning a debate means to him, Theodore describes how the meaning is variable and has shifted over his debate career:

Um, depends. It honestly depends on the debate. So like, uh, if you asked me that question like my junior year or my sophomore year, um, I would have just been like winning debate, it’s like huge, it’s like all or nothing, you know, it’s like super important, a lot of like social significance to it and also just like a lot of like personal pride in winning. And now that I kind of like, I have a, I have a job after college and I’m thinking about law or grad school and I’m just like, obviously I want to do well, but I’m kind of at a point where it’s just like debate something that like I go to on the weekend, it’s kind of like a job. You go through the steps and you like perform and like when you went around like yeah, little endorphin rush, which is nice.

**Goals.** Another way debaters motivate themselves is by setting goals to achieve a certain level of competitive success. These competitive goals can be explained abstractly or concretely, such as qualifying for the National Debate Tournament or winning a tournament. Two participants identified competitive goals as a motivating factor. Theodore identified reaching a competitive goal as a major factor, especially in his final year of debate. Theodore explained that, “this year, like, my main motivation is like we've always been on the cusp of like doing super, super well and we just haven't gotten that yet. So it's like this year is kind of like my last swing at, you know, winning a tournament or something.”

Another participant in their final year of debate indicated that they are driven by goals established early in their debate career. Zac felt that achieving “a certain level of competitive success” was the best way to validate the work that he put into debate and “stimulate debate as part of my identity.” Striving to attain competitive success in his final year of debate kept him motivated to work through burnout experienced the prior year. Zac described that, “the only difference between last year and this year is like, this is my last year. I had goals coming into college about what I wanted to do in debate. I hadn't accomplished those yet. And so like, you know, this is the last year to accomplish them.”

It is notable that both participants who mentioned reaching competitive goals were in their final year of debate participation. Their shared feeling of having one final opportunity to live up to goals set early in their debate careers. It is possible that younger participants are driven by competitive goals, but those goals did not emerge in interviews because they have several more years to accomplish them.

**Knowledge.** The competitive nature of debate can encourage debaters to seek more knowledge on a subject. Wallace returned to intercollegiate debate after a hiatus after feeling that

“reading very similar literature that I would read in debate was just not as fulfilling without the, uh, competitive drive about it.”

For Zac, “the way that you win debates was that you just knew the arguments better, and you just had to read more.” This drive to win encouraged Zac to work hard at understanding complex topics by “breaking through books on postmodernism: Nietzsche, Bataille, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Virilio . . . in this attempt to be like, I will just know this argument better than anyone who could possibly talk to me about it.” Although these subjects were interesting to Zac and shaped the way he views the world, he initially was motivated to do the reading so that he could win debates. Despite providing incentives to seek knowledge, Zac also contends that debate can also become “antithetical” to “intellectual growth and development,” because debate “discourages nuance and the ability to, um, get deep into literature.”

**Forced Engagement.** Two participants suggested that they were motivated to debate and win so that they can force opponents and judges to engage with ideas which are important to them. As Theodore explains, the burden of rejoinder requires engagement with arguments, and the opponent “would have to answer or they would lose.” Explaining why he reads arguments with “an indigenous or settler-colonial focus,” Wallace, who identifies as White and Native American, described the accountability function of reading those arguments. Wallace elucidated that, “I think they're just really important. Uh, I think they're mostly true. I think that, uh, it's also important for the other folks in our activity and communities to be accountable to them, uh, to some small degree, uh, that losing to them generates whatever small amount that might be uh, is important and worth pursuing.”

Finn, who identifies as trans and nonbinary, also uses the competitive nature of debate to bring attention to issues which are important to them. Reading trans studies arguments can both

validate Finn and bring attention to issues important to them. Finn explains that, “in some ways like to reintroduce these things and like these arguments and to make them have this uncomfortable confrontation, I feel like it's good and it makes me feel good to make other people have to confront it because I'm constantly confronted with it”

This signal-boosting function is unique to debate because participants have the opportunity to introduce ideas that their opponents would not be confronted with otherwise. Wins can serve as a validation of ideas. Debaters can use the format to spread awareness about issues which are important to them, and the competitive nature of the format forces the opponents to engage when they might not in other settings.

**Losing and Motivation.** While the competitive nature of debate can motivate debaters to continue participating, previous research suggests that competition is not always viewed positively. No participants in this study maligned the competitive nature of debate, but Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001) found that some debaters view competitiveness as a disadvantage. Bailey, a first-year, suggested that competitive setbacks can be demotivating, but he persists out of confidence that he can achieve competitive success through hard work:

I think that debate sometimes can be very frustrating and very unmotivating and there are a lot of times like if I'm losing rounds consistently or having trouble finding evidence or not understanding something or uh, just getting bored, that it becomes easy to hate debate, but there's something about the activity that kind of always pulls you back that no matter how much you're frustrated about an RFD [reason for decision] that you think was wrong or a speech that you thought was great that someone else hated, or a card that you cut that someone else thought was trash, no matter how much it, kind of fuels the fire in the end and it makes you want to work harder to learn more, to find better cards, to give better speeches. And because I think the competitive part of it is what motivates me in the end. It's just like, I know I can do better than that, I know that I can redeem myself. I know that I can win.



Bailey explains that losing debates can hamper his motivation, but he tries to take losses in stride. Instead of quitting or becoming less involved in debate, Bailey aims to channel losses to encourage him to perform better in the future. Finding motivation despite losses is essential for long term participation. Losing is inevitable and many debaters, especially those with less experience, lose more than they win. Bailey deals with competitive losses by reassuring himself that he is capable of winning, but his response still suggests that losing can be demotivating absent self-reassurance. When debaters lose debates, they may need to evaluate other aspects of debate which motivate them instead. In the next section, I will discuss process-oriented motivational factors which are not directly tied to the aim of winning debates.

## **Process**

In addition to competitive motivations, participants described enjoying the general process of debate. This process includes building arguments, refining arguments, and giving speeches. Four participants discussed process-oriented reasons for why they are motivated to debate.

Finding joy in the process of debating can be a reason to participate when competition alone is insufficient. Shae observes that “it's possible to get that feeling of success or winning in a lot of other activities that are a lot less, you know, intense and anxiety-inducing.” This “complicated relationship between winning and enjoying debate” requires the cognitive features of debates, like “really cool problem solving and analytical kind of component” for Shae to enjoy debating.

