

## **COLUMBUS SPEECH & DEBATE**

**NEW MEMBER and INTEREST MEETING Thursday**

**September 3, 2015 2:30 p.m. ROOM: D 18**

**The CCHS debate team consistently places in the top 10% of National Forensic League Chapters**

**Moderator:** Dario Camara - [dcamara@columbushs.com](mailto:dcamara@columbushs.com)

The Columbus Speech and Debate Team competes in year- round interscholastic speech and debate tournaments on a local, regional, and national level. Membership in the club is open to any student enrolled at CCHS. Students are expected to keep a 3.0 un-weighted GPA. The Columbus Speech and Debate Team is a member of the Florida Forensic League (FFL), the National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL), and the National Forensic League (NFL). The National Forensic League also serves as the National Honor Society for Speech & Debate

**The various Speech & Debate events include:**

### **Congressional Debate**

This is individual debate in a large group setting. Congressional Debate models the legislative process of democracy, specifically, the United States Congress. Students optionally write legislation submitted by their coach to a tournament, and they research the docket of bills and resolutions distributed by each tournament. At the tournament, students set an agenda of what legislation to discuss, they debate the merits and disadvantages of each, and they vote to pass or defeat the measures they have examined. Parliamentary procedure forms structure for debate, and students extemporaneously respond to each others' arguments over the course of a session. Congressional Debate is a valuable learning exercise, because students familiarize themselves with current social and political problems and learn appropriate behavior and rules for formal meetings. Contestants are evaluated by judges for their research and analysis of issues, argumentation, skill in asking and answering questions, use of parliamentary procedure, and clarity and fluency of speaking.

### **Lincoln Douglas Debate**

Lincoln Douglas Debate centers on a proposition of value, which concerns itself with what ought to be instead of what is. A value is an ideal held by individuals, societies, governments, etc. One debater upholds each side of the resolution from a value perspective. To that end, no plan (or counterplan) should be offered. A plan is defined by the NFL as a formalized, comprehensive proposal for implementation. The debate should focus on logical reasoning to support a general principle instead of particular plans and counterplans. Debaters may offer generalized, practical examples or solutions to illustrate how the general principle could guide decisions. Topics change every two months.

### **Public Forum Debate**

Public Forum Debate is audience friendly debate. Two pairs (teams) debate monthly controversial topics ripped from newspaper headlines. Rounds begin with a coin toss between the competing teams to determine side and order (Pro-Con or Con-Pro). Public Forum tests skills in argumentation, cross-examination, and refutation.

### **Extemporaneous Speaking (United States and International)**

A contestant draws three questions, selects one, then has 30 minutes to prepare a speech in response. The contestant utilizes files of published materials (books, magazines, newspapers, online sources) s/he has compiled as a resource for answering the question. At the completion of the 30 minute preparation period, the student speaks on the topic for up to 7 minutes. The NFL divides extemp. into two separate events: United States (dealing with domestic issues), and International (issues beyond US borders).

### **Original Oratory**

Orators are expected to research and speak intelligently, with a degree of originality, in an interesting manner, and with some profit to the audience, about a topic of significance. Although many orations deal with a current problem and propose a solution this is not the only acceptable form of oratory. Your oration may simply alert the audience to a threatening danger, strengthen its devotion to an accepted cause, or eulogize a person. An orator is given free choice of subject and judged solely on the effectiveness of development and presentation.

### **Dramatic Interpretation**

This is an individual category in which the selections are dramatic in nature. Selections shall be cuttings from published-printed novels, short stories, plays, poetry, or any other printed-published materials. Presentations must be memorized, without props or costumes. The time limit is 10 minutes which includes an introduction.

### **Humorous Interpretation**

This is an individual category in which the selections are humorous in nature. All other rules are the same as Dramatic Interpretation.

### **Duo Interpretation**

This is a two-person category in which the selection may be either humorous or dramatic in nature. All other rules are the same as Dramatic Interpretation.

### **Oral Interpretation of Literature**

Students present selections in two categories -- prose and poetry. Each selection must be a maximum of ten minutes in length. The student must hold a manuscript and appear to be reading. The students alternate between rounds of prose and rounds of poetry.

Christopher Columbus High School  
**Speech & Debate Schedule | 2015-2016**

**September**

12	Bulldog Invitational	G. Holmes Braddock (Miami, FL)
17-21	Yale Invitational	Yale University (New Haven, CT)
26	Flying L Invitational	Fort Lauderdale High School (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

**October**

3-4	Crestian Tradition	Cypress Bay High School (Weston, FL)
16-19	New York City Invitational	Bronx Science High School (Bronx, NY)
24	SFCFL 1	West Broward High School (Pembroke Pines, FL)
30-Nov 1	Blue Key Invitational @UF	University of Florida (Gainesville, FL)

**November**

6-7	Nova Titan	Nova High School (Davie, FL)
14	SFCFL 2	Everglades High School (Miramar, FL)
20-23	Glenbrooks	Glenbrook North/South (Chicago, IL)
21	Falcon Invitational	Charles Flanagan High School (Miramar, FL)

**December**

3-7	Princeton Classic	Princeton University (Princeton, NJ)
5	Colt Invitational	Coral Springs High School (Coral Springs, FL)
12	SFCFL 3	Miami Beach High School (Miami Beach, FL)

**January**

8-10	Sunvitational 2016	University School (Davie, FL)
28-Feb 1	Emory Barkley Forum	Emory University (Atlanta, GA)

**February**

6	FFL Regionals (State Qualifier)	North Miami Beach Senior (North Miami, FL)
12-16	Cal Invitational @UC Berkley	University of California (Berkley, CA)
20	SFCFL 4	Stoneman Douglas High School (Parkland, FL)
26-27	NSDA Districts: Speech/Cngrs	

**March**

4-5	2016 FFL Varsity State	Timber Creek High School (Orlando, FL)
12	NSDA Districts: Debate	
19	SFCFL Grand Finals	St. Thomas Aquinas High School (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

**April**

15-16	2016 FFL Novice State	Wellington High School (Wellington, FL)
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**May**

27-29	NCFL 2016 Sacramento	Sacramento, CA
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**June**

11-18	NSDA Nationals 2016	Salt Lake City, UT
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# FORENSICS AND COLLEGE

by  
Professor Minh A. Luong  
ADMISSIONS

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

Extracurricular activities like forensics are playing an increasingly important role in the college admissions as well as the scholarship awarding processes. Why? Grade inflation is rampant in both public and private secondary schools and test preparation programs are distorting the reliability of national standardized tests like the SAT and ACT. According to the Wall Street Journal (Interactive Edition, April 16, 1999), college admissions directors are relying less on grade point averages and standardized test scores, and are relying more on success in academically-related extracurricular activities such as speech and debate as well

as drama. Successful applicants to top schools still need to demonstrate academic success in their coursework as well as perform well on standardized tests, but the days of a 4.0 GPA and 1600 SAT score guaranteeing admission into a top school are gone. In 1998, Harvard University rejected over 50% of its applicants with perfect Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and 80% who were valedictorians. Private and public institutions of higher learning, facing the reality of needing to train graduates for a global economy, are selecting applicants who can not only perform well academically but can also set themselves to an endeavor and succeed in extracurricular activities. After all, college students must select a major that concentrates on a particular field of study; why not select the students who have demonstrated success with that type of focus and dedication?

Colleges now acknowledge, based on years of experience, that students who demonstrate success in extracurricular activities which give them real-world skills like critical thinking, oral and written communication, and the ability to organize ideas and present them effectively perform better in college and turn out to be successful alumni who give back generously to their alma mater. What does this mean? According to Lee Stetson, Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, "We realized one of the better predictors of success is the ability to dedicate oneself to a task and do it well." But according to the Wall Street Journal's recent study of top universities and ten years of applicant, admissions, and scholarship data, "not all extracurricular activities are created equal." Two of the surprising findings were that participation in some of the more common sports in high school athletics, soccer, basketball, volleyball, horseback riding, skating, and base-

ball, did very little for applicants. Unless these students win state or national awards, there does not appear to be any significant benefit from participation in these activities. Second, the Wall Street Journal study noted that "although community service has been widely touted over the past decade as crucial to college admissions, our numbers suggest it matters much less than you might expect."

The Wall Street Journal report did specifically highlight a "consistent trend" — one that forensic coaches have known for a long time — that dedicated participation in drama and debate has significantly increased the success rate of college applicants at all schools which track such data. State and national award winners have a 22% to 30% higher acceptance rate at top tier colleges and being captain of the debate team "improved an applicant's chances by more than 60% compared with the rest of the pool," according to the report. This is significantly better than other extracurricular activities that tend to recruit from the same pool of students as forensic teams such as school newspaper reporter (+3%), sports team captain (+5%), class president (+5), and band (+3). Even without winning major awards, participation in speech and debate develops valuable skills that colleges are seeking out and that is reflected in the above average acceptance rate (4%). Colleges and universities today are looking for articulate thinkers and communicators who will become active citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

The National Forensic League, with its mission of "Training Youth for Leadership," is one of a handful of national high school organizations which leading colleges use as a "barometer of success." Qualification to NFL Nationals is viewed as a considerable accomplishment with late elimina-

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

As a former policy and Lincoln-Douglas debater as well as student congress and individual events competitor, I appreciate the different skill sets that each event emphasizes, as well as the shared lessons on research methods and critical thinking skills. As a college professor, I note that my top students are most often former high school debaters who actively participate in class discussions and articulate persuasive arguments both in class and on written assignments. The Ethics, Politics, and Economics (EP&E) major at Yale College is an elite course of study which requires special application prior to the junior year to be admitted into the program. It is often known as the “debate major” because it attracts some of the brightest undergraduates at Yale and most of the students in the program are former high school debaters and/or members of the Yale debating team. It is no surprise that many of my students are entering their senior year of college with employment offers already in hand and quite a few of them already own their own companies. One of my graduating seniors, who is in the process of taking his company public, told me that his debate experience was a critical factor in persuading investors to support his business venture.

As a corporate advisor, I see the skills developed in forensics paying rich dividends as I work with talented managers at client companies and on teams with other consultants. Over the years, I have had discussions with many senior executives and managers, nearly all of whom identify effective communication, persuasion, and leadership skills as “absolutely essential”

for success and advancement in their respective organizations. Many of these successful business executives, government leaders, and non-profit directors do not directly attribute their graduate degrees to their own achievements but rather they point to the life skills and work ethic learned in high school speech and debate that started them down the road to success. One vice president told me that “my Ivy-League MBA got me my first job here but my forensics experience gave me the tools to be effective which allowed me to be promoted into my present position.”

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

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

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

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

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

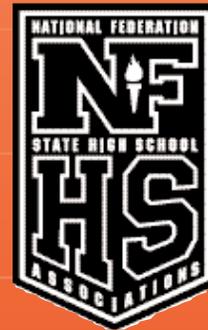
more advanced intellectual and professional challenges?

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

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

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# **The Value of Speech, Debate and Theatre Activities: Making the Case for Forensics**



VSDT

**NFHS Publications**

**THE VALUE OF SPEECH, DEBATE  
AND THEATRE ACTIVITIES:  
MAKING THE CASE FOR  
FORENSICS**



**Robert F. Kanaby, Publisher**  
By Kevin Minch  
Kent Summers, Editor  
**NFHS Publications**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kevin Minch is associate professor of communication and director of forensics at Truman State University. He has previously coached at Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; at Wayne State University, in Detroit; and at the University of Kansas. Kevin serves as speech consultant for the NFHS, associate editor of the *Forensic Educator* and as the college advisor to the NFHS Speech Advisory Committee. He formerly helped in the production of the NFHS annual CX debate video package and currently serves as a member of the CX debate topic selection Wording Committee.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I want to take a moment to thank some contributors to the research that went in to preparing this volume. Specifically, my student workers Ryan Walsh (now at NYU Law) and Todd Turner offered assistance in collecting some of the quantitative research on the relationship between participation and successful fulfillment of curricular outcomes. I would also like to thank each of the many individuals who made helpful suggestions about new research that could contribute to this volume.

## WHAT OTHERS SAY: SELECTED QUOTATIONS EXPLORING THE VALUE OF FORENSICS

**Editor's Note:** These quotations were drawn from the previous edition of *The Value of Forensics*, published by the NFHS in 1994, including the several historical figures cited. The exceptions are from Grant McKeehan and Donald Rumsfeld.

**John F. Kennedy, August 22, 1960**

"I think debating in high school and college is most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of Women Voters . . . I wish we had a good deal more debating in our educational institutions than we do now."

**Malcolm X (Autobiography, 1965)**

"But I will tell you that, right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been."

**Aristotle, *The Rhetoric***

"If it is a disgrace to a man when he cannot defend himself in a bodily way, it would be absurd not to think him disgraced when he cannot defend himself with reason in a speech."

**Frank G. Clement, Former Governor of Tennessee**

"I cannot think of any one in the country who owes more to his participation in the National Forensic League events than I do."

**Grant McKeehan (2001), Attorney**

"I am proud to say that I believe my experience in high school forensics and college debate has contributed more to my success than any other single factor in life. I learned a lot about winning and losing, and for the first time in my life realized how much fun it can be to give everything you have to an activity you love."

**Diana Carlin (1994), Dean of the Graduate School, University of Kansas**

"I am a firm believer in the power of forensics to change a person's life. The ability to communicate is one of the most powerful there is in our society. By giving young people the opportunity to develop effective communication skills, forensics opens doors to endless opportunities. I know it did for me."

**John Fritch (1994), Chair, Department of Communication, University of Northern Iowa.**

“As an undergraduate from a small rural community it was only through forensics that I was introduced to the social graces of dining in restaurants, meeting officials of universities and checking in at an airport. . . . it is also true that forensics provides the only opportunity which many students have to encounter these events.”

**Clark Olson, Ph.D., (1994), Former Director of Forensics, Arizona State University**

“Just this week I was visited by the father of one of my first year “walk on” students. He was eager to meet me because he wanted to know what it was about forensics that made it such a special activity that had transformed his son from a careless teenager into an adamant professional competitor. As his son performed his events at Christmas, his father detected that forensics had brought something very special to his son’s life. . . .”

**Arthur Voisin (1994), Former Director of Forensics, Southfield (MI) Lathrup High School**

“The intellectual challenge of forensic activities is instrumental in the personal growth and development of individual students. Schools unable to maintain or even initiate gifted and talented programs would be wise to maintain debate/forensic programs as the training obtained is highly comparable. Student success and achievement is the major reason that competitive forensic activity should be an educational opportunity for all young people.”

