

Empowering Latinas Through Debate:
An Analysis of Rates of Success at SCUDL Tournaments
of Latina Debaters

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Debate empowers debaters. Speaking from personal experience, we can honestly say that policy debate is one of the most empowering and transformative activities a high school student can participate in. Speaking as a Latina who began debating in high school, debate has affected me in ways that have quite literally changed the course of my life. I was one of two Latinas in my high school honors courses and the only Latina on my high school debate team. During my three years debating in high school I never met another female of Latin descent from another school that either self-identified or was identifiable as Latina. During my four years debating in college, my encounters with other women of Latin descent were so limited that I although I know I must have met one or two Latinas along the way, I cannot recall them by name. The first time I had a meaningful interaction with a Latina who was also a debater was when I judged my first New York Urban Debate League tournament. It was only then that I realized the profound privilege of being around people who “look like you” that many other debaters take for granted.

Who are Latinas? By the term “Latina” we will be referring to the diverse group researchers and US government census takers alike refer to including women who descended from countries in Central and South America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic (Garza, 1994). By seeking to study this group, our aim is not to essentialize or characterize in broad strokes.

Indeed, both authors recognize and embrace the diversity of women encompassed by the term Latina. Indeed, we utilize the term Latina with full knowledge that some women who fall into this category might not embrace this term as fully as scholars in this field have embraced it, and use it only for clarity's sake.

Latinas in high school as a group are more likely to dropout, are more likely to get pregnant, attempt suicide at higher rates, and are more likely to have used marijuana and cocaine than white or African American girls the same age (Navarro, 2001). Latinas are attending the same high schools as their white and African American counterparts, but they are not doing as well as women of other ethnicities. It is no coincidence that I had trouble encountering girls of my same background when I was participating in high school forensics. Despite the alarming fact that Latinas face many social and institutional barriers to staying in school, remarkably little is being done to combat this crisis (Vives, 2001). Indeed, Latinas, like many other women of color, are often rendered invisible by virtue of the fact that policymakers and other individuals in positions of power often focus their attention on white women and minority men (Flores, 1990; Lopez, 1995; Galindo and Gonzalez, 1999; Garcia, 1997).

This study seeks to determine whether rates of participation and success in the Southern California Urban Debate League present hope for debate to be utilized as a means of empowering Latinas and bridging the educational gap. We will focus on the SCUDL for two reasons. First, the SCUDL is located in Southern California, home to many Latin American communities. Second, the

SCUDL is the UDL both authors are most familiar with since we have both been involved with this organization since its inception, both in volunteer and administrative capacities, respectively.

The Southern California Urban Debate League (SCUDL) is an organization that seeks to bring debate to those students who attend economically underserved high schools. It is one of 13 Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) located in cities across the United States, including New York, Chicago, Atlanta and Baltimore. Students of many different ethnicities and backgrounds, including Latinas compete in the SCUDL and in UDLs across the country. Until the advent of the UDL, debate was largely the domain of the rich, suburban high school or more frequently, the private school. The Open Society Institute (OSI) began making grants to bring debate back to underserved high schools in 1997. The goal of the program is to make debate accessible to those schools most in need of the skills debate provides (Breger, 1998).

The skills and benefits debate offers are wide-ranging. By virtue of its quick pace and the constant need to back up one's arguments with evidence, debate enables students to develop many critical skills including research, argument development, and organization. Carrie Crenshaw (1998) argues:

The benefits to the high school students and teachers are irrefutable. There is ample evidence documenting the benefits of debate participation in part because it provides pre-professional preparation, improvement of students' educational experience and communication skills, and it supplies training for coping the information age. Participation in debate teaches students many skills including argument construction and evaluation, library research, as well as information processing, integration, and management. It also exposes students to the important social issues of our time and promotes depth of study, complex analysis and focused critical thinking. (p. 83)

Proving a causal relationship between debate and increasing students academic performance would be difficult, but debate has been credited as improving critical thinking and analytical skills by recently conducted meta analysis (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999). Therefore, debate can be considered a component in the strategy of improving students grades and academic performance.

In addition to direct educational benefits, debate empowers those who are lucky enough to participate in its pedagogy. Brusckie and Warner (2001) discuss the benefits debate offers to its participants:

Debate teaches students to become critical thinkers because of its dialectical nature. Students in the habit of questioning the claims of others and thinking through the possible objections to their own claims easily develop the mental faculties needed to become active consumers of information. Rather than simply taking knowledge offered to them at face value, students almost automatically begin thinking through possible objections to any knowledge claim and develop probing questions about it. (p. 8)

Indeed, one former Urban Debate League participant turned UDL organizer, Ed Lee (1998), had the following to say about his experience:

Debate allows students to take control of their educational destiny and at once make it a site of resistance. It allows those saddled with the baggage of poverty, racism and sexism to construct their personal strategy for liberation. The Urban Debate League provides a space for us to learn what justice is because it forces us to learn from those disproportionately affected by injustice. (p. 96)

Debate has a profound influence on its participants via the skills it enables participants to develop. It affords the critical thinking skills students in

underserved high school need to question critical assumptions they or others might make about their abilities.