This complicated relationship between motivation, winning, and the process of debate also resonates with Finn. Finn calls into question what it means to “win” a debate. For Finn,

losing debates can further the process of personal growth and argument development which motivates them to continue debating. Finn contends that the process-oriented goal of refining arguments is more important than the competitive goal of winning every debate, especially if Finn can learn and grow from a loss:

Winning can be like the round where I, where you lose, but you learn a lot because like you have a whole new perspective. I think that that's a form of winning because whenever you go back into rounds against teams and arguments where you have like very much failed in the past, um, even if you don't necessarily win the round, having a better understanding and seeing that growth and having the answers the next time, even if it doesn't mean you won the debate, I think that's winning. Um, I think, I think like winning is learning and growth probably, but, uh, because I don't think you have to win to be like a winner at the debate, but I do think that there's, there's moments of winning where you just kicked the shit out of teams that deserve it and it feels great and that's the kind of winning that kind of gets me from tournament to tournament. Um, but the growth is why I've stayed in debate long-term.

Two other participants discussed being motivated by the process of developing debate arguments. Developing debate arguments is a unique process which involves reading about a subject in depth, selecting parts of research articles to illustrate the argument, writing summaries of the research which ties the argument to the research, and then organizing the arguments into a broader file. The process which packages research articles into arguments is known in the debate community as “cutting cards.” This term was borrowed from the pre-digital process of scanning pieces of evidence, cutting out relevant paragraphs, and gluing the evidence on index cards. While debate research is now conducted digitally using word processing applications, the process of “cutting cards” remains similar. Bailey describes finding joy in the eclectic process of “cutting cards” for debate arguments. Bailey stated that, “as cheesy as it is to say that you learn stuff and it's an educational activity. . . sometimes if you're up at like two in the morning reading

some really dense but interesting article and you just have some like epiphany of how the world works because you're trying to cut a card just kind of weird and profound.”

Skye also discussed the argument-creation process as a factor which motivated her to debate in college after debating in high school. Discussing differences in her high school and college debate experiences, Skye observed that college debate required her to “think a lot more deeply about ideas” so that she could come up with “multiple lines of defense” for her arguments. This drive to think deeply about ideas and the capacity to robustly defend them is unique to the college debate experience, particularly in the NDT-CEDA style, for several reasons. Speech times are longer than high school policy debate, allowing more space for argument development. Additionally, intercollegiate debate teams tend to have a larger and more experienced coaching staff that help to drive argument innovation.

In addition to enjoying the process of argument development, one participant discussed finding enjoyment in the act of crafting and delivering speeches. Intercollegiate debaters deliver two speeches every debate round and at least sixteen speeches per eight-round debate tournament. Cecilia explained why she loved giving speeches:

I just really love giving speeches. I don't know, there's something about like the adrenaline rush and like talking really fast. You just like, don't get to do that ever. I just loved, I really loved the adrenaline rush that you get when I give speeches. Um, that's like one of my favorite parts about like debating and like why I keep debating is I just absolutely love giving speeches.

Cecilia’s explanation of why she enjoys delivering speeches in debate suggests the enjoyment would not translate to other communicative activities. Cecilia observes receiving an adrenaline rush due to the rapid delivery characteristic of her delivery of speeches in debate, but most other communicative activities, apart from auctioneering, would call for a completely

different style. By noting that giving debate speeches is a reason why she continues to debate, Cecilia clearly identifies that this unique communicative style is a motivating factor.

## **Skills**

In this section, I will discuss the various skillsets which participants reported gaining from their debate experience. Skills are an important part of a discussion of debater motivations even if many responses focus on skills they have gained from previous participation and not skills they anticipate to refine from continued participation. Lawler's (2001) affect theory of social exchange suggests that debaters are pragmatic and evaluate the skills they are gaining from their debate involvement, whether continued involvement in debate is worth developing those skills, and to what end they plan to use those skills. Some participants reported that their continued involvement will help hone skillsets which will be useful to them in the future. Other participants, particularly those with significant experience, perceive that their continued investment in debate will reap diminishing returns in debate-related skillsets. Debaters who perceive they can continue to refine skills from continued debate participation might be motivated to that end, whereas those who feel diminishing returns on debate-related skills might be motivated by different aspects of debate.

Each participant reported that their debate experience has helped them develop skillsets which will serve them later in life, but reports varied in both the types of skills participants gained and the motivating power of skill-acquisition. Participants also described the usefulness of debate-related skills in varying degrees of specificity. Some responses suggested that the skills from debate will be broadly useful, while other responses were contextualized to particular uses and careers.

Participants reported three major debate-related skillsets: communication, research, and analytical skills. Communication skills discussed by participants include public speaking and persuasion. Research skills involve the basic capability to conduct research as well as the ability to process and synthesize a large volume of information. Analytical skills encompass decision-making and argument evaluation.

For Robert, perceived external benefits are a reason why he chooses to debate over participating in other activities:

The reason I like very much like would like to continue it is because, it's just, the research is not common. I can't say that I would expect myself to research the structure of our nuclear weapons policy or you know, um, the depth of our deference doctrines and stuff like that. So just like the ability to like learn about new things in my extracurricular activities is something that I find valuable because like sure I could join a plethora of extracurricular activities that have probably a lot of great people in them and I would enjoy my time. But like the external benefits are reasons why I can say that like debate tops other activities.

Robert's response suggests that he considers the practical benefits of activities in which he invests his time. Robert has determined intercollegiate debate to be worthy of his time because it is capable of being more useful for him in the future than other activities he could join. The pursuit of further debate-related benefits motivates Robert to stay in the activity. One commonly mentioned benefit of intercollegiate debate participation was enhanced communication skills.

**Communication.** Three participants reported that their intercollegiate debate experience improved their communication skills. It should be no surprise that participants reported their communication skills improving from an activity characterized by persuasive, well-reasoned speaking. Perhaps only three of ten participants discussed communication skills from debate

because the relationship is so obvious. Communication skills discussed by participants include the confidence to speak publicly, but also the ability to organize thoughts and package them clearly and persuasively.

Two participants explicitly mentioned that they were not excellent communicators before participating in debate. Those who perceive that their communication skillset is lacking before debate participation might be drawn to debate to bolster communication skills. Wallace praised debate for helping him have “the ability to communicate in a persuasive manner, something that I probably wouldn’t have picked up” without participating in debate. Additionally, Robert reported that he has “always had relative problems with . . . communication” before debate, but debate participation improved his communication skills because “debate kind of trains you to be able to have more conviction and persuasion.”

Three participants elaborated on the utility of the communication skills they could gain from debate. Robert, a first-year, feels that the communication skills he learned in debate will be useful “in some avenue in the future, whether it be the final presentation that I had to do on Tuesday . . . or an interview for a job.”. This explanation suggests that Robert thinks about both past experiences (final presentation) and future expectations (job interview) when evaluating the utility of debate-related communication skills. Even though Robert is unsure of his future career path, he remarked that communication skills will be useful in whatever he does. Robert elaborated that, “I either planning on going into some economics-based career or politics, but both of them rely on having leadership and the ability to communicate, which are probably two of the biggest problems in most like human-run organizations. And I guess being able to provide those makes myself and everyone around me more effective at what they do.”