**John Heineman (1994), Individual Events Coach, Lincoln (NE) High School**

“Not every student will win a state championship or qualify for nationals, but students will inevitably discover that the persistence, dedication and sweat it takes to compose an oratory, perform an interpretation or prepare an extemporaneous speech is the same hard work it takes to survive that first semester of college, land that big job or create a strong family unit.”

**Don Ritzenhein (1994), Vice Provost of Arts and Sciences, Macomb Community College**

“How many debates, I wonder, did I participate in over a seven-year high school and college career? How many rounds of oratory and extemp? And those are just the tip of the iceberg. Double, triple that number of contest events went into practice; double, triple that number of hours went into research and preparation. It’s no wonder the skills I learned are automatic. It is that intensity, resulting in intuitive lifelong skills, that makes competitive speaking so unique and so valuable.”

**Donald Rumsfeld (2004), Secretary of Defense**

“I used to think one of the most powerful individuals in America was the person who could select the annual high school debate topic. Think of the power to set the agenda, and determine what millions of high school students will study, read about, think about, talk about with friends, discuss with their teachers and debate with their parents and siblings over dinner.”

**THE VALUE OF SPEECH, DEBATE  
AND THEATRE ACTIVITIES:  
MAKING THE CASE FOR FORENSICS  
By Kevin Minch**

**BACKGROUND**

In early December 2000, I was on a late night flight from Kansas City to Detroit after learning of the death of my high school debate coach. It was a particularly poignant moment for me because I received the call about her passing while with a group of students at a college debate tournament. It was my second year as a director of my own program at a small liberal arts college in Missouri. Since I was, at that time, in my third year as the associate editor of the NFHS' *Forensic Educator*, I scribbled on the back of some school paperwork what would later be the opening essay for our forthcoming issue. I wrote:

I recently attempted to explain to a group of my students at Truman State University why I was willing to give up my weekends and evenings for no additional pay, why I was willing to sacrifice pursuits in the area of research that other colleagues consider "normal" for someone on a tenure track, and why I would want to carry the additional emotional baggage of being so intimately involved in the lives of 40 students. The answer, I explained, was simple. The gift I gave as a forensic educator is but a small down payment on a debt I owe to those who went before me . . . those who made the sacrifices that made my education possible. A forensic educator is a very special kind of teacher, I told them, and we do not consider these choices sacrifices. They are personal rewards.

The passion of the forensic educator is great. It is so because most of those working in the field have experienced first-hand the profound benefits of an education that is supplemented by forensics. At the time I observed:

I would not be in the field of communication – let alone a speech and debate coach – were it not for [my high school coach]. I probably would not have gotten a Ph.D., or run for political office, or completed a number of the other major life accomplishments I have were it not for the sequence of events she set in motion. . . . I owe who I am to my parents, and friends, and a host of people around me. I owe what I do to [my coach].

This booklet is designed to help the prospective supporter of speech, debate and theatre activities – be they a parent, aspiring coach or speech teacher, administrator, school board member or program benefactor – appreciate how these activities fit into the overall educational experience of a student. It brings together, in one location, a significant amount of research and theory about the effectiveness of education in these activities, yet it also presents a notable amount of anecdotal evidence (in the form of testimonials and the observations of professionals) that demonstrates how these programs work in practice and how alumni of these activities have prospered in college and beyond.

I cannot write this volume without stating emphatically that no amount of quantitative research can demonstrate what I know in my heart to be true. Performance activities (and by this I mean the full range of debate competitions, individual speech events, mock trial, theatre, one-act play, etc.) are life-changing experiences for the students who participate in them. Speech, performance and critical thinking liberate the mind and the individual.

Nonetheless, the reader of this volume will find ample evidence of all kinds in support of that conclusion. My objective has been to pull together the best research available on the relationship between participation in these activities and the achievement of various educational outcomes – both the kind governments and school boards specifically describe, and the general life achievement objectives we all hope our students fulfill.

## **WHAT IS FORENSICS?**

Before any useful discussion of the impact of speech, debate and theatre activities can take place, it is useful, first, to acquaint the unfamiliar reader with the range of options available to students. Different school systems, and different state activities associations, group these activities under different headings, yet many of the activities share characteristics, coaches/advisors and pedagogical objectives.

The traditional “territory” of forensics has been activities such as interscholastic individual or team debating and individual speaking events. Individual speaking events include a range of more specific activities including limited preparation events (impromptu and extemporaneous speaking competitions), platform speaking events (oratory, informative speaking, special occasion speaking, oratorical declamation of great speeches) and oral interpretation of literature (the performance of poetry, prose or dramatic literature). Additionally, theatre activities take multiple forms, including the traditional school play or musical, as well as competitive programs in one-act play, reader’s theatre, and so forth. These activities often complement those already described in what we might term a “broad-based” forensics and theatre

program. Programs such as Model United Nations, Student Congress and Mock Trial also fall under the general rubric of forensic activities in many schools.

These programs are usually cocurricular, meaning that they sometimes hold actual classes during the school day and continue their activities outside of the classroom. Others are extracurricular and function exclusively as teams or clubs after school. While theatre programs may be entirely contained within the school itself, performing plays “on campus,” all of these programs may be – and often are – competitive, either attending one-day, multi-day or overnight tournaments at other schools, or participating in festivals to showcase their work. Thus, there is both a pedagogical and a competitive or performative “team” component to most of these activities.

It is important to recognize, however, that “forensics” is not a label everyone necessarily attaches to the activities in which they are involved. When interscholastic programs (competitive activities) are considered, the labels we will use will vary from state to state. For the purposes of this booklet the term “forensics” will describe the broad range of activities we have discussed here and, where appropriate, the names of specific activities will be used to describe what we know about their individual impact on students. It will be a central contention of this booklet that a school does not need to do all of these programs to benefit but that teachers, parents, students and administrators can work together to develop the optimal mix of what is truly a wide variety of educational opportunities in the area of theatre, speech and debate. Generally speaking, the more opportunities that are provided, the better the students are served.

This booklet replaces *The Value of Forensics* booklet, which was authored by Jack Kay and published in 1994 by the NFHS.

## **THE BROAD CASE FOR FORENSIC ACTIVITIES**

Faculty and administrators who have assessed extracurricular and cocurricular activities long ago reached the conclusion that participation in these activities has a positive impact on such important measures of a school’s performance as GPA and student retention. I remember when I first joined my high school debate team, expressing the concern to my coach that my grades might suffer from all of the time I was spending on the activity. She quickly assured me that, if anything, participation in speech and debate would improve my grades. She was certainly correct. I also learned new skills and how to organize. Yet, most importantly, I was driven to succeed because my involvement in these activities made me more competitive.

Much of the research done to establish a relationship between cocurricular involvement and academic performance has related to athletic activities.

However, some important generalizations have been made. Daniel R. VanderArk, a former principal at Michigan's Holland Christian High School, summarized an NFHS study on the subject in a 1992 article for the *Forensic Educator*, noting that 95 percent of principals surveyed believed that "participation in activities teaches valuable lessons to students that cannot be learned in a regular class routine" while 65 percent of students said that "activities helped to make school much more enjoyable" (VanderArk 26).

He further elaborated by pointing to a Minnesota study that showed significantly higher average GPAs among students involved in activities, with students involved in fine arts showing the highest gains. Similar data from studies in Iowa and Indiana confirmed activities participation as a source of improved student performance. VanderArk also noted the results of research in Kansas showing that "94 percent of high school dropouts in that state 'were not enrolled in activities programs'" (VanderArk 26).

More specifically, those who have had contact with speech, debate and theatre activities have observed specific desirable outcomes in a variety of areas. Students experience improved learning, both inside the classroom and in the context of what one might call "lifelong learning" – the practical application of classroom skills outside the classroom. Students with special needs – both the gifted and the learning disabled – gain unique benefits from their experiences in these programs. These experiences often satisfy needs that are not, or cannot be, addressed efficiently by current educational curriculum. Additionally, students experience positive outcomes in terms of preparedness for the workforce and occupational success. Socially, students develop in positive ways, learning group communication skills and exploring how to negotiate complex relationships. Finally, and quite importantly for schools in a period of fiscal uncertainty, participation in such programs promotes a sense of loyalty by school alumni that translates into a supportive community, good citizens and future parents.

What makes this difference? A number of scholars have advanced the "laboratory" metaphor to describe what forensics activities do (an idea that we will revisit several times in this booklet) that makes them different from other extracurricular or cocurricular experiences. Professor Kevin Dean has argued that these activities are a "developmental opportunity." Specifically Dean argued at a 1991 developmental conference on forensics education: "developmental programs provide students a context in which to both gain knowledge and apply that information in their interactions with others" (88). Unfortunately, Dean noted, "Such activities are frequently difficult to implement on the secondary and even more so college levels because educators typically are responsible for large numbers of students and have a limited time frame (one period or class per year or term) in which to observe and interact with the students under their tutelage" (88). Dean contended that the growth of cocurricular programs, such as forensics, is the natural outcome of a desire by teachers to provide these

developmental experiences. Other scholars have termed this type of learning “experiential” noting:

Experiential learning allows students to move beyond the classroom walls which tend to isolate and fragment learning to, instead, consider learning as it occurs throughout their daily lives. According to experiential education theory, learning does not come about only in the traditional classroom setting (if it does so at all in such a setting). Moreover, people learn about the world around them via encounters with numerous symbol systems. (Sellnow 5-6)

Scholars have further developed the laboratory metaphor, arguing that these developmental experiences – blending classroom and practical learning – boost the acquisition of knowledge in the broad field of communication studies (Swanson “Special” 49-50), enhance interpersonal communication skills (Friedley 51-56), strengthen the capacity of students to function in small group communication settings (Zeuschner 57-64) and provide valuable learning experiences in the realms of organizational communication (Swanson “Forensics” 65-76) and mass communication (Dreibelbis and Gullifor 77-82).

The crux of this effect is the coach. Imagine a teacher in a speech classroom of 25 to 30 students. Her particular school functions within a traditional 50 minute to one-hour class period. For a graded assignment, students have to compose a seven-minute speech and perform before the class. Optimistically, even with relatively short periods of feedback between each speaker, and a rapid turnaround between each performance, more than a class period would be exhausted just hearing the speeches. If instructor or audience feedback is added to the speeches, a single assignment on a single speech could take the better part of a week of classes. Now imagine if that instructor was teaching debate, and each debate composed of four students took an hour! While classroom instruction of speech is vitally important for teaching fundamental concepts of oral communication, such a schedule *cannot* provide the detailed feedback, rehearsal and polish that an after-school, cocurricular program in speech, debate or theatre can. The individual interaction with a coach, added to the feedback of peers and adjudicators from other schools, multiplies the input a student receives on their work. Moreover, it allows for a depth of analysis of the work that simply cannot be achieved in any other environment. Consequently, learning is substantially enhanced.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students and faculty who have participated in speech, debate and theatre activities have generated voluminous anecdotal evidence of the value of these programs in enhancing the academic experience. Many lawyers, doctors and professors were involved in speech and debate programs. However, they also recognize the vast number of students who improved as students because of their participation in forensics – even if they never went on to graduate school or acquired a six-figure salary.

A 1991 survey of college students involved in competitive individual speaking events (many of whom reported that they continued competing because of their high school experiences) cited among the advantages they perceived: improved oral communication skills, improved critical thinking skills, organization, research skills, improved writing skills, improved self confidence, the capacity to think quickly, development of a sense of ethics and a sense of personal accomplishment (McMillan and Todd-Mancillas 6-8). In each instance, more than 65 percent of students either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statements that these were advantageous outcomes.

Among the most cited advantages of forensics participation are greater oral communication competency, improved reading comprehension, more highly-developed listening skills and stronger quantitative measures of academic achievement. One of the most broadly recognized advantages, interconnecting all of these benefits, is improved critical thinking.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Speaking broadly, research into the general advantages of arts education (within which forensic activities can be placed) has yielded very positive results related to student performance in measures we would commonly associate with critical thinking. A 2000 study by Buton, Horowitz and Abeles abstracted in the Arts Education Partnership’s 2002 *Critical Links* report indicated that children defined as “high arts” (those with significant arts involvement): “scored higher (from teacher ratings) on expression, risk-taking, creativity-imagination and cooperative learning” (Deasy 66), skills important to effective critical thinking. Tasks such as researching for a debate, organizing a speech, directing a play or analyzing the motivation behind a character in a story function to improve students’ problem-solving and questioning skills.

In no area has the critical thinking relationship been more directly studied than in debate activities. While this should not be viewed as excluding other forensic experiences, this emphasis is not surprising, given the traditional association educators make between argument and logical thought. Still, there is much debate – specific research can teach us.

Professors Kent Colbert and Thompson Biggers observed in 1985: “Keefe, Harte and Norton concluded, ‘Many researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience’” (238). Studies as far back as the 1940s – both on the high school and college level – have established a fairly consistent correlation between participation in debate and higher test scores in critical thinking (Bradley 135). More recently Laurence E. Norton, one of the most respected collegiate speech and debate coaches of the 20th Century, observed:

A pioneer study was conducted by Brembeck on the influence of a course in argumentation on college students. A major conclusion of the study affirms, “The argumentation students, as a whole, significantly outgained the control students in critical thinking scores.” More recently Gruner, Huseman and Luck investigated the relationship between high school debaters’ proficiency and their scores on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Tests. They found that the relationship between debate ability and critical thinking ability extended to all five subtests of the Watson-Glaser test. (Norton 33-4)

Robert Greenstreet, in a 1993 summary of the available data on the relationship of debate participation and critical thinking, correctly noted that the correlation is somewhat of a “chicken-egg question” (18). That is, researchers cannot know conclusively whether the improved critical thinking performance is the result of (a) really good students entering debate first, (b) debate taking students and making them better critical thinkers, or (c) students being impacted by the broader design of the educational system, of which debate is only a part. Nonetheless, in any of these instances, the correlation serves as an affirmation of debate’s positive role. It either serves the enrichment needs of gifted students, it uniquely improves the performance of students or it enhances a system already striving to improve student performance. This is where students’ own experiences and perceptions can be instructive. Surveys of students affirm the perception of improved performance. Greenstreet reported:

A tremendous variety of former high school debaters attest to the value of debate training on their critical thinking as well as their communication abilities. Even Lee Iacocca (1984) jumped on the bandwagon in his autobiography. Testimonial and survey support appear consistent that debate experience equates with positive changes in participant thinking behavior. (21)

Researchers have hypothesized a number of reasons for this improved (or perceived improvement) of critical thinking performance. An obvious source is the significant amount of research a student involved in debate will perform during a typical competitive season. Russell Windes, a former director of debate at Northwestern University, quoted a former debater and Northwestern political science professor while writing in *The Speech Teacher* in 1960: “Professor Robinson expressed his belief that a year’s research on a debate proposition by a good debater may equal the amount of time a graduate student invests in research on a master’s thesis” (107). Robinson and Windes’ observations from 1960 could not have foreseen the depth of research performed by 21st century debaters armed with the Internet and Lexis-Nexis, often more adept today at finding support for their next argument than the graduate students these writers then alluded to.

The competitive drive of interscholastic debate competition provides incentives for performance unimaginable in most classroom settings. Norton observed, “In debate a student has the motivation for thorough research on one subject for one academic year; usually this is not possible for an English theme or a term paper (30). Bradley further noted, “debate promotes an independent pursuit of the problem on the part of each student” and “Since the debate propositions are chosen annually in a currently controversial area in which much information is available, it is generally next to impossible to exhaust all sources” (135).

More recently Stefan Bauschard has argued that debate exhibits characteristics of cooperative learning, or various types of structured group investigation. He observed in 2001 that: “more than 575 experimental studies and 100 correlational studies have been conducted” in the area of cooperative learning. Among these, researchers have determined that “Cooperative learning is an excellent way to promote critical thinking because it is a method that involves structured discussion, emphasizes problem solving, and encourages verbal learning methods that enhance the development of metacognition” (9).

While the bulk of research on these relationships has been conducted in relation to debate activities, many of the same skills translate into speech and theatre contexts. Most individual speaking events require intensive research in preparation for performance. Specifically, events like extemporaneous speaking, student congress or Model United Nations require perpetual investigation of current events. Theatre students must work collectively to facilitate successful performances and often exhibit the same kinds of cooperative learning skills identified by Bauschard. Ideally, access to a variety of different forensics events, such as experiences in both debate and individual events, or debate and theatre, access different skills needed to make a more effective overall critical thinker.

## ORAL COMPETENCY

Naturally, a logical outgrowth of all such activities is increased speech competence. As has already been observed, scholars attribute to forensic activities the capacity to enhance understanding in a variety of communication contexts – interpersonal, organizational, small group and mass.

The importance of developing these skills cannot be overstated. One need only read a copy of a newspaper's classified section to see how many potential employers demand good communication skills from their new hires. Moreover, a recent issue of the National Communication Association's *Spectra*, reported that "the largest gap [between high school preparation and college expectations] exists in oral communication skills." The study, conducted by the firm of Peter D. Hart and Associates in December, 2004, asked 900 high school graduates to compare what they learned in high school to what they were expected to have learned when they reached college or the workforce. The gaps in expectations exceeded those for science, mathematics, research abilities and writing ("Oral" 15).

Fortunately, students involved in speech, debate and theatre activities enjoy marked improvement in oral communication through active practice and refinement of their communication skills. Not only are they better performers, but they also tend to be more confident performers. Colbert and Biggers identified research by Selmak and Shields (1977) that revealed "students with debate experience were significantly better at employing the three communication skills (analysis, delivery and organization) utilized in this study than students without the experience" (Colbert and Biggers 237). Ohio University's Roger Aden, himself a former director of forensics and professor of speech, added in 1991 the conclusion of research asserting that the forensics "laboratory" improved students' analysis of argumentative communication and their capacity to communicate with other people. 1995 research in theatre by Rey E. de la Cruz extended this thinking to dramatic activities, noting that young students who participated in certain creative drama exercises "significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills" (Deasy 20). What is more impressive about the de la Cruz study was its focus on students with learning disabilities. Windes further observed that speech and debate programs "contribute heavily to the building of an extensive speech curriculum" (106).

Speech, debate and theatre teachers know from experience what their students learn "in the arena." A teacher's capacity to assist the preparation, critique and restructuring of a speech, a debate or an interpretative performance is limited by the space and time of the normal classroom day. Cocurricular forensic activities enable students to develop their work over time, under the experienced guidance of a coach. Moreover, through competition, students receive feedback from adjudicators and responses from audiences that first, teach them how to respond to criticism, and second, encourage them to reframe and

adapt their work. These experiences foster interpersonal sensitivity, improved appreciation for the needs of a group or a team, and heightened awareness of the importance of audience adaptation – so critical to an effective performance and everyday communication interactions.

## READING COMPREHENSION

Reading is a natural outgrowth of research and performance. It would be natural to assert that a debater would need to read their evidence and a performer would need to read a script. Does such access to written material, however, translate into improved skills as readers? Substantial research has offered an unqualified “yes” in response to this question – particularly in the area of theatre and arts education.

James S. Catterall, Richard Chapleau and John Iwanga, in a 1999 study, reported that “sustained involvement in theatre” resulted in students performing better in standardized reading testing. In fact, “about 48 percent of drama students scored high in reading, compared to 30 percent of students not involved in drama” (Deasy 70). Catterall summarized many of the best impacts of theatre on reading when he wrote: “Research shows consistent positive associations between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension, oral story understanding, and written story understanding. . . . Studies of older children show impacts of drama on reading skills, persuasive writing ability, narrative writing skills, and children’s self-conceptions as learners and readers” (Catterall 60).

Several studies have focused specifically on reading comprehension. Researchers have noted improvements in the capacity to understand and describe stories by acting-out. A 1992 study by Peter Williamson and Steven Silvern noted both improved reading comprehension and improved meta-behaviors such as questioning and directing others among students engaged in dramatic enactment of stories (Deasy 54). Anthony Pellegrini observed in 1984:

. . . students using dramatic play to think about, review and otherwise process the story they had just heard were more likely to use explicit language when retelling their stories. . . . That is, they were better at producing a retelling that would be coherent, and make sense to a listener who did not already know the story. Pellegrini makes a critical point, that conveying meaning explicitly is an important skill and one that is traditionally valued and rewarded, both in school and in later life instances of communication. (Deasy 44)

In total, the larger body of research compiled by Deasy and colleagues in the volume *Critical Links*, describes an increased capacity of students who analyze

literature by means of acting-out to retain information, negotiate meanings with others, and in turn, be able to retell stories to others. This translates, more concretely, into improved standardized measures of reading comprehension.

One study, conducted by Michaela Parks and Dale Rose in 1997, found that students involved in dramatic reading and presentation exercises experienced an improvement in reading comprehension scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and also showed a three-fold improvement over a control group in their “nonverbal ability to express factual material” (Deasy 36). Similarly, Sherry DuPont’s 1992 study of remedial reading students engaged in drama found that “when children have been involved in the process of integrating creative drama with reading they are not only able to better comprehend what they’ve read and acted out, but they are also better able to comprehend what they have read but do not act out, such as the written scenarios they encounter on standardized tests” (DuPont quoted in Deasy 22).

While much of the research into the relationship between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension has been conducted with younger students, intuitive connections can be drawn to secondary school drama programs or interscholastic forensics competitions. Once again, the laboratory metaphor previously described becomes useful. A student reading a text in solitude potentially lacks motivation to “go deeper” in an examination of a text. Theatrical re-enactment of stories or plays, and the successful oral interpretation of literature in a competitive environment demands careful inspection of a text and understanding of the author and the characters, their motives and emotions. A similar critical capacity develops among debaters who have to frame a larger “story” to describe the advocacy in a debate. Students learn collectively, under the guidance of an effective teacher/coach, the importance of comprehending the meanings of ideas, negotiating those meanings with peers and conveying those meanings to an audience.

## **LISTENING**

Forensic activities also serve to improve the listening skills of students. Research has demonstrated that students tested on immediate and delayed recall of information perform rather poorly due to a lack of active listening skills. The active listening process requires an active attempt to absorb facts and perceive feelings rather than passively engaging in the situation we are in (Hunsaker 27). These are skills that interscholastic speech and debate competition nurture by the activity’s very nature.

Students in debate must listen to their opponents to recognize arguments and respond to them. Moreover, students must also appreciate the verbal and non-verbal feedback they receive from adjudicators in order to continue to be

successful. Similar feedback is provided in the context of individual events competition and drama competitions involving adjudication.

## **TEST-TAKING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Even while we find concrete advantages in a range of academic skills, it is always nice to know that participation in an activity leads to academic success. As we have already observed, data clearly indicates involvement in cocurricular and extracurricular activities – particularly arts-based activities – correlates with higher grades. My own personal experience as a forensic educator has proven this true. While the institution I work for has a reputation for recruiting successful students, the students who choose to compete in speech and debate activities consistently have higher high school GPAs (generally between 3.5 and 3.8) and higher ACT scores (normally around 28 or higher) than their counterparts outside of the activity. They tend to receive more scholarships, take more challenging courses and are highly motivated. This is a consistent theme found among college coaches who describe their experiences receiving experienced high school competitors.

Bauschard asserted in his 2001 article that the kind of cooperative learning that takes place in the competitive environment naturally increases academic achievement (9). James Catterall reported in a 1998 study of students actively involved in arts activities, such as theatre, that: “High arts students earned better grades and performed better on standardized tests. High arts students also performed more community service, watched fewer hours of television, and reported less boredom in school” (Deasy 68). Similarly, a 1999 study by Catterall and colleagues determined that:

. . . students with high arts involvement scored higher on standardized tests scores than those with low arts involvement. More specifically, 57.4 percent of high arts-involved students scored in the top two quartiles of standardized tests, compared to only 39.3 percent of low-arts involved students; 56.5 percent of high arts students scored in the top two quartiles in reading, compared to 37.7 percent of low-arts students; and 54.6 percent of the high arts students scored in the top two quartiles of history/geography/citizenship tests, compared to 39.7 percent of low arts students. (Deasy 70)

As we have seen, involvement in speech, debate and theatre activities stimulates a variety of different skills. The fact that test scores and grades improve along side these skills should not be surprising. These programs successfully promote critical thinking, speaking, reading and listening skills. These skills are so fundamental to academic performance that the relationship with overall academic performance is intuitive.

We should not, however, allow ourselves to think exclusively about high-performing students. Our schools are filled with students with special needs who struggle to achieve, or are starved for challenges. Here, too, forensic activities make an important difference.

## **OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

Retention of students in school is often tied to the interest they hold in education. While a variety of socio-economic, family and personal factors may come into play, a student who is engaged in meaningful experiences while in school is probably far more likely to choose to remain there. Indeed, a study appearing in the journal *Developmental Psychology* in 1997 reported that: “Students who dropped out of school had participated in significantly fewer extracurricular activities at all grades, including several years prior to dropout” (Deasy 80). More specifically, a 1990 study by the Center for Music Research at Florida State University reported survey data indicating that participation in the arts kept students in school and, more specifically, that 83 percent of those surveyed said their decision to remain in school was tied to participation in the arts (Deasy 74).

## **GIFTED STUDENTS**

Gifted students, in particular, need careful attention. Many students involved in forensics cite their experience in the activity with giving them a sense of direction and the intellectual stimulation that they felt they lacked in their normal curriculum. As has been stated elsewhere in this essay, some scholars have argued that the work generated by a year’s involvement in debate, for example, can rival the work put into a Master’s thesis or a doctoral dissertation. Any parent who has ever watched their son or daughter spend hours after school working on a set design or practicing their lines has marveled at the capacity of that child to move mountains when their mind is set to a task. Creative thinkers are similarly challenged to stretch their imaginations as they interpret a program of poetry or assemble an extemporaneous speech arguing for the government to take a different approach to free trade.

One model for successfully addressing the needs of gifted students has been offered by Kevin Dean and David Levasseur who argued in a 1989 issue of the *National Forensic Journal* that high-achieving students can benefit from more challenging “capstone” experiences in speech. In their experiment with a collegiate basic public speaking course, these University of Maryland instructors discovered that students who attended forensics competitions, in addition to normal speech classroom activities, achieved a greater level of satisfaction from their experience (137). Even novice-level experience in a competitive environment puts the communication learning experience in context and stimulates the mind.

## LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

The learning-disabled student faces an entirely different challenge. Depending on the disability, tasks like writing, retaining information for prolonged periods of time or focusing on an argument can prove difficult and frustrating. Teachers can become impatient and classmates can be cruel. Yet the sense of purpose generated by involvement in team activities, such as speech, debate and theatre, can be highly valuable. Moreover, the teaching methods employed work differently than those a student might normally encounter in the classroom.

Rey E. de la Cruz, in a 1995 doctoral dissertation, researched the impact of drama education on students with learning disabilities. The editors of *Critical Links* noted:

Existing research pointed to two developments important to the success of children with learning disabilities. One was the centrality of linguistic skills, variations in which account for most placements of children into special-needs status. The second was consensus in research that children with learning disabilities typically lack social skills necessary for effective peer-to-peer and student-teacher interactions – relations that contribute generally to success in school. (Deasy 20)

de la Cruz's research concluded that children involved in a creative drama experience benefited from improved social skills when compared with a control group. "They also significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills. . . (Deasy 20). This research suggests programs like forensics can function as a valuable supplement for learning disabled students yearning to experience success.

One of the fortunate experiences I have had as a coach has been the opportunity to work with several students with learning disabilities. While these students present unique challenges, they are far too often dismissed as "uncoachable." Far from true, these students challenge teachers in unique ways, but the rewards they receive from staying in competition expand their academic achievement. My personal experience has confirmed de la Cruz's research in a non-theatrical context. Debaters and public speakers with learning disabilities succeed because they are focused on a special goal. That focus transfers into day-to-day classroom activities as better study skills, increased confidence and, in most cases, higher grades.

## AT-RISK STUDENTS

An area of notable success in the forensics community has been programming to address the needs of at-risk students – particularly those in urban communities. Debate programs such as the Soros Foundation’s Urban Debate Leagues and the Kaiser Family Foundation’s Barbara Jordan Youth Debates have demonstrated that allocation of resources to under-served communities helps keep students in school, stimulates community investment and private funding and moves gifted students toward a college education. Students who might not otherwise be exposed to the topics and competitive experiences of debate become enthralled by it, often entering collegiate debate programs upon graduation. The potential for such programs across all forensics and theatre events is vast.