Roberts' sentiments about the broad applicability of communication skills are shared by Bailey. Bailey, a first-year, also predicts his communication skills gleaned from debate will be valuable, even though he is unsure how he will use them in the future. While Bailey is also unsure about his career trajectory, he perceives that debate "gives me some skills . . . to think critically and communicate effectively, which are universally applicable."

The perception of universal applicability of skills is a unique motivating factor because many students are unsure about future career paths. This is particularly true for younger debaters. Feeling that debate skills can be useful among several different paths can be a reason to continue debating even when decisions about careers shift over time.

While the previous responses focused on broad applications for communication skills, one participant was more specific. Alton, a senior, related the communicative benefits to his future career in law, observing that debate "helped me with public speaking and helped me organize my thoughts . . . I'm probably going to do moot court and mock trial when it gets to law school as a continuation of debate." It is notable that the participants reporting broad applications were both first years while the participant reporting a specific application is a senior. A probable explanation is that the senior has a clear idea of his post-college trajectory, while the first-years are more uncertain. Despite their differing goals, all three participants were confident that communication skills would be useful in the future.

**Research.** In addition to communication skills, four participants described debate enhancing their ability to research. These skills were described as searching for information as well as processing and organizing information. Beginning from an annual topic's announcement in July to the conclusion of the debate season in April, debaters conduct a massive amount of in-depth research. This research requires debaters to become adept at using search engines. The

demand for high-quality evidence requires debaters to scrutinize sources when conducting their research. Further, debaters must process and organize information so that it can be readily used within debate rounds. As a result, debate tends to produce excellent researchers. Cecilia explains how debate requires familiarity with many styles of literature surrounding a given topic, which varies based on a given debaters' argumentative interests:

The main thing is just like how to do research, how to like look out like academic papers and discern the validity of different empirical studies or the ways in which certain people write about high theory. Like for me, my particular interest is in like reading a bunch of queer theory. Um, and so just like being able to sift through, um, either extremely technical, philosophical or legal or political . . . documents and be able to understand them pretty quickly. And so I feel like that's something that's useful. Also like being able to navigate different databases, which is something that a lot of people at university like still don't know how to do, like even just like writing papers for class.

Additionally, two participants perceived that they were more capable of research than their peers as a result of their debate experience. Theodore perceives that he has a debate has given him a “big advantage just in the sense that like you can just parse through like vast amounts of information faster than other people more efficiently than other people and you know, summarize it very effectively.” Cecilia also expressed that she was more capable of conducting effective research than her peers. Cecilia explained that, “a lot of people that go to university, that are Poli-Sci [Political Science] majors don't know how to do effective research and um, I think definitely just being in debate has helped me be able to do that if I would need to do that. So that's one of the portable skills that I feel like you learn.”

While research skills from debate can have tangential career and academic benefits, they can also have a very direct impact on career trajectories. Theodore, a senior, shared that, because of the research skills he learned from debate, he was recruited for a lobbying job after he



graduated which specifically recruits debaters because “they think the activity makes you vastly better researchers than other people you could hire out of undergraduate.”

**Analytical.** A final category of skills described by participants involves analysis and critical thinking. Six participants reported that intercollegiate debate improves their analytical skills. The wide range of uses for analytical skills creates overlap between this category and the communication and research categories, but participants described analytical skills in distinct ways.

Theodore’s explanation of analytical skills is representative of how these skills were described by other participants. For Theodore, debate offers an “analytical sharpness” which allows debaters to “make better decisions” and “evaluate things more critically.” To support this contention, Theodore cited former debaters who translated their analytical sharpness to produce valuable outcomes, such as Neil Katyal, former United States Solicitor General, and Kit Pierson, an attorney involved in a class action lawsuit about water quality in Flint, Michigan.

Two other participants described their analytical skills as useful for them in their future careers. Cecilia expects that analytical skills learned in debate will be useful in her future career in the publishing industry. Debate’s emphasis on the validity of sources, analyzing arguments, and evaluating works are especially useful for Cecilia’s future goals. Cecilia explained ways in which analytical skills could be useful:

In intangible ways, things like being able to critically analyze arguments are really important for whatever field you go into. Um, just like being in a business setting and like thinking about the ways in which a company might interact. Um, I plan to go into the publishing industry. So I think those analytical skills are useful as like an editor . . . to like look at the validity of sources and whatnot. So that's probably a way in which it could help in the future.

Shae has also considered specific ways in which analytical skills could apply to his future career. Shae plans to pursue a career in medicine. While shadowing, Shae observed a doctor explaining the importance of taking a prescribed course of medicine in a way which “really reminded me of like building a debate case basically, um, for why somebody should take a particular action.” Shae described how analyzing a patient-doctor interaction similar to a debate can produce more effective outcomes:

I think the best doctors are the people who are able to show their work, um, in how they present the particular conclusion for their patient. And so if a doctor were to say like, you need to take this medication, the patient would be like, well, why? And especially if they're skeptical of the idea of more medication, they would be less likely to adhere to that prescription. But if a doctor is able to present their logical thinking, I'm from the starting point of, you know, here's your diagnosis, here's what we know about this medication, about your disease, your illness, and here's why I think this is the best course of action. The patient is more likely to be like, well, you know, that's reasonable, let me adhere to this very logically presented argument. And I thought it was something that struck me as unexpectedly similar to debate. Um, I didn't expect to think or expect to find that doctor-patient interaction was similar to the reasoning used in debates, but it makes sense because it's, you know, it's the same idea of problem-solving, but it's useful in debate and then doing debate research.

Shae's comparison of building a debate case and logically persuading a patient suggest that he has interrogated the usefulness of debate's analytical skills to his future career goals. Perhaps this usefulness motivated Shae to continue participating in debate, but, at the time of the interview, Shae only had one semester of debating left before he graduated. It is unclear that one additional semester of debate participation will produce meaningful gains in analytical skills. While Shae did not make this observation, other participants suggested that their debate-related skillsets would not improve substantially by continued debate participation.

**Diminishing Returns.** Three participants expressed that debate participation did improve certain skillsets, but their continued involvement in debate would not result in significant

improvements beyond what they had already accomplished. This perception of “diminishing returns” was a factor in participants’ evaluations of why they continue debating. Theodore, a senior, explained that “winning is why” he continues to debate because he does not expect significant gains in debate-related skillsets so late in his debate career:

I think you tap out those processing skills like after like two years of college debate, um, maybe three years because there are definitely diminishing, marginal returns. Like after you know how to cut a file and you've cut like 100 files, like the 101st file that you cut is not going to like make you that much better at info processing. There's definitely value to like, from the first time you cut a file to like the tenth or fifteenth file that you cut, like there is actually a big improvement in each one. But just like, the returns are declining.

Theodore’s response suggests that he certainly felt that he benefitted from participation in debate. However, after three years of intense debate research and information processing, he has little left to gain in terms of skill development. Instead, Theodore feels motivated to continue debate for competitive reasons.