In a theatre context, measurable success has already been observed. Jeanette Horn published a study in 1992 for the National Arts Education Research Center exploring how a theatrical script-writing institute experience influenced the personal successes of inner-city students. Among her findings were improved attendance, increased use of school and public libraries, more prolific writing and a growth in self-perception and behavior. “Students increasingly saw themselves as leaders” (Deasy 28).

A discussion of the growth in student leadership potential lends an appropriate transition to the question of outcomes *after* one’s time in school has ended.

## OCCUPATIONAL OUTCOMES

An important goal of the educational system is preparation of students for future occupations. Students in forensics activities are well known for achieving future professional success, whether it be in politics, law, medicine, academia or the performing arts.

Colbert and Biggers reported the data of a 1984 study by Keele and Matlon that concluded:

90 percent of debaters have attained at least one graduate degree. 30 percent of their sample are university educators while another 15 percent are top ranking corporate executives. Ten percent are now working in the executive or legislative branches of government. They suggest that these ratios do not vary between those who graduated 25 years ago and those who finished within the last five years. It is doubtful that many other activities can boast of so many successful alumni. (Colbert and Biggers 239)

Similarly, a 1960 survey of 160 senators, congressmen, governors, Supreme Court justices, members of the Cabinet and other political leaders identified one hundred who felt high school or college debate experiences had helped their careers. Ninety described the experience as “greatly helpful” or “invaluable.” Twenty-six of the 60 surveyed who lacked debate experience indicated that they wished they had had it (Colbert and Biggers 239). Given that this survey was taken in 1960, one must wonder how many more leaders have followed this same path.

Still, one need not dwell on high-powered jobs to measure occupational success. If we recognize that today’s marketplace values a well-rounded education, critical thinking skills, communication skills and the ability to interact with people effectively, then few activities can prepare students for the marketplace as well as speech, debate and theatre. Students with these experiences not only have strong intellectual and workplace skills, but they have the unique advantage of knowing how to function in the context of a team, imbuing them with a sense of collegiality that will help keep their jobs.

## **SOCIAL OUTCOMES**

Involvement in forensics also has significant social impacts. These tend to manifest themselves in better self-esteem and interpersonal skills, but they also appear in the form of better citizenship behaviors.

Windes and Bradley both argued that participation in debate promotes an attitude of tolerance on the part of students (Windes 100; Bradley 136). Bradley elaborated in his article for *The Speech Teacher*: “taking part in educational debate programs helps to create tolerance for other points of view. Not tolerance for the sake of tolerance, but tolerance for the other point of view because of respect for the logical, substantiated arguments upholding that viewpoint” (136). In essence, debate helps students to view situations from multiple vantage points and to respect the fact that one person’s sense of reality, truth or tradition may not be the same as the person next to them.

Tournament competition is a socially significant experience, affording “students the opportunity to meet some of the best thinkers and speakers from a large number of other schools throughout the country” (Windes 103). Travel, in and of itself, is a significant growth experience. Windes observed: “The enjoyment of the trips and their educational value, the social contacts with other students, and the excitement of the contest, including the trophies and recognition, all of these things are as much a part of a young citizen’s education as his academic work” (103).

A strong case can also be made for the impact these experiences have on citizenship. Windes continued:

Previously mentioned is the fact that debate is a necessary adjunct to a free society – that it illuminates positions, educates the public to the issues, and allows final decisions to be made democratically after the presentation of at least two opposing points of view. This in itself is perhaps the most forceful argument that can be made in behalf of training young people in advocacy. (107)

Bradley supported this claim when he argued that debate “prepared the student for the democratic society in which we live” (137).

Windes further elaborated on the civic function of debate when summarizing the work of James Coleman, who advanced an early argument (in 1959) for the role of debate in what we would now call “civic engagement.” He wrote:

Professor Coleman suggests that competitive debating achieves similar results in high schools, and at the same time achieves beneficial academic results for both the individual who engages and the society in which he functions. Debating has its individual rewards; at the same time it induces constraints and group-reinforced rules of conduct, a completely new experience for many of its participants. The debate team represents the school, and this is not so distant from being a civic responsibility and a civic representative. (Windes 108)

He concludes:

Competition for grades bring about a kind of group defense mechanism which ridicules the bright student. No such epithets exist for the debater, for his achievement has benefited his squad, his school, and the community. In helping to win a debate for his school, the young adult is performing a civic function, one for which he has had to deny himself pleasures and accept a social responsibility. (Windes 108)

While Windes may be overly optimistic about the praise a debater will receive for his or her competitive successes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these observations about civic engagement and improved social functioning are consistent with Bauschard’s research into cooperative learning and forensics. He observed that such a learning environment has been demonstrated to promote pro-social behavior, reduced absenteeism and increase work achievement (9).

## **EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT OUTCOMES**

Kenneth Anderson, a professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, noted in a summary of developmental research in forensics: “Debate tends to attract students above average in intelligence and higher intelligence correlates somewhat with winning” (151). For many schools, attracting intelligent students to extracurricular activities is an exciting end in itself. However, making students in speech, debate and theatre happy about their experiences is an investment in the future of the school.

One of the things that most impressed me about my high school’s speech, debate and theatre programs was the consistent support those programs, and by extension, the school, received from those who had once participated, graduated and gone on to greater things. A sense of tradition permeated those programs that brought alumni back to assist in coaching, or to attend a play, or to contribute funds to support travel to an out-of-state competition. When I went on to briefly coach at another high school while working on my Master’s degree, I again experienced that same sense of loyalty. To be loyal to the program was to be loyal to the school. The parents of these students were among the first to step forward to campaign for school tax ballots and bond issues and their students often became vocal boosters of education as adults. Thus, the process of making more civically-aware, articulate critical thinkers comes full circle. Those who were taught so well by a system that valued them as diverse and valuable individuals came back to help ensure that the next generation of students would benefit from the same experiences.

## **HOW DOES THIS TRANSLATE INTO A PROGRAM AT MY SCHOOL?**

So perhaps your school is a school that does not have an active speech, debate or theatre program, but wants one. Or maybe you have such programs but are facing questions about how to best configure them. The first, and most important, fact to know is that organizations and experienced professionals in the field are available to help you make a new program a reality or shape an existing one to be better, stronger or more cost efficient. The NFHS has plentiful resources available through its Web site <http://www.nfhs.org/>. Simply select the link for Professional Associations and find the icon for the Speech, Debate and Theatre Association. Naturally, your local state association, or affiliated association for forensics or theatre, can assist you as well. Many states have materials specifically designed for the novice coach or the new school. Local colleges and Universities are often very eager to assist programs in their area, sometimes helping teachers with volunteer assistance. Whitman University in Washington sponsors a special site designed to help high schools and their students locate collegiate programs and also offers a list of national forensics organizations on both the high school and state level. They can be found at <http://www.wcdebate.com/7others/colleges.htm>.

Whether your school begins with a local debate league and an annual play, or develops a full-service program that fields students in national competition, an investment in forensics education is a sound investment in the future of your school and community.

## **AFTERWARD**

My hope is that you have found something useful in reading this booklet. Whether you are looking to create a new program, shape the course of an existing one, or simply want to learn more about the activity. As a student and coach I have spent every year since age fourteen involved in some form of speech, debate or theatre activity. For me these experiences truly have been profound.

The research assembled here is only a partial view of what these activities are capable of. Sadly, much of the research that has been done on the impact of these programs is old. The reader will note that many of the pioneering studies on the impact of debate and individual events competition were conducted as far back as the 1950s. Why is this? Put simply, for so long the speech education community took at face value what anyone who has worked as a speech and debate coach knows from experience: these activities work. Fortunately, as exemplified by several of the newer pieces cited here, a younger generation of coaches is now actively revisiting this research and re-confirming much of what we already know, yet re-contextualizing it in the methods and measures more commonly employed today. In theatre, the reader will note that much of the pioneering work-particularly in the area of reading comprehension – has been done with children before the secondary school level. This is fitting, as those years are formative in a child's acquisition of the desire to read. Yet, much of what these studies tell us is equally applicable to secondary and collegiate contexts.

As we are committed to the value of forensics, so too must we be committed to innovation in that very field. As our students learn by doing, so too do we, as educators, continue to learn by refining and investigating our techniques. This volume is merely a part of that process, one which I hope will be a continued one. In the meantime, it is my sincere hope that schools around America (and indeed, as is increasingly the case, around the world) will continue in the great tradition of our earliest schools, emphasizing training in rhetoric and performance for the sake of intellectual growth and improved citizenship.

Kevin M. Minch, Ph.D.  
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# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN COMPETITIVE FORENSICS AND STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

by Tammie L. Peters

*Abstract: Sponsors of competitive speech programs must prove scientifically how forensics improves student achievement, as defined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001). While many studies have shown a connection between debate experience and improved critical thinking skills, few studies have linked competitive speaking specifically to the standardized tests required by NCLB. This researcher examined the state and national test scores of similarly motivated honors English students in a single high school, over the course of 4 years, and compared the scores of forensic students against the scores of non-forensic students. It was found that students with experience in competitive speech scored significantly higher ( $\alpha = 0.03$ ) on state administered writing tests and significantly higher ( $\alpha = 0.07$ ) on a nationally normed reading test. Additionally, this study revealed no significant difference in test scores between students who competed in the debate events vs. those students who competed in the non-debate events.*

Those of us who coach forensics know that this is an extraordinarily worthwhile and valuable activity. However, in these times of financial belt-tightening and the requirements of No Child Left Behind, forensics programs are in jeopardy. School administrators and teachers feel pressured by national and state requirements to raise test scores or be forced to endure official sanctions and punishments. Supporters of programs, especially those outside of the core classes of basic Language Arts (i.e., reading and writing), Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, and Foreign Languages, find themselves forced to demonstrate how student participation in these non-core subjects will improve test scores or else risk reduction or elimination of support, including funding and teacher time.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Researchers (Collier, 2004; Rogers, 2002) have observed that no studies have been done on the impact of forensics on standardized test scores. Instead, a number of authors (Allen, Berkowitz & Loudon, 1995; Carroll, 2007; Crawford, 2003; Hier, 1997; Massey, 1999; McCrady, 2004; Minch, 2006; Parcher, 1998; Re, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Sellnow, 1994; Tumposky, 2004; Warner & Brusckhe, 2001) have commented on the logical effects that participation in forensics should have on student test scores; after all: (a) debaters and extemporaneous speakers must research and evaluate evidence while they organize

arguments quickly, (b) orators must do a great deal of research and compose carefully worded speeches, and (c) interpreters of literature must study it carefully in order to understand the best way to orally present the material to make an emotional impact on the audience. Certainly, the acquisition of these skills should be expected to contribute to higher scores in reading and writing. Credible support for the connection to standardized test scores is essential if sponsors of forensics are to be able to defend their programs over the next few years.

Other researchers (Allan et al., 1999; Fine, 2001; Greenstreet, 1993; Vaughn & Winner, 2000; Whalen, 1991) have noted that any possible connection between participation in forensics and higher test scores is the result of the higher motivation and intellectual levels of forensics students in comparison to the rest of the student population. Greenstreet described this problem as the “chicken/egg” (p. 18) quandary: if forensics participants have better test scores, is it because of something the students learn in forensics, or is it because they are smarter and more motivated students? Any researcher will have to consider this problem in order for the results of his or her study to be considered credible.

Findings from credible studies in regard to the connection between participation in forensics and any intellectual and educational benefits are critical if forensics programs

are to survive. Anderson (1974, as cited in Greenstreet, 1993) warned, “In an age of educational accountability, the forensics community is and will increasingly be called upon to tell what it seeks to do, how well it accomplishes its goals, and what other effects it has” (p. 24). Without solid research findings that connect forensics participation to increased test scores, this activity will be lost in “budgetary shuffles and the panic to improve the basics” (Warner & Brusckhe, 2001, p. 2). These writers were harbingers of the research necessary to defend any academic program under NCLB (2001): under this law, only those programs “that have been demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, ¶1) justify inclusion in schools. McCrady (2004) observed that forensics programs have been cut already in various schools because administrators see them as expendable programs that do not contribute to the basic education mandated by law. As long as the U.S. has a culture that values standardized test scores as a measurement of school, teacher, and student success, forensics educators will have to establish a definite link between competitive speech and higher test scores in order to survive.

## Background on CSAP

Mandatory student testing began in Colorado before the U.S. Congress passed

NCLB (2001). Members of the Colorado State Legislature established the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP; 1997) in 1997. It is a series of criterion referenced tests based on curriculum performance standards. In 1997, state officials mandated that two tests in Reading and Writing be administered to students in fourth grade (Colorado Department of Education, CSAP Summary Data section, 2007); by 2006, the number of tests had increased to 31 tests across eight grades, plus students in the eleventh grade were required to take the ACT (1989). Currently, all students in Grades 3-10 are tested in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics; additionally, students in Grades 5, 8 and 10 are tested in Science.

Since students in forensics learn about how to read information and manipulate language to create an argument, this researcher is interested in the Reading and Writing tests, especially the tests administered to high school students. The Reading tests include short passages of fiction and nonfiction accompanied by both multiple choice questions and paragraph length constructed responses. In the Writing tests, students are required to: (a) edit texts, (b) evaluate sentences, (c) write paragraph length constructed responses, and (d) write one essay length extended constructed response. More information about the CSAP and how it will be used in this study is provided below.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In light of No Child Left Behind (2001) requirements, findings of scientific research are essential for supporters of high school forensics programs to defend their programs. To date, no specific research has been done to study the connection between state mandated standardized test scores and participation in competitive speech. Before this researcher examined the test score data, it was important to understand the context of this research. Participation in speech and debate has been important to a variety of cultures, and the development of competitive speaking has been notable. The impact that participation in competitive speech has on critical thought and other skills has been studied for many years. While there is a strong connection between participation in forensics and the development of academic abilities, there are some deficiencies in past studies.

### Historical Perspective of Competitive Speech

The history of forensic speaking is long and rich. Lewis (2004) noted that, in numerous cultures, quality speaking skills

have been valued since the very earliest days. In ancient Greece, books were rare. Trained performers would present poems, both original and by other authors. Contests occurred in which the talents of the interpreters were pitted against each other. The importance of such performers continued through the time of the ancient Hebrews, the Roman Empire, and the Middle Ages of Europe. Stories, histories, myths, legends, and other important ideas were recited by talented storytellers termed *bards* in France, *scops* in England, and *fili* in Ireland. Similarly, Crawford (2003) explained that orators were important in ancient Rome, and debates in the Senate were a critical part of the government. When Demosthenes used pebbles to practice clear speech, he was involved in a long established tradition in which public speaking was valued. During the Enlightenment, debate skills were essential to the salons of France (Carroll, 2007). In the United States, the value of public speakers was evident in the growth of the Chautauqua movement of the late 19th century, which brought speakers and musicians to towns across the U.S. (Canning, 2000). According to Canning, Theodore Roosevelt called the Chautauqua movement “the most American thing in America” (¶1). The most popular speakers were lecturers, like William Jennings Bryan, and elocutionists, who created one person shows from pieces of literature. Clearly, public speaking, including debate and interpretation of literature, has been valued throughout time and across cultures.

In the U.S., the historical respect for excellent speaking skills led to the development of interscholastic competitive speech (Barfield, 1989). Intercollegiate competitions began in 1872, and Southwestern College created the tournament format for multiple teams in 1923 (Barfield). The oldest high school debate society in the U. S. is at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where debate was an established student activity as early as 1825 (Phillips Academy, 2007). “From 1855 to 1890, debate presented one of the more popular forms of intellectual entertainment in many schools” (Borchers and Wagner, 1954, as cited in Barfield, p. 49). In 1895, teachers in a group of high schools in Wisconsin formed the High School Lyceum Association, which was “devoted to promoting interscholastic debate” (Barfield, p. 51). By 1925, a group of high school teachers began to organize a national honor society for interscholastic speech competitors (National Forensic League [NFL], 2007). This group established the NFL as a national

honor society for speech. Initially, only six events were offered: debate, original oratory, extemporaneous speaking, interpretation of dramatic literature, interpretation of humorous literature, and oratorical declamation. Over the next 70 years, other events were added. In 1945, members of the National Association of High School Principals placed NFL competitions on their list of approved competitions and activities. In 2007, over 1.2 million students had become members of the NFL, and over 2,000 schools had earned NFL charters.

Forensic competition continues to be valued worldwide. In 1999, members of the Open Society Institute created the International Debate Education Association (IDEA; 2007). The IDEA was designed to promote debate and discussion in “those societies where democracy is in its infancy and where negotiated resolution to conflicts and cross-community dialogue are little-established concepts” (¶2). Currently, IDEA events take place in 27 countries.

Throughout time, members of many cultures have valued speech and the benefits it provides, especially to young people. Excellent speaking skills have been respected from the earliest times through today. Competitive speaking has been appreciated since ancient Greece and continues to be important today.

### Various Benefits of Participation in Forensics

McCrary (2004) commented, “All veteran and even novice coaches know in our hearts that our programs have immeasurable educational value” (p. 41). A variety of benefits have been ascribed to participation in competitive speech. For example, competitors in forensics develop better academic skills and succeed more than their peers in school. Barfield (1989, as cited in Bellon, 2000) “found that participation in competitive debate among high school students positively correlates with significant gains in cumulative GPA” (p. 166). Collier (2004) found a similar effect in her study of high school debater students in inner city schools. She concluded, “Two results are clear – debaters achieve significantly higher grades and intend to attend college at a substantially greater rate than their non-debating peers” (p. 28). Warner and Brusckhe (2001) concurred: high school debate can lead to improvement in student grades in other academic courses. In his study, Rogers (2002) found collegiate debaters “were able to maintain slightly better GPAs than their non-debate peers. They were significantly stronger academically” (p. 21),

as determined through a variety of indicators. Fine (1999, as quoted in Bellon) hypothesized that this positive effect of competitive speech was because forensics, particularly debate, “appears to strengthen students’ ability to persevere, remain focused, and work toward challenging goals” (p. 166).

Another important benefit attributed to participation in forensics is the increase in civic awareness and the empowerment of students to be productive members of a democracy. Re (2002) argued that forensics, especially debate and extemporaneous speaking, “expose young people to global and international perspectives” (p. 4). The study of current events and the experience of public speaking lead students to participate actively in civic activities. Warner and Bruschke (2001) found, “Students who can face and overcome those challenges and those fears [of competitive speaking] are seldom afraid of public dialogue in any other context, be it a political rally, city board meeting, electoral campaign, legal proceeding, or town hall meeting” (p. 7). Rogers (2002) concluded even more strongly: “Debaters were significantly more likely to participate in the democratic process through voting, volunteering their time and resources to political campaigns, and participating in social activism” (p. 21).

Also, participation in forensics may decrease adolescent violence. Bellon (2000) explained that increased verbal skills and argumentation skills could provide youths with alternatives to violence. Collier (2004) suggested that participating in debates provided students with the requisite tools to resist negative peer pressure. Warner and Bruschke (2001) explained that debaters “are actually more empathetic, less ego-centric, and better at taking the perspective of others” (p. 15). Rogers (2002) found similar results in his study of college student attitudes. Collier found the same effect, and she hypothesized that “debate gives these students a reason to achieve – a reason to reject risky behaviors” (p. 27). Students with forensic experience may learn how to use words instead of violence to solve problems.

Student participation in forensics, especially debate, may lead to these benefits because of the teaching methods used by speech coaches. In particular, forensics is a type of experiential education, in which students analyze real issues and then defend their analyses outside of the classroom (Sellnow, 1994). Hier (1997) suggested that forensics is an excellent delivery system for education because forensic educators use “hands-on methods that produce more

retention” (p. 7). Bellon (2000) explained that the use of constructivist teaching methods, where students are actively engaged in the construction of knowledge, are powerful tools to increase student achievement; participation in competitive forensics provides these types of constructivist opportunities.

Overall, the list of benefits attributed to participation in competitive speech and debate is impressive. Forensic competitors tend to achieve higher grades, be better citizens, and accept others’ views and fight less. These perceived benefits may be why many college admission officers prefer forensic competitors, especially captains of debate teams, when they accept applicants for their schools (Luong, 2000). Also, it may explain why many employers tend to prefer to hire former debaters over other applicants (Parcher, 1998). Colbert and Biggers (1985, as quoted in Bellon, 2000) explained, “In a time when many of our students ask us how educational activities will help them get a job, the answer seems to be unequivocal. Debate experience is highly valued by the business world” (p. 167).

### Critical Thinking Skills and Forensics

Historically, one reason public speaking has been valued is due to the association between it and critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are vital to society. As Dressel and Mayhew (1954, as cited in Korcok, 1997) noted, “The good life in a democratic society. . . seems to rest fundamentally on one’s ability to think critically about those problems with which he (or she) is confronted” (¶7). Massey (1999) wrote about the importance of critical thinking to the Postindustrial Era since “those with a diversity of knowledge (i.e., those with training in critical thinking skills) are the ones who seem to have the best ability to attain success” (p. 24). Members of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004), an education advocacy group made up of representatives from major businesses, defined “critical thinking and problem solving skills” as “essential to prepare students for the future” (¶1). The former Governor of California even issued an executive order about the importance of critical thinking skills for students (Korcok, 1997). Katula and Martin (1984, as cited in Whalen, 1991) “identified critical thinking as an essential element of our society’s ability to develop literacy” (p. 391). Also, critical thinking skills are valued in the State of Colorado as identified in the goals of the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP; 1997; Colorado Department of Education, 2007).

There is little agreement on the exact definition of critical thinking. However, most

of the definitions share similarities. Watson and Glaser (1939, as quoted in Brembeck, 1949) explained:

Critical thinking involves (a) a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends, as well as the ability (b) to recognize problems, (c) to weigh evidence, (d) to comprehend and use language with accuracy and discrimination, (e) to interpret data, (f) to recognize the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships between propositions, (g) to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations and (h) to test the conclusions by applying them to new situations to which they seem pertinent. (p. 177)

Dressel and Mayhew (1954, as quoted in Whalen, 1991) maintained that critical thinking involves five characteristics, the:

(a) ability to define a problem, (b) ability to select the appropriate information for the solution, (c) ability to recognize both stated and unstated assumptions, (d) ability to select relevant hypotheses, and (e) ability to draw valid conclusions and inferences. (p. 391)

Garside (1996; as quoted in Allen et al., 1999) concluded that:

the literature suggests at least four defining aspects of thinking that make it *critical*: (a) thinking that is clear, precise, accurate, relevant, logical, and consistent; (b) thinking that reflects a controlled sense of skepticism or disbelief of any assertion, claim or conclusion until sufficient evidence and reasoning is provided to conclusively support it; (c) thinking that takes stock of existing information and identifies holes and weaknesses, thereby certifying what we know or don’t know; and (d) thinking that is free from bias, prejudice, and one-sidedness of thought. (p. 18)

Finally, the members of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) define critical thinking as:

(a) exercising sound reasoning in understanding; (b) making complex choices and decisions; (c) understanding interconnections

among systems; (d) identifying and asking significant questions that clarify various points of view and lead to better solutions; and (e) framing, analyzing and synthesizing information in order to solve problems and answer questions. (¶1)

These definitions share certain commonalities; in particular, critical thinking seems to include the ability to (a) gather and carefully evaluate evidence to solve a problem, (b) avoid preconceived notions and biases, (c) remain open to new ideas, and (d) apply information to a variety of situations.

### **Logical Connections to Critical Thinking**

In terms of academic and life skills, students who participate in forensics are exposed to critical thinking techniques. The connection between forensics participation and critical thinking skills is logical. Hunt (1994, as quoted in Parcher, 1998) commented, “Forensics helps you learn to be able to think clearly and adapt to rapid change” (¶5). Parcher wrote that the “creation of an argument is one of the most complex cognitive acts that a person can engage in” (¶6); since students in all forensics events must create arguments, typically forensics students engage in such complex thinking, regardless of the specific type of competitive event in which they are engaged. The development of these arguments requires (a) research, (b) organization and arrangement of information, (c) anticipation of what others might think about the same subject, and (d) evaluation of how to best use materials (Minch, 2006; Parcher, Tumposky, 2004); these requirements are the elements of critical thinking. Freeley (1990, as cited in Korcok, 1997) explained that the fundamental elements in the creation of an argument are the essence of critical thinking. Carroll (2007) wrote that when students participate in forensics, especially the public speaking events, they are introduced to formal logic and argumentation, which “build critical thinking skills” (p. 34).

### **Studies about Critical Thinking and Forensics**

Investigations into the connection between the ability to think critically and participation in forensics have been conducted for more than 60 years (Korcok, 1997). The first study was conducted by Howell in 1943 (Korcok).

#### *Howell (1943)*

Howell (1943) studied the impact of participation in high school debate on the scores on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA). He asked 218 debate students from 28 Wisconsin schools to participate. In order to develop a control group, he matched each debate student with a similar student who did not participate in debate, and he matched the participants by age, academic record, gender, and I.Q. scores. Howell administered four of the Watson-Glaser tests to each student as both a pretest and a posttest. Overall, Howell found “debaters outgained non-debaters in critical thinking scores over the experimental period of six months” (p. 100). However, the difference between the scores of the debaters vs. those of the control group was not statistically significant. In the comparison between the scores of all debate students and the scores of all control students, Howell found an 85% chance that the improvements in critical thinking skills were not due to chance. When he compared the scores of debate students to the scores of non-debate students with matched I.Q. scores, “the debaters again outgained the non-debaters” (p. 100), but there was only an 89% chance that this difference was not due to chance. Howell suggested that the reason his quasi-experiment did not attain statistical significance was due to the variety of teaching methods and program emphases in the 25 different schools. He noted, “Great differences in mean gains of debaters over non-debaters were found among the participating schools” (p. 100-101). Similarly, Colbert (1995) wrote that the “findings implied instructional techniques, methods, and/or content probably influenced the acquisition of critical thinking skills” (p. 60). Even though Howell’s findings did not demonstrate a definitive connection between participation in debate and increased critical thinking scores, Korcok (1997) observed this study “was sufficiently suggestive of a relationship to motivate further research” (¶21).

Also, Howell (1943) established the design for such studies: (a) establish a control group and a test group, (b) administer the WGCTA as a pretest, (c) wait while students engage in forensics events for a specified period of time, and (d) administer the WGCTA as a posttest. Allen et al. (1999) pointed out that, in 14 later studies, this basic protocol was followed.

#### *Brembeck (1949)*

The next major study was conducted by Brembeck (1949). Brembeck was interested

in how participation in argumentation courses might affect critical thinking abilities of college students. He examined courses in argumentation at 11 different universities, and a total of 202 students were in his experimental group. His control group consisted of the same number of students from each of the schools. “The two groups were equated as carefully as possible according to age, sex, educational background, debating experience, and number” (p. 178). Like Howell (1943), Brembeck administered four of the Watson-Glaser Tests of Critical Thinking (WGTCT), which had been revised since Howell’s study. Brembeck concluded, “The argumentation students, as a whole, significantly outgained the control students in critical thinking scores . . . There is approximately one time in a hundred that this difference could occur by chance” (p. 187). Also, Brembeck noted, “Argumentation students with high school and/or college debate training made significantly higher pretest scores than those without debating experience” (p. 188). Brembeck’s study is important to this project in two ways: (a) forensics programs are one type of argumentation course offered in high schools, and (b) students with high school debate experience seem to be better prepared for critical thinking requirements in collegiate courses than students without debate experience.

#### *Cross (1971)*

Another important study was conducted by Cross (1971, as cited in Colbert, 1995). Cross administered the WGCTA to 136 students from nine high schools. The participants “were novice debaters participating in their first semester of debate” (Cross, as cited in Korcok, 1997, ¶30). In addition, Cross noted the amount of participation by each student over the course of the year and assigned them to groups of high participation and low participation. After a year, Cross administered the WGCTA again and found, “Those who are drawn to competitive debate, low and high participants, and continue for one academic year have greater thinking facilities than those who are not attracted to debate” (as quoted in Colbert, p. 56). He found that “high participation in competitive debate accelerates debaters’ capacity in critical thinking while low participation may not enhance critical thinking beyond the normal improvement in an academic year” (as quoted in Korcok, ¶31).