Theodore's feelings of diminishing returns were shared by Skye. Skye, a senior, also felt that she experienced significant improvements in debate-related skills earlier in her debate career, but continued participation in debate would not result in the same returns:

I don't really know that I'm getting a lot of like hard skills that I haven't already. Like I think benefits and hard skills that I could get from one extra year of debate, I think they're, they're kind of smaller . . . I think like all those hard skills I developed them in high school or I developed them like in the first two years of college. Like I don't really think like one extra year is going to do like a huge difference in terms of those other hard skills.

A sentiment of diminishing returns is not exclusive to seniors. Cecilia, a first-year with substantial high school debate experience, shared a feeling of diminishing returns, stating that “you can continually refine your skills if you keep debating, but it’s not teaching you something new.”

Debaters who feel diminishing returns acknowledge that they have gained skills from debate but are skeptical that they can continue to improve skills at the rate they did previously. When debaters feel that they will not be rewarded with greater skills from continued debate participation, they must motivate themselves in other ways. One such motivator could be through debate’s capacity to broaden perspective.

### **Perspective**

Every participant reported that their perspective changed as a result of debate. Generally, debaters reported that their experience in debate imbued them with a different perspective on a variety of topics, from their political leanings to their own racial and gender identity. Part of this perspective expansion stems from exposure to ideas and identities in intercollegiate debate which participants would miss if they did not participate. Additionally, debaters reported that they view the world differently as a result of their debate experience. This different worldview involves a questioning of previously-held beliefs and a desire to test and research ideas instead of accepting them on face value. The relationship between perspective expansion and motivations is complex and will be discussed later in this section, but participant responses suggest that debaters can be motivated to keep being exposed to ideas which they would miss otherwise.

**Self-Reflexivity.** One way this perspective expansion operates is through self-reflexivity. Five participants described how debate caused them to become more self-reflexive. This process

of self-reflexivity emerges in many forms but generally involves rethinking previously-held beliefs upon the receipt of new information. Some participants were more explicit in identifying specific issues they rethought, while others simply noted that debate changed their outlook more generally. Skye, who identifies as Hispanic/Latinx, reported that debate was responsible for a “social awakening” in her which influenced her beliefs on race, economics, and politics more broadly:

It's really the first time I had ever thought about race in a very serious way and was my first inclination that maybe like capitalism, or like what they taught me in school about capitalism, wasn't necessarily like right with a capital “R” or true with a capital “T”. Um, and so I think in that sense it's definitely made me more like a more leftist person, um, and made me aware of a lot of things that I wouldn't otherwise be aware about.

Shae, who identifies as Asian, also reported a leftward trajectory in his political leanings and a realization about power relations. Debate made it clear to him that “there are a lot of elements of our political systems that are just kind of stacked against people of color, a working class, uh, and generally vulnerable people.”

Theodore, who identifies as White, rethought his political beliefs as well. He reported that debate made him simultaneously “more liberal in some areas and more conservative in others.” Ultimately, debate caused Theodore to view issues more “objectively” and less ideologically:

I care a lot more about the climate now . . . I do think that like government regulations a little overburdensome and basically it's just like figuring out like the sweet spot between like the United States and Russia for like probably like, you know, socialist, capitalist system quality system that you have in Norway. So it's like I think it allows me to sort of look at something such as like trickle-down economics, like obviously bullshit, but like the way that I evaluate it, at least it's not in the context of like, well Reagan proposed it

and like Regan's an evil conservative, but you just like . . . you want to google scholar and you can type in trickle-down economics and you can like actually like read a study.

A particular issue one participant rethought was his role in settler colonialism. Wallace, a junior who identifies as Native American and White, described a process of re-learning about settlerism and its relationship with his native state:

As [a resident of my state], particularly with half of my family being very aggressively white, um, it has, uh, taught me to sort of rethink some of the ways in which the things we have been taught, particularly in relationship to things like the land run . . . that's massively taught and propagated in [my state's] schools at a very young age. That it was sort of a neutral site of an opening up of lands for a settlement as a neutral process . . . so the sort of truth of how just so not neutral that was, as well as the, uh, understanding of the ways that other things are shaped by it.

Instead of defaulting to previously-held beliefs, Theodore is inclined to research and learn about issues before reaching to a conclusion about their value. Similarly, Skye thought about complex issues of economics and race in a new way and began to view the world more probabilistically. Wallace described a specific issue which he rethought. This turn towards self-reflexivity is described as a challenging but positive effect of debate.

**Identity.** Debate participation also led to some participants rethinking their identity. Bailey's exposure to academic research on gender broadened his viewpoint on the topic and led him to question "what does gender mean ultimately and how should we think about it? How should we try to be . . . in the world, either despite it or through it."

Debate research also expanded Finn's ideas about gender and sexual orientation, and this perspective-expansion helped them understand and articulate their own identity. Because of "diving deeper into trying to understand and articulate" their sexuality through debate research,

Finn “realized that it wasn’t just sexuality and there [were] a lot of ripples of gender.” Research conducted for, among other reasons, debate arguments offered Finn “the grammar to articulate” their feelings on gender and sexuality and “explain it to people” both in and out of debate rounds. Without conducting this research, Finn predicts that they might have arrived at the same conclusions about sexuality and gender, but “it would’ve taken a lot longer to figure it out.”

For Alton, a senior who lived in a nation in West Africa for the first part of his childhood, questions of settler colonialism in debate challenged his positionality and were difficult to come to terms with:

I'm not sure about my blackness, if I'm black and whatnot. And settler colonialism really hit me like that. It's really like, I'm just like, oh my goodness, I'm a fucking settler because, by the way I'm Black but not Black. But I don't think there should be a distinction because I did immigrate here . . . So that really gave me an existential crisis, gave me an existential crisis and it makes me constantly think about it. Am I worthy to read afro-pess[imism]? Do I have a place in discussions of settler colonialism, settlerism? Is it just a move to innocence? . . . And that's a conversation I have with myself or I have myself into rounds.

These questions were so challenging to Alton that he felt the need to avoid thinking about it because “if I constantly think about that, I would break down . . . I do not have time to be doing that.” Alton’s experience of grappling with settler-colonialism and his identity was the only description of perspective-expansion producing a negative reaction. Engaging with settler-colonialism is unlikely to motivate Alton to participate as a result of the disruptive effect the issue has had on his life. Alton’s experience demonstrates that perspective-expansion is not always a motivating factor and engaging with difficult questions (especially when tied to identity) might even demotivate some debaters. However, most participant responses suggest that perspective-expansion is broadly valuable.