#### *Allen, Berkowitz and Loudon (1995)*

Allen et al. (1995) compared the gains in

critical thinking skills among: (a) students in introductory communications courses, (b) students in argumentation courses, and (c) students in competitive debate. They administered the WGCTA test, as revised in 1961, to 138 undergraduate students at 5 universities. They tested 34 students in introduction to interpersonal communication courses, 37 students in public speaking courses, 32 students in argumentation courses, and 35 students involved in some form of competitive speech including debate and non-debate events. After a semester, they readministered the tests to the same students. They found, "Both argumentation classes and forensic participation increased the ability in critical thinking compared to introductory interpersonal communication and public speaking classes" (p. 6). Among the four types of experiences, they found "participation in competitive forensics demonstrates the largest gain in critical thinking skills" (p. 6).

*Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt and Loudon (1999)*

Allen et al. (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of studies in which the connection between communication instruction, including competitive forensics, and critical thinking skills was examined. First, they critiqued the design of the Watson-Glaser tests, in all of the forms; "the methodological issue is whether one can measure critical thinking using an objective test and whether an objective test completely captures the domain of critical thinking" (p. 20). However, since most of the researchers examined used various editions of the Watson-Glaser tests, Allen et al. recognized that they were limited in their study, and additional research needed to be done to determine the validity of these tests. Then, Allen et al. established the methodology of their meta-analysis. They limited their study to manuscripts, both published and unpublished, that contained quantitative data; examined some type of communication skill improvement exercise, such as a course or participation in competitive speech; and included some method to assess critical thinking skill improvement. They examined both longitudinal studies and cross-sectional studies. "The data were analyzed using the variance-centered form of meta-analysis developed by Hunter and Schmidt (1990)" (p. 23). They found that both longitudinal designs and cross-sectional designs showed "communication skill exercises improve critical thinking" (p. 24). Participants in competitive forensics "demonstrated the largest improvement in critical thinking

scores" (p. 27). As for the deficiencies in the Watson-Glaser tests, Allen et al. found that, "when compared to other instruments, the Watson-Glaser measurement for critical thinking reported smaller not larger gains for communication skills training" (p. 25). Thus, in any studies in which the Watson-Glaser tests were used, the researchers may have underestimated the effect of communication instruction, such as competitive speech, on critical thinking skills. The Allen et al. conclusion means the connection between forensic participation and critical thinking may be greater than previous researchers had suspected.

### **Participation in Forensics and Standardized Test Scores**

While the studies about the effects of participation in forensics on critical thinking are intriguing, because of the NCLB (2001) and CSAP (1997) requirements, students must improve specifically their scores in reading, writing and mathematics. Even though CSAP includes questions that evaluate critical thinking skills, it evaluates other skills and knowledge as well. Thus, any studies that examined the relationship between forensics participation and standardized test scores are especially important to this researcher.

*Barfield (1989)*

The first major study to use nationally normed standardized tests was conducted by Barfield (1989). He used the Stanford Achievement Test, seventh edition (also known as the SAT-7), to evaluate claims about critical thinking skills in high school debate students. Barfield identified a total of 300 students from three different private schools in the southeastern U.S. Half of the students had been involved in highly competitive debate programs for at least two years; the other half were non-debate students who were carefully paired to the debate students on the basis of class rank and course loads. Barfield compared the percentile scores of the SAT-7 prior to the debate students "engaging in academic debating" (p. 152) to the percentile scores of the SAT-7 after two years of competitive debate; the percentile scores for the non-debate students were compared for a comparative time period. Barfield also compared the grade point averages (GPAs) of both sets of students. He found a "statistically significant increase" (p.153) in reading comprehension scores. He also found a "definite correlation between active participation in a highly-competitive interscholastic debate program and gains in student GPAs" (p. 158).

*Collier (2004)*

The second important study in this era of standardized test scores was the study conducted by Collier (2004) on the impact of participation in high school debate on reading scores. Collier administered the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) as a pretest to students, who participated in competitive debate, as well as students, who did not participate in competitive speaking, a total of 421 students, from 22 high schools in five cities. Teachers at each of the schools recommended debate students for the study, as well as students who had not participated in debate for the control group. Collier identified Honors students in both groups. After the debate season was completed, again, Collier administered the SRI to all students. Based on the test scores, Collier concluded that participants in debate scored 25% higher on the reading test than those in the control group and 18% higher than the control subgroup of honors students, which was significant ( $p < 0.10$ ). Collier suggested that the research requirements of debate motivated students to read and comprehend a wider variety of materials than other students. Collier's findings are especially important because she assessed the reading scores of high school students, as opposed to college students. Additionally, while critical thinking skills are important to society, the focus of state required tests is on reading, writing, mathematics, and science skills.

*Vaughn and Winner (2000)*

The only other study this researcher found, which was related to the connection between forensics participation by high school students and test scores, was conducted by Vaughn and Winner (2000). They examined the connection between acting and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. The findings from this study are relevant to this project because acting is very similar to oral interpretation in forensics. Vaughn and Winner based their study on survey responses from students on SAT tests over 12 years and found that the highest SAT scores were achieved by "students taking acting/play production courses" (p. 83). When they examined the component SAT scores of Verbal and Mathematics, the relationship between acting and high test scores was even more evident. While they did not claim a causal relationship, they did find a correlation between participation in acting and higher test scores.

Overall, the findings of many studies (Allen et al., 1995, Allen et al., 1999, Barfield 1989, Brembeck, 1949; Collier, 2004;

Cross, 1971; Howell, 1943; Vaughn & Winner, 2000) have indicated a positive relationship between participation in forensics and academic skills. Most studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between forensic participation, especially debate, and critical thinking skills. More recently, researchers have begun to study the impact of participation in competitive speech and similar events on standardized test scores.

### Criticisms of Recent Research

While the findings from the above studies appeared to demonstrate the positive effects of forensics participation on academic abilities, there were weaknesses in these studies. The greatest weakness found was the chicken/egg dilemma posed by Greenstreet (1993). McGlone (1974, as cited in Greenstreet) wrote, "There is a rather large number of investigations which demonstrate that debate improves certain cognitive abilities and a large body of criticism of these studies which point out that people who have these abilities are simply attracted to debate" (p. 18). Many of the authors of these studies acknowledged this very problem; for example, Whalen (1991) noted, "those who are drawn to debate simply have a tendency to be better critical thinkers" (p. 393). Allen et al. (1999) concurred when they stated,

Forensic participants are self-selected, and the choice to participate in competitive forensics might be related to higher levels of existing critical thinking. Basically, the claim is that comparisons of forensic participants to nonforensic samples are not a fair comparison because of the bias in self-selection. (p. 20)

In her study of reading scores, Collier (2004) wrote, "more research is warranted. . . to remove the myth of self-selection" (p. 29). Vaughn and Winner (2000) acknowledged the same problem when they wrote, "Alternative explanations include the possibility that students who choose to study the arts are high achievers to begin with" (p. 87). In order for new research projects to be regarded as credible, such projects will have to be designed to avoid the self-selection problem. Another problem with past research on participation in forensics and increased academic skills is that most of these studies were based on data collected from college students. Collier (2004) pointed out that these studies were conducted with college level subjects, who are notably different from high school students. Collier observed, "15 year-olds in urban public high schools

can't be compared with college students, particularly those at some of the more elite institutions involved in the debate studies" (p. 7). In her review of literature, this author found only six studies in which the test scores and survey responses of high school students were examined: Howell (1943); Cross (1971, as cited in Korcok); Huseman, Ware, and Gruner (1972, as cited in Greenstreet, 1993); Barfield (1989); Vaughn and Winner (2000); and Collier. As Collier astutely commented, high school students, who are required by law to attend school and take particular courses, are different from college students, who have self-selected both college attendance and particular coursework. In order to meet the requirements of the NCLB (2001), future researchers will have to examine how forensics participation affects the academic skills of high school students if they are to provide evidence to secondary school administrators of the value of competitive speech programs.

Barfield (1989) criticized past studies regarding the positive benefits from debate experience because researchers compared the test scores of students from schools with unequal forensics programs. "In fact, no study has yet collected data which specifically address the quality of instruction received in the debate and non-debate groups" (p. 14). Barfield specifically pointed to Howell's work; Howell found greater improvement in critical thinking skills among students at some schools than students at other schools. Barfield asked, "Could this imply that training in debate can either be 'good' or 'bad' and that the quality of the instruction might bias the outcome of the research?" (p. 14). In order to conduct truly meaningful research about the academic benefits of debate, researchers will need to compare data from students in schools with similar instruction methods and academic priorities for forensic participants.

The final weakness of past research is that the focus has been mostly on the effects of participation in debate. This author found no empirical studies in which the effects of participation in original oratory, extemporaneous speaking, or interpretation of literature were examined. Only a few authors (Carroll, 2007; Crawford, 2003; Hier, 1997; McCrady, 2004; Minch, 2006; Re, 2002; Sellnow, 1994) even mentioned the non-debate events, and those references were limited to the logical connections these events should have on academic skills. Hier, for example, discussed how "speech and debate are almost completely discovery activities. Students select their poetry readings or their prose readings in speech. They select their

arguments in debate" (p. 8). McCrady argued, "It's obvious that kids who probe deeply into literature are developing higher order thinking skills" (p. 41), and "logic is taught in extemp, persuasive oratory, and debate" (p. 44). Re mentioned, in passing, that extemporaneous speaking and student congress are events that require knowledge acquisition. Sellnow included oral interpretation as an example of an activity that provides "different ways of knowing for participants" (p. 7). Minch cited a survey of college students, who had participated in individual events, in which they perceived that this experience helped to develop their critical thinking and reading comprehension skills. The problem with such limited research on the non-debate events is that supporters of comprehensive high school forensic programs must be able to justify their entire programs to critical administrators. Also, educators, who need financial support for programs that include the non-debate events, must have empirical findings about the effects of these other events.

### Literature Summary

Researchers have explored the positive effects of competitive speech on academic skills since 1943. Since public speaking has been valued for centuries in a variety of cultures, it makes sense that it would have a positive impact on thinking and comprehension skills. Logically, student participation in forensics should increase academic skills, especially critical thinking skills. In light of the current testing requirements, Barfield's (1989) research on how participation in debate leads to higher scores on the SAT-7 and higher GPAs and Collier's (2004) work on how participation in debate leads to higher reading scores are very exciting. However, often, studies about the effects of forensic participation are flawed in terms of the chicken/egg effect (Greenstreet, 1993): the positive results of these studies may be due to the higher abilities and motivation of students who are involved in competitive speech. Additionally, most of the studies have been focused on college students and may not apply to high school students. Finally, the focus of most of the quantitative studies has been exclusively on debate and has ignored the possible benefits of other forensic events. It is hoped that the design of this project will avoid some of these criticisms and add to the credible research on this activity.

### METHODS

Currently, the NCLB (2001) requires that only those programs "that have been

demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, ¶ 1) receive administrative support. While participation in forensics has been linked to increased critical thinking skills, it is essential that studies be designed that use scientific methods to establish the value of this activity in terms of standardized tests, especially those tests required by law. Also, studies need to be designed to avoid the chicken/egg (Greenstreet, 1993) dilemma; in new studies, the researchers must design methods that take into account student motivation and intellectual levels. Finally, in order to meet the NCLB research expectations, new studies must be designed to evaluate the impact of forensics participation on high school students. While studies about college students provide useful information, current laws require studies be conducted that apply to secondary students. This researcher hoped to meet those requirements in this project.

### Procedures

In order to study the possible effects of participation in forensics on standardized test scores, this researcher designed an experiment, based on quantitative data, in order to avoid the deficiencies in other studies. However, since this researcher examined the test scores of students who had chosen, individually, to participate in forensics, or not, as opposed to random assignment of students to the test group and the control group, it was a quasi-experiment, as defined by Korcok (1997). Part of this study was a longitudinal study to examine pretest and posttest scores of state level tests; part of this study was a cross-sectional study to examine the test scores for one national level test.

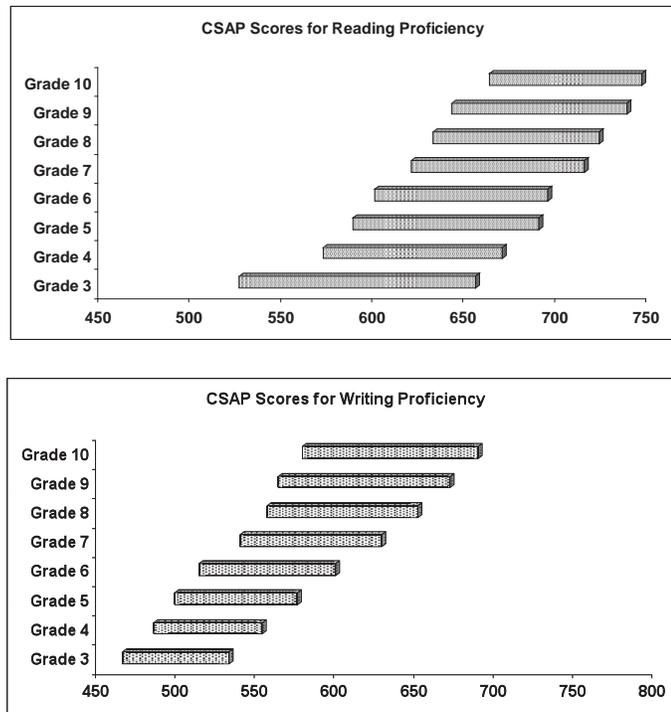
### Instrumentation

The Colorado Student Achievement Program (CSAP; 1997; Colorado Department of Education, 2007) is the required series of tests for students in this state. While there have been challenges to both NCLB (2001) and CSAP, this researcher did not evaluate or justify the use of the CSAP. Since the CSAP was developed by the staff of McGraw-Hill (CTB/McGraw Hill, 2006) to align with the Colorado State Content Standards, the results of this study should be similar to studies conducted in other states that use instruments from the McGraw-Hill for state content standard tests, such as California, District of

Columbia, Florida, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, and Oklahoma. CTB/McGraw-Hill tests are used in 23 states and are given to 35 percent of the nation’s students (Toch, 2006).

The CSAP (1997) is required of all Colorado students, Grades 3-10. At each grade level, it is comprised of 3 tests each in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics and 2 tests in Science. The CSAP is administered in all Colorado high schools during March each year. This researcher was most interested in the effect of forensics on the Reading and Writing scores. The CSAP provides a unique opportunity to collect pretest and posttest data since the CSAP uses a graduated scoring system: all students, Grades 3-10, receive scores based on a scale of 0-999, and all students are expected to increase their scores each year in order to be deemed proficient, as shown in Figure 1 (CDE, 2007). This continuous scale allows researchers to examine the data as pretests and posttests.