**Activism.** The expanded perspective resulting from intercollegiate debate participation can encourage debaters to translate their knowledge and skills into action. Two participants cited their debate participation as an inspiration for becoming directly involved in organizations or protests that aim to effect social change. A link between intercollegiate debate participation and activism was established by Mabrey and Richards (2017). Further, after the February 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, some survivors-turned-activists credited their high school speech and debate experience in providing the communication skills and policy knowledge necessary to advocate for changes in gun policies (Gurney, 2018). Responses from participants illuminate how learning in debate can “spill out” to inspire debaters to become involved in activism.

Robert credits his “entire interest in politics and, like, my understanding of it” to debate. This interest in politics led to “a better grasp of, like, the way politics works and the importance of it, especially things like voting . . . and even things as small as student activism.” Because of his interest in politics imbued by debate, Robert started organizing for political change. Robert explained that, “I organized a walk out after the Parkland shooting at my high school. And I just thought it was incredibly important, especially because I was in Fort Lauderdale when it happens. So like it kind of makes me more inclined to act on issues that matter to me.”

Another participant became involved in medical debt workshops after learning more about the issue through his research for the healthcare debate topic. Shae explained how his readings for a healthcare topic had “the most significant impact on me as a . . . political or social agent” because Shae wants to be a doctor. Shae’s realizations about the “really messed up” U.S. healthcare system prompted Shae to “do more outside of debate in terms of political engagement and organizing for . . . social change in the realm of healthcare.”



Shae later explained that the debate's capacity to inspire him to effect change varies depending on the annual topic. The healthcare topic intersected with Shae's goals of becoming a medical doctor and there were opportunities in his local community for him to translate his research into action. However, Shae explains that the 2018-2019 topic does not have the same effect because "I likely will not have very much to contribute to the realm of like executive power literature or military presence in the future." A part of this difference stems from interest and perceived immediacy:

I don't really enjoy reading that much about, um, kind of foreign policy stuff or like in depth legal analysis as much as I do about, um, about like climate change or healthcare because . . . I think healthcare, it was clear that it was because it would impact my, you know, my career decisions and it just, it just seems so cruel that our healthcare system was so messed up. And climate change is such a big important subject that is going to kill us all very soon. Whereas I didn't, I don't feel the same kind of urgency I feel about this year's topic.

In sum, these responses suggest that debate can inspire activism by providing the communicative and research tools for advocacy, but also by shedding light on social problems which debaters are then motivated to work towards changing.

**Perspective and Motivation.** While perspective expansion was primarily described as an effect of debate participation, participants described two ways in which perspective expansion can serve as a motivating factor. Finn's debate experience has helped them understand themselves and their gender. Finn identifies as trans and genderfluid, and as their identity shifts, they articulate their arguments in new ways. This iterative process helps them understand more about themselves:

I like to see what happens because I'm still like really experience-like trying to figure out what my identity is, kind of like shifts between like from tournament to tournament, what we're defending and thinking about um, gender in a new way every time. It just like, it's kinda cool that like you can always be changing your arguments because, like, I do feel like my identity is always changing. And so like the constant re-articulation of argumentation is kinda cool because it does feel, I don't know, it's just like a total shift . . . like as I understand myself more for like, performing things in a different way or like reading arguments that like frame things differently.

In addition to the re-articulation of argumentation, continued participation in intercollegiate debate offers more opportunity to learn from the perspective of judges. For Wallace, learning about new perspectives through the feedback of judges is a reason he re-joined college debate after a hiatus. He noted that, “the diverse and interesting feedback from judges about the readings that you're doing is not something that happens other places. So hearing the differential opinions of your judges is really important to me. Uh, so i.e. way that, you know, certain folks in the community evaluate things differently. It's really interesting learning about that stuff.”

## **Community**

A final motivating factor reported by participants was the desire to be a part of a community. Participants described enjoying the community they found in debate, both within their squad and in the broader debate community. Participants enjoyed that both their debate squad and the broader debate community had shared values and experiences. Participants also made friendships within the social network of debate and wished to remain a part of that network. However, some participants tempered their reviews of communities within debate by identifying unaddressed problems.

**Squad Community.** Five participants identified their debate squad as a reason why they debate in college. Explanations differed, but the most common reason was that participants made important friendships within their debate team. Further, some participants explained certain characteristics of their squad which they enjoyed.

For seniors Theodore and Skye, the debate team was where they made their best friends throughout college. Skye's most "cherished memories" from college debate were "gatherings and dinners" with her debate team, and she made some of her "best friends" on the squad. Theodore also made his "closest friends" on his debate team. Shae, a senior, found that the close relationships he formed with other members of his debate team was a major reason for why he continued debating:

I stayed on the team because of a lot of the kind of relationships I formed with people on the debate team. I really, uh, enjoyed just like hanging out with a lot of the members of the debate team outside of a debate context because I found that a lot of those people were, you know, really intelligent, had really good thoughts about, you know, things in general. Um, and they turned out to be really good friends of mine that I am still very close with. Uh, and so I think that was definitely a factor that kept me on the team.

The experience of these three seniors is useful because they can offer a retrospective look at how the relationships they made within their debate squad encouraged them to continue debating. However, these responses are not necessarily reasons why they joined their debate squad in the first place.

Two younger participants discussed how the composition of their debate squad encouraged them to sign up for debate. For Finn, a sophomore, a major factor in joining the debate team was to seek like-minded individuals on their conservative campus:

Whenever I only got into [my university], I knew that I had to like reach out because I felt like if I was going to go to like a Christian university and I did, like I wanted an escape. I wanted to be able to get away from the conservative hellhole that I was from. Um, and so I knew that the only way I could find that at [my university] was through debate.

The quality and size of the debate squad was a reason why Robert, a first-year, chose his university. Robert liked the cooperation and capacity to make a difference on his relatively small debate squad:

So to me, many people can make, can individually make the difference in debates. So like having a massive team wasn't like some like do or die thing for me, but I figured, you know, keeping prep close and just like getting to know a really tight-knit group of people. Eventually, we would work as a unit, and I just really liked the level of like, the level of like focus and like cooperation that we have to have a small team.

Cecilia feels the “the community aspect of the [my debate team] in particular is really strong or something that I really enjoy,” which is why she wants to continue to “be a part of it.” While the community aspect may have encouraged Cecilia to initially become involved in her debate team, it may not motivate her to continue actively debating. One aspect of her debate team which Cecilia appreciated was that students who no longer actively debate are still a significant part of the debate team:

Um, I think this whole part was kind of unique to our team and a lot of other intercollegiate debate teams, if you no longer actively debate anymore, you're not really considered to be part of the team. Um, but there are a lot of people at [my school] . . . that, um, don't actively debate anymore but are still very much a part of the team and will hang out in the squad room and will go to, like, debate gatherings and are now, are involved in a lot of the other community outreach options that I just kind of described but don't actively debate. And I think that that's kind of like a big part of [my team] and something that I really enjoyed.