*Figure 1. CSAP scores for proficiency rating*



Source: Colorado Department of Education (CDE). (2007). CSAP summary data 1997-2005. Denver, CO: Author.

Since officials at the national level have begun to consider the implementation of a growth model of student scores (ED to test NCLB, 2005), whereby schools would be evaluated based on whether individual student test scores increased from year to year, CSAP is a good instrument to use. Additionally, the analysis of gains in student scores, as opposed to a single score, is better aligned with the best practices identified by the National Education Association (NEA, 2005).

In order to evaluate the effects of forensics participation on a nationally normed test, this researcher will examine ACT scores. The ACT is another element of the CSAP (1997) and all eleventh grade students in Colorado are required to take the ACT as the final element of student testing (CDE, 2007). Also, the examination of a nationally normed test will make this study useful to educators and administrators in parts of the country that do not administer tests designed by McGraw-Hill. However, this researcher was not able to determine if participation improves ACT scores since there is no pretest available; thus, this portion of the project is a cross sectional study.

### Sample Population

This researcher will examine the test scores of students from Golden High School, a suburban high school in the Denver metropolitan area. Demographically, the school is 87.1% Anglo, 7.9% Hispanic, and 1.3% African American (Jefferson County Public Schools, 2007).

Also, 17.6% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

Participation in the forensics class and program at this school was self-selected. No specific recruiting of particular students was done. The program was open to students in grades 9 through 12 of all academic levels. On average, 35 to 40 students participated in forensics in any given school year; of those students, approximately one-third to one-half were honors students, who took honors level courses in other subjects, and the remainder were average students. All students in the program were expected to take a formal course in forensics for at least one semester; after that semester, students could continue to participate in the forensics class during the regular school day or they could participate in forensics through an independent study program for academic credit. In the regular forensics class, students were introduced to all forms of forensic speaking: debate, original oratory, student congress, and oral interpretation. After this introduction to all the speaking events, students were allowed to choose one event as their focus of study and competition.

In order to avoid the problem of self-selection as defined above, the data to be studied was from students who participated in Honors English 11 during a 4 year period. First, the honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses at Golden High School were self-selected; students did not test into these classes nor did teachers assign them to these classes. Also, in this author's observations, all of these students participated in extracurricular and cocurricular activities, such as peer counseling/mentoring, student government, student publications, athletic teams, play productions, music performance groups, and other similar extra curricular and cocurricular activities. Additionally, all of these students were involved in multiple honors and AP courses. Thus, the data for all of the students involved in this study represented the test scores of motivated students who self-selected to participate in a variety of school activities and intellectual challenges. In terms of the self-selection, this was a homogenous group of motivated, intellectual students, some of whom chose to participate in forensics and some of whom did not.

The examination of students over several years from a single program should have eliminated several variables that could negate or weaken the conclusions. Variables, such as teaching styles, departmental priorities, and cocurricular vs. extracurricular status

of forensics, did not have an impact on this study. All students examined had experienced the same curriculum, the same expectations, and the same grading requirements. Furthermore, the students from the first 3 years that the data were collected had the same English 9 Honors teacher and the same English 10 Honors teacher. During the fourth year studied, faculty changes occurred due to retirements; however, the curriculum and expectations remained the same. Finally, all the participants with forensics experience had the same coach and learned about competitive speech under the same conditions.

Of this group of honors students, the test scores of those students, who did not participate in forensics, were designated as the control group. The test scores of those students, who did participate in forensics, were designated as the test group. The 4 years studied produced CSAP test score data for 205 English 11 Honors students without forensics experience, and 32 English 11 Honors students with forensics experience. Since the scores for the 2007-2008 class of English 11 Honors students were not available until after the due date for this project, only 3 years of data were available for that part of the study: 160 English 11 Honors students without forensics experience, and 24 English 11 Honors students with forensics experience. Since the test group for the analysis of ACT scores was not 30, it was less reliable than the study of CSAP scores.

Within the test group, all students who participated in forensics were considered as a single group when compared to the control group. These students competed in debate, public speaking and oral interpretation events. This researcher did not limit student participation to only debate students. Also, no distinctions were made in regard to the length of participation. As described below, in this project, the researcher compared Grade 8 test scores to Grade 10 test scores. Forensics at this high school was a semester long course; some of the participants were involved for only 1 semester while others were involved for the entire 2 years covered by the testing framework. A complete description of the test group is included in an Appendix. In the future, additional studies can be done to examine the value of the different events or the effect of participation time on test scores.

#### **Data Collection**

Since the advent of NCLB (2001), administrators of Jefferson County Public Schools have made the CSAP (1997) scores

of each teacher's students available to that teacher. Teachers have been required to use these data, especially CSAP test data, to adjust teaching methods as an element of their evaluations. Thus, all CSAP scores were available to this teacher researcher. Since 11th grade students in Colorado are required to take the ACT (1989), those scores were available to teachers as well.

This researcher examined the scores in both Reading and Writing in Grade 8 and Grade 10. Grade 9 test scores were not used in this analysis for specific reasons. This researcher felt that use of the Grade 9 tests would limit the data to only students who chose to participate in forensics in Grade 9 and eliminate the data of those students who opted to begin forensics in Grade 10, and Grade 9 tests scores could be skewed by the turmoil of freshmen as they adapt to the high school environment.

Only the test scores of students, who have taken all four tests, were included: Reading Grade 8, Reading Grade 10, Writing Grade 8, and Writing Grade 10. The test scores of any student who missed one or more of these tests were not included in this study. Also, only the test scores of students who attended this school for their entire ninth and tenth grade years were included.

Since this researcher was concerned with whether forensics participation has a positive effect on test scores, standard statistical analysis were used on two types of data: test scores and changes in scores. This researcher examined mean scores and standard deviations, and the test of differences of means at the  $\alpha < 0.10$  level of significance.

Also, this researcher examined the ACT (1989) scores for each student involved in this study. Since every Colorado student is required to take the ACT in Grade 11, the data was easily accessible. Standard statistical analysis was conducted on the composite scores, as well as scores for the English and Reading portions. Unfortunately, the examination of ACT scores could not include pretesting and posttesting. This researcher examined: (a) mean scores and standard deviations, and (b) the test of differences of means at the  $\alpha < 0.10$  level of significance.

#### **Anticipated Results**

At the end of this project, it was believed that the positive effects of participation in forensics would translate into increased reading and writing test scores on both the CSAP (1997) and the ACT (formerly known as the American College Test, 1989). To that end, this researcher posited several null hypotheses to be tested.

- H<sub>1</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the gains of writing skills of high school students in honors English courses who participated in forensics when compared with the gains of writing skills of high school students in honors English courses as measured by CSAP (1997) scores in 8th grade and 10th grade.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the gains of reading skills of high school students in honors English courses who participated in forensics when compared with the gains of reading skills of high school students in honors English courses as measured by CSAP (1997) scores in 8th grade and 10th grade.
- H<sub>3</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the scores for reading of high school students in honors English courses who participated in forensics when compared with the scores for reading of high school students in honors English courses as measured by ACT (1989) Reading scores.
- H<sub>4</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the scores for English usage and editing of high school students in honors English courses who participated in forensics when compared to the scores for English usage and editing of high school students in honors English courses as measured by ACT (1989) English scores.
- H<sub>5</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the gains in writing skills of high school students in honors English courses who participated in debate events when compared with the gains of writing skills of high school students in non-debate events as measured by CSAP (1997) scores in 8th grade and 10th grade.
- H<sub>6</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the gains in reading skills of high school students in honors English courses who participated in debate events when compared with the gains of writing skills of high school students in non-debate events as measured by CSAP (1997) scores in 8th grade and 10th grade.
- H<sub>7</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the scores for reading of high school students in honors English courses who participated in debate events when compared with the scores for reading of high school students who participated in non-debate events as measured by ACT (1989) Reading scores.
- H<sub>8</sub>: There shall be no significant difference in the scores for English usage and editing of high school students in honors English courses who participated in debate events when compared with the scores for English usage and editing of high school students who participated in non-debate events as measured by ACT (1989) English scores.

## Results

In order to determine the appropriate level of significance for each test, this researcher examined the literature in this discipline. Barfield (1989), Collier (2004), and Howell (1943) established a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.10$ ; thus, this researcher used this established threshold to determine the significance of results. Additionally, this researcher used a one-tail test since previous research indicated that students with forensics experience should have higher scores than students without forensics experience.

### *H<sub>1</sub>: CSAP Writing Scores*

The CSAP (1997) scores for writing would indicate that students who participated in forensics had greater gains in writing skills than the students who did not participate in forensics (after applying a trim for extremes), as displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of CSAP Writing Data with a 5% Trim*

	Non-Forensics Participants	Forensics Participants
Number of student scores in study	185	28
Grade 8 CSAP Writing – mean	640.50	634.29
Grade 10 CSAP Writing – mean	663.70	671.82
Change in CSAP Writing – mean	23.19	37.54
Change in CSAP Writing – stand. Dev.	36.47	41.37

This amount of data required the use of the test of differences of means for small samples, which uses the Student's  $t$  distribution for critical values.

The scores for students who did not participate in forensics are identified as Group 1 and the scores for students who did participate in forensics are Group 2. The calculations for this test revealed a Student's  $t$  score of  $t = 1.906$ . This number met the requirement for  $\alpha = 0.10$ . In fact, this number revealed a significance of  $\alpha = 0.030$  for a one-tailed test. Thus, after a 5% trim to reduce the effects of extreme cases, participation in forensics increased CSAP (1997) writing scores at a significant level, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

### *H<sub>2</sub>: CSAP Reading Scores*

Displayed in Table 2 are the data for CSAP (1997) reading scores.

**Table 2**

*Summary of CSAP Reading Data with a 5% Trim*

	Non-Forensics Participants	Forensics Participants
Number of student scores in study	185	28
Grade 8 CSAP Reading – mean	16.82	713.18
Grade 10 CSAP Reading – mean	736.89	738.21
Change in CSAP Reading – mean	20.07	25.04
Change in CSAP Reading – stand. dev.	20.58	18.11

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's  $t$  score of  $t = 1.209$ . This number did not meet the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ . This number revealed a significance of  $\alpha = 0.11$  for a one-tailed test, which approached the desired significance level but did not achieve it. Thus, participation in forensics did not increase CSAP reading scores at a significant level, and the null hypothesis was accepted, although the reading scores approached the desired significance level.

### *H<sub>3</sub>: ACT Reading Scores*

Displayed in Table 3 are the data for ACT (1989) reading scores. The total number of scores studied was less for this test because the class of 2009 had not yet taken the ACT scores; the data were based on 3 years of test scores instead of 4 years.

**Table 3****Summary of ACT Reading Data with a 5% Trim**

	Non-Forensics Participants	Forensics Participants
Number of student scores in study	150	22
ACT Reading – mean	26.13	27.59
ACT Reading – standard deviation	4.14	4.69

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's  $t$  score of  $t = 1.517$ . This number met the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ . This number revealed a significance of  $\alpha = 0.07$  for a one-tailed test. Thus, after a 5% trim to reduce the effects of extreme cases, participation in forensics did increase ACT reading scores at a significant level, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

 **$H_4$ : ACT English Scores**

Displayed in Table 4 are the data for ACT (1989) English scores.

**Table 4****Summary of ACT English Data with a 5% Trim**

	Non-Forensics Participants	Forensics Participants
Number of student scores in study	150	22
ACT English – mean	25.60	26.36
ACT English – standard deviation	4.28	5.02

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's  $t$  score of 0.7137. This number did not meet the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ . Thus, after a 5% trim to reduce the effects of extreme cases, participation in forensics did not increase ACT English scores at a significant level and the null hypothesis was accepted.

 **$H_5$ : Debate Students vs. Non-Debate Students and CSAP Writing Scores**

Since the test scores examined in this study included scores by students who had debate experience as well as students who participated in only non-debate events, this project provided the author an opportunity to examine whether the differences, or lack of differences, of the various test scores were related to whether the students had debate experience or participated only in the non-debate events. Provided in the Appendix is a description of each student participant in the forensics group. Since all of the current research available attributed gains in critical thinking and reading scores to debate experience, student scores in this study are divided into two categories: (a) students with any debate experience, regardless of the type of debate, alone or in conjunction with participation in other events; and (b) students with no debate experience. Based on this criterion, 20 students were defined as debate students, and 12 students were defined as non-debate students. Because of the small numbers of test scores, the test of differences of means for small samples, which uses the Student's  $t$  distribution for critical values, was used. Also, since the number of scores was so small, no trim was used. This small sample examined indicates that this statistical analysis is less reliable than a larger sample.

**Table 5****Summary of CSAP Writing Scores for Forensics Participants**

	Debate Participants	Non-debate Participants
Number of student scores in study	20	12
Grade 8 CSAP Writing – mean	651.60	642.92
Grade 10 CSAP Writing – mean	690.80	673.08
Change in CSAP Writing – mean	39.20	30.17
Change in CSAP Writing – stand. Dev.	65.56	62.10

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's  $t$  score of 0.385. This number did not meet the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ . Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between the gains in the writing abilities of debate students and the gains in writing abilities of non-debate students, and the null hypothesis was accepted.

 **$H_6$ : Debate Students vs. Non-Debate Students and CSAP Reading Scores**

Displayed in Table 6 are the data for CSAP (1997) Reading scores.

**Table 6****Summary of CSAP Reading Scores for Forensics Participants**

	Debate Participants	Non-debate Participants
Number of student scores in study	20	12
Grade 8 CSAP Reading – mean	722.50	704.50
Grade 10 CSAP Reading – mean	742.45	734.58
Change in CSAP Reading – mean	19.95	30.08
Change in CSAP Reading – stand. Dev.	21.41	23.05

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's  $t$  score of 1.261. This number did not meet the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ .

This number revealed a significance of  $\alpha < 0.11$  for a one-tailed test, which approached the desired significance level but did not achieve it. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between the improvement in reading between debate students and non-debate students, and the null hypothesis was accepted, although the reading scores approached the desired significance level.

 **$H_7$ : ACT Reading Scores**

Displayed in Table 7 are the data for ACT (1989) Reading scores.