**Intercollegiate Debate Community.** Other than the allure of joining a particular debate team, four participants described being drawn to the broader intercollegiate debate community. Wallace found that the debate community is “a place where lots of people are very open with one another. It's a very relatively accepting a community.” Bailey explained that he enjoyed being a part of a group of smart, like-minded people:

I think there are a lot of just good, self-reflexive, interesting people in debate. And it makes walking around the halls of a school knowing that every single person I look at probably has very deep thoughts about how the world works, how a legal systems function or specific theories, whether it be nuclear deterrence or queer theory or whatever that person's thing is. Um, and I'm just surrounded by people who are like me and people who would get me because they, we, we all share this common experience of unreasonably relentless research.

For Finn, interest in the broader debate community began in high school. Like Bailey, Finn enjoyed that debate attracts like-minded individuals. But Finn, who identifies as genderfluid, also explained that they met other trans people for the first time through debate, thereby helping Finn understand their own gender identity:

I did not know what it meant to be trans at all. And so whenever I got, I guess the first as a queer trans person, like the first layer of that was like, I met my first girlfriend through debate and so kind of having that like magnified sphere, again, of, like, leftism, it helped me find other people because it just was like, it attracts people that are marginalized and so I have that community. But in addition, just like whenever I started getting into more critical arguments later in high school and early in college, um, I, like I started meeting trans people . . . it just kind of like opened up like a conversation . . . I realized that it wasn't just sexuality and that there was a lot of, like ripples of gender.

**Professional Opportunities.** The debate community can offer access to professional opportunities. Coaching opportunities at high school summer debate camps are limited and

debaters with competitive success are preferred. Securing these selective positions might be an additional reason why debaters are motivated to win. Two participants reported their intercollegiate debate experience leading to professional opportunities and interest in debate-related fields. Zac discussed leveraging his competitive success to secure coaching positions and a graduate assistantship:

Debate offers a litany of professional opportunities. You know, just last summer I was, I was working at [a national summer debate camp], obviously coached some teams now like, you know, there's, there's a variety of professional opportunities that in my mind pay much better than, you know, waiting or a being a retail clerk. And so, in my mind, the investment that I made in competition and other stuff was, it wasn't just a thing about debate. It is also about a potential professional goal and you know, just as I had gotten recruited for debate, um, you know, when I was in high school, I knew and know now that there is a real opportunity after you graduate if you go to graduate school to be paid pretty, pretty well, you know, on top for debate.

Further, because debate programs often have close ties to Communication Studies departments, debate participation can serve as an initial point of contact with the field. Finn's time in intercollegiate debate inspired them to pursue a career in Communication Studies to continue engagement with the research they have become interested in through debate:

It's definitely prepared me for my career in so far that it helped me figure out what I want to do . . . I'm going to grad school for [communication studies] and I'm going to be a professor. And so I wouldn't have found that love for communication because I didn't, I didn't know like what the communication and like rhetoric fields was before I came to Baylor . . . To me, it just looked like a way to do debate professionally, um, and to kind of like continue the research that I've really enjoyed doing. So I guess like debate I think has prepared me for um, my career just because of like the research aspect of it.

**Problems.** Although evaluations of the debate community were largely positive, two participants discussed major problems in the debate community with which they were frustrated. Finn reported they experience “bias” within debate, especially when they read arguments about their trans identity. Finn described an “affect of distrust that happens whenever cis people see trans people” in debate and the identity-focused nature of their arguments “amplified” the impact of that bias.

Skye also expressed serious concerns about problems within the debate community, including masculinity and sexual assault, but particularly with the community’s tendency to “collectively ignore” these issues:

There has been an upheaval of it through the me-too movement, but I still am very frustrated with the state of like, one, just like overwhelmingly debate feels like so masculine, there are so many men around all the time. And two, it feels like a lot of people, men and women, get away with like sexual assault and it just feels like very frustrating. And it's frustrating I think particularly because it's not just people who are like 10 or 20 years older than me and they're creepy. It's like people who are like three or five years older than me that are like honestly, like within social circles that I know or that like with like friends with people that I'm friends with, that are creepy and weird and it's frustrating to see just the community kind of collectively ignore it.

The disparate opinions of the broader community suggest that it can both encourage debaters to participate and push them away. Perhaps some can be friendly with like-minds inside the community, but the above responses make clear that the debate community is far from a perfectly inclusive, accepting environment.

## **Balance**

Debaters grapple with a number of competing demands on their time, including coursework, jobs, family, and social needs. Debate demands significant amounts of time and energy from debaters. Some debate teams travel to as many as six or more debate tournaments a semester. Additionally, the large number of arguments to prepare can create a seemingly endless workload. This section seeks to explore how debaters stay motivated while balancing competing demands for their time.

**Debate and Coursework.** Participants generally described having a strategy to balance major demands on their time, particularly coursework and debate work. All ten participants suggested that they generally prioritized schoolwork over debate work, but the two inevitably come into conflict. Participants seemed to be aware that their continued involvement in debate requires them to maintain a baseline grade point average. Zac, a senior, learned from the experience of other debaters who were competitively successful but had to drop out of college because they neglected coursework for debate work:

School and family always come before [debate] to me . . . Obviously when I got to [my school] . . . there were several people who were like competitively very successful, but were just like failing classes . . . and not getting a degree. And in my mind I was like, I'm not going to be that . . . I'm not gonna, you know, win the NDT [National Debate Tournament] but drop out of college, like that can't, can't happen.

One participant's strategy is to frontload as much coursework as possible. Theodore reported that he tries to finish as much coursework as possible before the debate season begins, but his heavy debate workload still affects his grades:



When I get my syllabus, I just have to do all my schoolwork in the first couple of weeks . . . I just have to be very careful how I manage my weeks in order to like stay on top of school and then also be able to put into the time and effort I do in debate. . . The bigger problem I've had is I've had finals or midterms when I come back from debate tournaments and it's like you've gotten no sleep. and you get off the bus and you like, you go into your class and you're like, you had an exam and just like, all right, well maybe if I was able to like study one of these two days, my grade would be like a letter grade higher, you know.

Despite Theodore's best efforts to frontload as much coursework as possible, post-tournament exams are unavoidable. Skye explained that the debate's time commitments can create a zero-sum tradeoff between doing debate work and coursework, especially in the middle of the semester and when balancing a job:

I work like 10 to 12 hours every week too, and I have a pretty demanding class schedule and so when I'm gone for the weekends, that's when I do a lot of my homework. And so it's very stressful the week before and the week after [a debate tournament] to like make sure I'm on top of all of my school responsibilities, and specifically this semester I'm writing a thesis. Um, I definitely, there were multiple times in the middle of the semester . . . [that] were stressful in terms of like having assignments due and also having to debate. And it definitely was like a choice between one or the other.

Because of the obvious difficulty of balancing coursework and debate, some debate squads make deliberate efforts to lighten the load. Two participants described receiving support from their team. Theodore's debate team was well aware of as the difficulty of balancing coursework and debate, and practical tips were shared:

We got sent a list of professors who are really good for debaters, which was, that was awesome. So like we had a feeling of like professors we should avoid or professors who shouldn't avoid. And then I also like the other advice that we got, which was really good. It was like when you build your schedule around like Tuesday, Thursdays, so we don't have class Monday, Friday, but that also limits out some classes you could take is you want to do that, So it's, it's, it's hard like planning your schedule around that.

Another participant reported that their debate team was responsive to conflicts between coursework and debate. Finn appreciated that their squad gave debaters space to modulate their debate workload if coursework became too heavy:

Usually [my team] is really supportive of schoolwork, like [my teammates] didn't go to Wake because [my teammate] couldn't miss more school. The coaches really, really, really heavily emphasize, like, do not do debate work if you have school stuff to do. And so I think that having that team atmosphere of just like holding each other accountable and always like, no one's ever mad if you miss debate for school. Um, and so that's like, it's a really healthy, I think team culture in that sense. Um, and I think that it will be a lot more difficult if that wasn't the case to pick between school and debate.

Finn and Theodore both reported that their intercollegiate debate experiences were improved as a result of their teams' policies on balancing school and debate. Specifically, Finn's team's explicit support for prioritizing coursework over debate work reduced pressure and gave Finn space to complete coursework without facing backlash. This culture of deference towards coursework should be modeled.

**Debate and Social Life.** Participants described how they maintain friendships while balancing debate. As discussed in the Community section, several participants reported finding close friendships within the debate team. These social relationships are important because they are not impacted as heavily by the time demands of debate; instead, debate can be an opportunity to spend more time together.

However, while participant responses indicate that debate participation can foster new friendships, debate can come at the expense of old friendships. Finn explained that while their debate team and family were understanding when Finn was unable to spend time with them, Finn's relationships with non-debate-participating friends suffered:

Um, so it's like my family and [my] debate team and that's pretty much my circle, and so luckily it's really easy to like for those people to understand and see like, I know that you're struggling and like I'm doing this too. Um, but like friends outside of debate, I've definitely gotten more distant from because of those time commitments. And so that's a downside for sure.

Theodore explained that debate tournaments occupy weekends, which are typically when social functions happen. Non-debate-participating friends struggle to understand why he puts so much time into debate:

People will, I mean, I'm sure you had this experience, they don't understand like why you're gone every weekend, which makes kind of forming normal social relations difficult because like when do people usually hang out? It's like, you know, on the weekend or you know, Friday or Thursday evening, which is the time that you would be preparing for a debate tournament usually.

One participant described struggling to hang out with his debate and non-debate social circles simultaneously. For Shae, hanging out with non-debaters and debaters at the same time is challenging because the conversation gravitates towards debate subjects which are inaccessible to non-debate-participating friends:

Um, I think one thing that kind of stands out to me is that a lot of my friends are people who either were once on the debate team at Harvard or are currently on the team. Um, and I think in part it's because when a few of us to debate people hang out with other non-debate people, we ended up talking about things that are related because they just occupy so much space in our minds I think. And so the people who are not debate, like in debate are kind of lost. Uh, and I've, I've experienced this happening a couple of times.

On the other hand, some debaters might intentionally seek to spend time with non-debate-participating friends when they can. Cecilia explained why she prioritizes maintaining relationships with friends outside of debate:

Um, and so it's been really important for me to like always kind of prioritize like having and maintaining friendships that are outside of the debate community. I definitely have a lot of close friends within the community, but it's just like really important for me to like have people and like remind myself that like not like debate isn't the world, not everyone does debate and it's like really important to be able to like have relationships with people outside of that sphere.

**Debate and Family.** Two participants discussed balancing the time commitment of debate and spending time with family. Finn described long periods of time without seeing their family because the heavy travel load from debate made it difficult to use weekends without tournaments to travel home:

I haven't gone home since August or July to like my parents' house. I saw them at Thanksgiving and they've come through [my college town] a few times but I haven't gotten to travel home. And so I get to do that for the first time next weekend. Um, and so like that's been really hard because I only live three hours away but I have a job too. Um, and so to take off time for my job, I like you can only take off so much and it's always for debate because I'm traveling like four or five weekends a semester, so I didn't get to just like take off a weekend to go see them and even if I had like a weekend off, you know, uh, it's hard to make myself want to go, like on a weekend trip, the one weekend where I'm not working a or doing a debate tournament.

One participant took time off from debate to spend more time with family. Zac skipped two back-to-back tournaments so that he could be with his family, and particularly, his ill grandfather. Zac was satisfied with his decision:

So, but, you know, I felt totally okay with it. I was, I thought it was the right decision Um, I really love my family and I love spending time with them. Uh, I miss them a lot and so the opportunity to spend like a month and a half with them was, was amazing. I loved that . . . Um, it was great, you know, so I still feel like that was a good decision and that would, I would gladly make it again if I went back in time.

**Debate and Other Extra-Curricular Activities.** Two participants reduced their involvement in certain extra-curricular activities because of the time required by debate. While Shae still finds time for community service, debate made it infeasible for him to continue to write for his university's political review:

My freshman year, I did a lot of writing for the [university political review] and was also involved in a lot of community service. And so I think both of those things, as I kind of geared up more debate stuff in sophomore and junior year, those things got crowded out . . . The political review thing is something that was definitely crowded out by debate because it was a kind of similar direction in that it was, you know, thinking and writing about political current events, um, and writing about like my opinions about those events and that was very similar to what I was doing in debate and I felt that it didn't really make sense to do both of those things.

Another participant struggled to find time for intercollegiate debate and extracurricular activities. When Skye took a hiatus from intercollegiate debate, she ran a volunteer organization. Upon rejoining debate the subsequent year, she had difficulty to even volunteer with the organization. Skye explained that, "last year I ran this volunteer-based, pro-bono after school program for kids in [my university's city] and I never would be able to do that with debate. I didn't really even have time to like not, not even just run it, like volunteer through it this semester because of debate."

Overall, participants indicated that debate was one of many demands on their time and energy. While finding a healthy balance was challenging, they remained motivated to continue debating through strategizing about ways to complete all required tasks and reducing their debate commitment when needed.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore motivations for intercollegiate debate participation. Through grounded theory methods, interview data were categorized and several themes emerged. This section will discuss relationships between themes, contributions to existing literature, practical implications, and limitations of the study.

### **Shifting Motivations**

Responses suggested that reasons for participation in debate are flexible and likely to shift throughout a debate career. Motivations for joining an intercollegiate debate team were not always consistent with reasons for staying on an intercollegiate debate team. While a first-year may join debate to access scholarships and improve communication skills, they might want to stay on the team because they learned to love the process of building arguments.