**Table 7****Summary of ACT Reading Data for Forensics Participants**

	Debate Participants	Non-debate Participants
Number of student scores in study	12	12
ACT Reading – mean	27.50	27.58
ACT Reading – standard deviation	5.21	5.43

It is obvious from the data that there was no significant difference between the ACT Reading scores of debate students and non-debate students. No statistical analysis was needed to accept the null hypothesis.

**$H_8$ : ACT English Scores**

Displayed in Table 8 are the data for ACT (1989) English scores.

**Table 8**  
**Summary of ACT English Data for Forensics Participants**

	Debate Participants	Non-debate Participants
Number of student scores in study	12	12
ACT English – mean	25.58	26.92
ACT English – standard deviation	5.95	5.84

The calculations for the test of differences of means for small samples revealed a Student's *t* score of 0.5569. This number did not meet the requirement for  $\alpha < 0.10$ . Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between the ACT English scores of debate students and the ACT English scores of non-debate students, and the null hypothesis was accepted.

A statistical analysis of the data revealed the following:

1. there was a significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in forensics and greater gains in CSAP (1997) writing scores; in fact, the level of significance was  $\alpha = 0.03$ ;
2. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in forensics and greater gains in CSAP reading scores, although the results approached significance at the  $\alpha = 0.11$  level;
3. there was a significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in forensics and higher ACT (1989) reading scores, as  $\alpha = 0.07$ ;
4. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in forensics and higher ACT English scores;
5. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in debate and students' participation in non-debate events in terms of gains in CSAP writing scores;
6. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in debate and students' participation in non-debate events in terms of gains in CSAP reading scores, although the results approached significance at the  $\alpha = 0.11$ ;
7. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in debate and students' participation in non-debate events in terms of ACT reading scores, and
8. there was no significant relationship at  $\alpha < 0.10$  between students' participation in debate and students' participation in non-debate events in terms of ACT English scores.

Thus, hypotheses  $H_1$  and  $H_3$  demonstrated a statistically significant ( $\alpha < 0.10$ ) relationship between participation in forensics and higher test scores, specifically the CSAP Writing test and the ACT Reading test. Hypothesis  $H_2$  was rejected, and participation in forensics was not significantly linked to higher CSAP Reading scores, although the results approached significance and suggested a relationship. Hypothesis  $H_4$  was accepted; participation in forensics did not significantly affect ACT English scores. In terms of the relationship

between forensics students who had debate experience vs. forensics students who had no debate experience, all four hypotheses,  $H_5$ ,  $H_6$ ,  $H_7$ , and  $H_8$ , were accepted; there were no significant differences between the test scores of debate students and students in the non-debate events.

**DISCUSSION**

The results from this study seemed to confirm the logical association between forensics participation and higher academic achievement, particularly higher standardized test scores. The greatest improvements in test scores were in the CSAP (1997) writing, CSAP reading and ACT (1989) reading tests. These findings seemed logical in light of past research and conjecture. On the other hand, students in forensics did not significantly outscore the control group in terms of the ACT English test. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between the gains by forensics students who studied debate and the forensics students who focused on the non-debate events.

Numerous researchers (Carroll, 2007; Freeley 1990, as cited in Korcok, 1997; Hunt 1994, as cited in Parcher, 1998; Minch, 2006; Parcher; Tumposky, 2004) hypothesized that participation in forensics should lead to greater critical thinking skills. Researchers, such as Allen, Berkowitz, and Loudon (1995), Brembeck (1949), Cross (1971, as cited in Colbert, 1995), and Howell (1943), found statistical evidence to suggest that participation in forensics increased critical thinking abilities. Within this framework of previous research, it makes sense that, in this study, forensics students improved their scores on the CSAP (1997) writing test more than non-forensics students. Officials at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE; 2007) explained that at least half of the writing test involves critical thinking abilities; students must demonstrate they can reason, plan, use evidence, defend a hypothesis, and explain their thinking. By writing extended constructed responses and short constructed responses, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. In light of the previous research, it makes sense that the greatest gains of students who participated in forensics vs. students who did not participate in forensics would be in the improvement of writing scores. The statistical analysis showed the strongest relationship between participation in forensics and improvement in writing scores; this relationship was found at the  $\alpha = 0.03$  level of significance.

When one considers Barfield's (1989) and Collier's (2004) studies, in which a connection was found between debate students and improved reading skills, it is not surprising that a strong connection was found between forensics participants and reading test scores, especially the ACT (1989) reading test. Students in forensics have to read a variety of information carefully. Debate students and oratory students must evaluate pieces of nonfiction for evidence that may help support an argument. Extemporaneous speakers must read a variety of news sources in order to synthesize information into speeches. Interpreters must do intensive literary analysis of their performance pieces in order to understand and portray all the nuances. Reading is a key element of all forensics events; thus, it makes sense that students who participate in forensics would have higher ACT reading scores. This author found a significant relationship at the  $\alpha = 0.07$  level. It is a bit puzzling as to why the connection between participation in forensics and improvement in CSAP (1989) reading scores was not as strong. The connection did not meet the requirement for significance, although it approached significance at the  $\alpha = 0.11$  level. It is possible that the reading selections on the CSAP were too simplistic to



challenge students and reveal their improvements in reading ability. After all, the CSAP reading questions were designed to test students' comprehension of grade level texts. The reading selections for the ACT were designed to emulate college level texts (ACT, 2007). Since forensics students are accustomed to reading complex texts and must defend intricate interpretations, the type of reading selections on the ACT are closer to the types of reading that forensics participants do.

There was no significant relationship between participation in forensics and ACT (1989) English scores. However, the types of questions asked on the ACT English test do not align well with the types of skills practiced in most forensics courses, particularly in the program studied. According to the ACT Technical Manual (2007), the majority of questions on the ACT English test are designed to assess mechanics: 13% of the questions assess punctuation, 16% of the questions assess grammar and usage, 24% of the questions assess sentence structure, 16% of the questions assess revision strategies, 15% of the questions assess organization of sentences within paragraphs, and 16% of the questions assess style and tone. While most students in forensics must think carefully about organization and style issues, the oral nature of forensics means that students do not have to practice, necessarily, editing skills on a written text; certainly, sentence structures meant to be heard can be different from sentence structures meant to be read. The focus of the ACT English test is on editing skills of written texts. In the forensics course studied in this project, mechanics were never explicitly taught or discussed, especially in terms of editing written texts.

When one considers the previous research in regard to the connection between debate and critical thinking skills, reading skills and academic success, it may surprise some readers that there was no

statistical difference between the test scores of forensics students with debate experience and forensics students with no debate experience. All the elements of critical thinking, such as evaluation and organization of information, seem more applicable to the debate events. However, the results from this study suggested that the reading and writing skills used in the non-debate events are as beneficial as the reading and writing skills used in the debate events. Students who compete in Original Oratory or Extemporaneous Speaking must have a thorough understanding of their topics in order to write effective speeches. Students who participate in the interpretation events must use critical thinking skills as well. They have to analyze carefully literary pieces, such as plays or novels, evaluate which parts of the literary work should be included in their performance and which parts should be cut, and evaluate the most effective ways to present the information so that the audience understands and appreciates the nuances of the characters' situations. The results from this study suggested that participation in all the forensics events is equally valuable to student achievement.

The greatest weakness of other studies, noted by scholars (Allen et al, 1999; Collier, 2004; Greenstreet, 1993; Vaughn & Winner, 2000; Whalen, 1991), is the problem of self-selection. Participation in forensics may seem to influence test scores because brighter, more motivated students elect to join forensics teams. However, this author attempted to design a study to minimize the chicken/egg effect. All the test scores examined were from students who were intelligent, motivated, and active in school activities. All the students had plans to attend universities. Moreover, all the students had self-selected into Honors English courses, which emphasized language skills, like reading and writing, and presented challenging materials. All these students were confident enough of their reading and writing abilities to

enroll in advanced English courses. This researcher designed a study that examined two like groups, and this study should mitigate any concerns about the chicken/egg dilemma.

### Limitations to This Project and Suggestions for Further Research

One possible weakness of this study is that the examination of test scores by honors students may not be applicable to other students. Because they are more interested in language, they may be more susceptible to the educational effects of forensics. Their interest in complex reading and writing may increase their gains in critical thinking skills while they participate in competitive speech. On the other hand, it is possible that the gains in reading and writing abilities by forensics students could be understated since the scores examined were by honors students instead of grade level students. Allen et al. (1999) discussed the ceiling effect, where students who begin with high test scores cannot improve greatly because their scores are already near the top, or ceiling. If participation in forensics increases reading and writing skills, the increases may have been muted because the honors students did not have much room to improve their scores. Additional studies, which examine the impact of participation in forensics on grade level students, need to be designed to evaluate the impact of the ceiling effect.

Another weakness of this study is the limited number of test scores examined. Without at least 30 test scores for the honors students with forensics experience, the results were less reliable than a larger sample (Brase and Brase, 1999). Furthermore, the examination of test scores by forensics students with debate experience vs. forensics students with no debate experience was limited because there were only a total of 32 forensics students studied: 20 in debate events and 12 in non-debate events. While the results from the comparison between test scores of honors students vs. the test scores of non-forensics students were supported by previous research, the comparison between the test scores of forensics students who had debate experience vs. the test scores of forensics students who competed only in the non-debate events was unique. The statistical connection between the test scores of these two groups was large enough to suggest only a relationship; additional research needs to be done to confirm the academic benefits of the non-debate events.

### Conclusion

The value of public speaking, specifically in a competitive setting, has long been recognized. However, in this era of No Child

Left Behind (2001) and high stakes testing, it is important that competitive speaking be connected scientifically to higher standardized test scores. Without such research, the future of forensics programs will be doubtful. This researcher found a statistically significant ( $\alpha = 0.03$ ) relationship between participation in forensics and higher writing scores as well as a statistically significant ( $\alpha = 0.07$ ) relationship between participation in forensics and higher reading scores. This connection seems to be equally true for students who choose to compete in the debate events as well as for students who choose to compete in the non-debate events.

During the writing of this project, the political climate began to change. Members of the Colorado House of Representatives proposed bill HB08-1357 (Fender, 2008), which would eliminate writing tests at all grades and eliminate CSAP (1997) tests in Grades 9 and 10. The ACT (1989) would be retained for high school juniors. While the bill passed the House, it was postponed indefinitely in the Senate Education Committee; thus, it was effectively killed (Colorado General Assembly, 2008). However, this event seems to point to the idea that the evaluation of participation in forensics in terms of CSAP scores may be irrelevant. However, two major points need to be made. First, even though the Colorado legislators may be considering revising their testing program, there is no evidence that this is happening in other states. The NCLB (2001) is still in force. CTB/McGraw Hill still produces tests for 23 states (Toch, 2006). While tests of writing skills are not required under NCLB, legislators in 33 states have added a writing component to their testing laws (Toch). Even if the Colorado testing law is altered, the results of this study still would be relevant to other parts of the nation. Second, regardless of political decisions about mandatory testing, this researcher has demonstrated that participation in forensics has a positive effect on reading and writing abilities. Whether they are tested or not, reading and writing have been the cornerstones of education and literacy. To disregard the implications of this project because of political decisions about the testing instruments would be a mistake.

Overall, the value of forensics programs in terms of specific student achievement cannot be denied. While forensics participation is not the only method that school staffs can use to improve their standardized test scores, especially in reading and writing, it is obviously one tool that should be retained in their arsenal of instructional methods to ensure student success.

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APPENDIX

Description of Forensics Students Involved in Study

Student	Grad Year	Years of Participation	Description of Participation (Event and NFL points earned during each year of participation)
1	2006	9th Grade, 2nd Semester 10th Grade – year	Poetry Interp – 26 Orig Oratory – 71 Duo Interp – 30
2	2006	10th Grade – year	Poetry Interp – 44 Duo Interp – 28
3	2006	10th Grade – year	Orig Oratory – 101 Extemp – 41
4	2006	10th Grade – year	Duo Interp – 139
5	2006	9th Grade – 2nd Semester 10th Grade – year	Orig Oratory – 30 Duo Interp – 139
6	2007	10th Grade – year	Public Forum – 156 Extemp – 21
7	2007	10th Grade – year	Policy Deb – 144
8	2007	10th Grade – year	Public Forum – 156
9	2007	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – year	LD Debate– 216 Impromptu – 10 Congress - 64 LD Debate – 87 Congress – 72 Humor Interp – 39
10	2007	10th Grade – 1st semester	Duo Interp – 25 Drama Interp – 7
11	2007	10th Grade – year	Poetry Interp – 31 Duo Interp – 7
12	2008	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – 1st semester	LD Debate – 21 Extemp – 11 Humor Interp - 13 Humor Interp – 10
13	2008	9th Grade – year	Duo Interp – 25 Drama Interp – 37
14	2008	10th Grade – year	Duo Interp – 47 Humor Interp – 20
15	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester	Public Forum – 45 Extemp – 12
16	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester	Duo Interp – 14
17	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester	Public Forum – 36 Extemp – 11
18	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester  10th Grade – year	Public Forum – 69 Extemp – 9 Duo Interp – 34 Drama Interp – 10 Poetry Interp – 21
19	2008	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – 1st semester	Public Forum – 45 Duo Interp - 40 Public Forum – 12 Duo Interp – 49
20	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester	Duo Interp – 51
21	2008	9th Grade – 1st semester	Duo Interp – 25 Orig Oratory – 9
22	2008	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – year	Duo Interp – 59 Humor Interp – 7 Duo Interp – 11 Congress – 40
23	2008	9th Grade – year 10th Grade – year	Public Forum - 122 Public Forum – 262
24	2008	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – 1st semester	LD Debate – 45 Duo Interp - 53 Duo Interp – 17
25	2009	9th Grade – 1st semester 10th Grade – 1st semester	Policy Deb – 111 Policy Deb – 79
26	2009	9th Grade – 1st semester	Policy Deb – 36
27	2009	9th Grade – 1st semester	Policy Deb – 66
28	2009	9th Grade – year	Policy Deb – 100
29	2009	10th Grade – 2nd semester	Policy Deb – 49
30	2009	9th Grade – 1st semester	Policy Deb – 27
31	2009	9th Grade – year 10th Grade – year	Policy Deb – 160 Policy Deb – 94
32	2009	9th Grade – year  10th Grade – 1st semester	Public Forum – 21 Extemp - 70 Extemp – 9 Congress – 7