Additionally, once participants joined an intercollegiate debate team, factors unbeknownst to them at the time of joining (e.g. perspective change, appreciation of the broader debate community) motivated them to continue participation.

Further, this study suggests that students assess the value intercollegiate participation will offer them in future endeavors, and this assessment influences their decision of whether to stay on the debate team or quit. Several responses suggested that participants with multiple years of debate participation were no longer motivated by sharpening analytical and communicative skillsets due to a perception of diminishing returns. Instead, these participants were challenged to find other reasons to remain involved in debate.

By their senior year, reasons for continued debate participation can even include a bias towards not changing behavior. For Theodore, a senior, part of the reason to continue debating is

“inertia” and a pre-season commitment to a “full year of debate” that he made with his partner. Additionally, seniors have an established network in their debate squad and the broader debate community which can constrain them from wanting to leave. Further, a final chance to achieve competitive goals can motivate seniors to continue involvement throughout their final year.

### **Contributions to Existing Research and Suggestions for Future Directions**

This study served as an update and expansion of existing research which explores motivations for intercollegiate debate participation. The findings suggest that many motivational factors identified by Jones (1994) remain. Competition, skill-seeking, and admiration of the process of debate were all present both in Jones (1994) and the present study. This study can increase understanding of these motivational factors by explaining particular ways in which they function and novel ways in which they emerge. For example, a competitive drive to force engagement with issues important to debaters is unrepresented in Jones (1994) and explains an emerging reason why debaters enjoy the competitive aspect of debate.

Additionally, new motivational categories emerged in this study which were not present in previous research. In particular, the motivating power of perspective-seeking through debate research and the implications to one’s view of self is unique to this study. An attractive explanation for the rise of perspective-seeking motivations is that “alternative” approaches to debate challenge power structures and prior understandings of the world, leading debaters to rethink previously held beliefs and expand their perspectives.

The study provides insights into the motivational power of skill development. While previous research (Hill, 1983; Jones, 1994; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001) and this study find that debaters participate to develop certain skillsets, the finding that debaters perceive



diminishing returns after several years of debate experience enhances understanding of the limits of skill development as a motivational factor. Debaters know that they can acquire skills from debate, but some feel the added value of a third or fourth year of participation is so low that skill development is no longer a reason why they continue to debate. A future study could conduct periodic assessments of motivation throughout debate careers to examine how motivations shift.

This study also contributes to knowledge about how debaters balance debate with competing demands for their time. Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001) identified disadvantages such as time, academics, social life, and stress. These factors are present in the study and are accompanied with explanations of how debaters navigate these hardships while remaining motivated to continue debate participation.

Future research on balance is warranted. The area is under-covered and only peripherally addressed in past research, including this study. Further studies could hone in on particular trade-offs (e.g. academics, social life, jobs, and health), for example.

### **Practical Implications**

This study suggests several practical implications which are useful for debate coaches and debaters alike. Some debate coaches and debaters are skeptical of the value of “alternative” approaches to debate. However, the correlation of these approaches and perspective-expansion as a motivational factor suggest that they can serve as an additional motivation for debate participation, even if these debaters and debate coaches focus on “traditional” approaches.

Additionally, debate coaches and debaters should be aware of how motivations can shift over the course of a debate career. While the acquisition of skillsets can serve as a strong argument to recruit new debaters, those with significant experience might not feel that they have

much to gain from additional debate involvement. Periodic assessment of why debaters debate can help debate coaches cater to the needs of their students and correct shortcomings. This assessment could occur during the beginning of the year during a meeting about partnerships and at the end of the year during a seasonal de-brief conversation. Debate coaches should be aware of their potential tendency to overestimate the motivational power of the educational benefits of debate (Mabrey & Richards, 2017).

The findings regarding balance are particularly useful for debate coaches. First, debate coaches should encourage debaters to prioritize schoolwork over debate work. The findings suggest that many debaters take this approach, but reinforcement of priorities from the coaching staff can assuage concerns debaters might have about completing coursework at the expense of debate work. Because the findings suggest that many debaters struggle to balance coursework and debate work, debate coaches should be lenient and supportive. Support can include offering practical advice and allowing debaters to take time off of debate for other obligations. Debate coaches should not only offer this support but encourage debaters to take advantage of it, as a fear of retribution might constrain debaters from taking advantage of a stated policy of deference to coursework or other obligations deemed legitimate.

Debate coaches should also encourage healthy practices for balancing coursework and debate. Attempting to complete all coursework before the debate season begins in mid-September, as one participant reported, is a herculean task which is not feasible for many students, especially first-years who are still getting used to the workload of college-level coursework. Offering leniency and support might persuade debaters to deal with coursework in a more manageable fashion. Without leniency and support, a debater might feel that they no longer have time to participate in intercollegiate debate and quit.

## **Limitations**

This study's findings are qualified by several limitations. First and foremost, the small number of participants limits the number of perspectives encompassed in the findings.

Participants in this study were not wholly representative of intercollegiate debaters, which was partially due to the small number of participants. Additionally, only two debaters in their sophomore or junior years were interviewed, compared to the five seniors and three first-years who were interviewed. A further limitation is that all participants had debate experience prior to college. It is possible that those who join debate in college are motivated by different reasons than those who have prior experience in the activity.

Moreover, this study only interviewed intercollegiate debaters who participate in NDT-CEDA debate, one of the many formats of debate available in college. The study was limited to NDT-CEDA debaters to control for variables from other formats and my ease of access to NDT-CEDA debaters, but it is possible that participants in other formats of debate have distinct motivations. Future studies could focus on other intercollegiate debate formats to assess whether the findings of this study hold true for other formats.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to use qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analytical methods to explore motivations for intercollegiate debate participation, as well as to update and expand existing research on the subject. This study found that students participate for a variety of reasons including affinity for competition, enjoyment of the process of debate, the acquisition of skills and perspectives, and finding a sense of community within both their debate squads and the broader debate community. Further, this study found that students remain motivated to participate in debate despite competing demands on their time by strategizing completion of coursework, satisfying social needs within debate, and modifying existing extracurricular and familial commitments to best serve their needs. This study is limited by its small sample size and the corresponding limitation of perspectives. Despite its limitations, this study provided useful insights into how debaters communicate their motivation to join and stay involved in debate and offered explanations for previously-unelaborated motivating factors.

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## APPENDIX – RESEARCH APPROVAL



**Missouri State.**  
**U N I V E R S I T Y**

**To:**

Daniel Simmons  
Communications

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2019-122

**Study Title:** Exploring motivations for intercollegiate debate participation

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** October 17, 2018

**Expiration Date:** October 17, 2019

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the period indicated.

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Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Daniel Simmons

**Co-PI:**

**Primary Contact:** Joseph Hamaker

**Other Investigators:** Joseph Hamaker