Debate can be a very powerful connection to the college world. Several participants in the SCUDL have no connection to any college experience. Many students' siblings and/or parents have not attended college. For those who have never been exposed to college, the possibility of attending college can seem remote and daunting. Financial aid forms, college applications, recommendations, etc., work together to form a process which can be both foreign and overwhelming to any college senior, let alone the student whose parents are entirely unfamiliar with the process and perhaps do not even speak the same language required by the English-only applications. Debate, by virtue of bringing students to college campuses and college debaters to coach high school students, can serve a critical function in enfranchising more individuals into looking at college as a viable option (Arbenz and Beltran, 2000).

This has been only a brief summary and discussion of the benefits debate offers its participants and specifically those benefits offered to the typical UDL student. Indeed, the purpose of this article is not merely to argue the benefits of debate but to further investigate if these benefits are reaching one particular group involved in the UDLs: Latinas. Girls in their teens have lacked a forum for expressing their views. Some recent work has been dedicated to providing girls with a medium for expressing their views about growing up, education, friendships, and hardships in their own words (see Findlen, 1995 and Shandler, 1999). These works largely focused on and featured non-Latin girls discussing

the issues salient to their lives. The following is an excerpt from the only Latina who did participate in either of the two projects, a fifteen year old named Karisma Amelia Rodriguez provides a dramatic insight into how some Latinas view their "place" in the world:

In Latino culture, if you were a woman, you were worthless. You could be sold as a maidservant/slave to a man for the rest of your life. You had to do everything exactly as you were told. You were at the mercy of your master. Your dignity was hidden, if not destroyed. Here, in the United States, you are still worthless for being a woman, and despised for being Latino. Your fault doubles. (Shandler, pp. 248-249).

Indeed, Latinas who view themselves the victims of sexism in addition to racism may feel doubly disadvantaged (Garza, 1994).

A revolutionary study has recently been released by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Education Foundation, with regard to Latinas and secondary education. The report "Si, Se Puede! Yes, We Can: Latinas in School," (2000) examines the experiences of Latinas in the US educational system. This study is important in that it undertakes the task of examining how and why Latinas are not "succeeding" in as great of numbers as non-Latina girls. Initially, the study examines social characteristics which might influence the likelihood of success for young Latinas in school. Ginorio and Huston (2000) discuss the differences between what a young Caucasian girl experiences growing up in comparison to what a young Latina experiences:

Latinas may find that family, community, school, and peer expectations are more discordant for them than for girls of Anglo, middle-class culture. Family expectations that children, especially daughters, stay relatively close to home during and after high school conflict somewhat with a prevailing trend in middle-class culture for successful students to go away to college for four years. Similarly, the expectation that women postpone motherhood or marriage while completing an education may conflict with

family or cultural norms of earlier marriage or more extensive family loyalties and commitments than is typical in Anglo, middle class culture. (p. 10)

Social influences have a profound effect on how Latinas approach their educational endeavors. It is important to note that many Latin parents do support their daughters' desire to attend college. A recent study showed that Hispanic parents value education as essential to attaining middle class status and being part of the "American Dream," more so than white parents. For example, Hispanic parents were twice as likely as white parents to rate a college education as the single most important factor in a young person's success (Immeerwahr, 2000). Alarmingly, however, according to the same study, Hispanic students' participation in higher education was the lowest compared to Black and white students, with only 20% of 18-24 year olds participating.

Educational institutions also play a role in socializing Latinas into thinking that they deserve a lower status than other non-Latina students. According to Ginorio and Huston (2000), a critical component contributing to this socialization may be teachers in high schools:

Teachers may have trouble moving beyond their own stereotypes of Latinas' educational possibilities (or probabilities, in their minds) and thus promote an education-dismissive environment. Many Latina/o students report that their teachers did not encourage them to consider college (Rodriquez: 1993). Evidence suggests that Anglo teachers have lower expectations for the academic performance of Hispanic students than do Hispanic teachers and that these expectations may be a crucial – and rectifiable – element of teacher education. However, teachers' expectations about academic performance are related to a student's chances of attending college. When evaluating students who are expected to attend college, Anglo and Hispanic teachers had similar academic expectations for their students. In this way, teachers may be education-encouraging for individual students while simultaneously endorsing an education-dismissive environment. However, Hispanic

teachers' evaluations remained high for non-college bound students, while Anglo teachers' expectations were lower. (pp. 10-11).

With regard to graduation rates, the rate for Latinas is lower than for girls in any other racial or ethnic group. Indeed once Latinas leave school, they are far less likely than non-Latina females and all other males to return to school (Ginorio, 2000). There are many social factors that might play a role in this statistic, but the role the schools play should not be overlooked.

Indeed there could be some conflicting values between parents and high schools which may alienate Latinas even further (Griego, 2001). Schools value competition and independence, where many argue that traditional Hispanic family values include cooperation, and dependence. Schools value education above all else. Hispanic families often put the family as the highest value, encouraging young Latinas to help support the family by working or taking care of younger siblings and other household chores (Navarro, 2001; Ginorio and Huston, 2001). Some scholars have taken to calling the code of behavior expected of Latin women from an early age, *marianismo*, a difficult balance between family and culture and the "outside" world (Navarro, 2001).

Given the fact that Latinas are facing unique challenges socially, culturally and institutionally, we undertook to determine whether Latinas as a group were succeeding in a setting that seeks to benefit all underserved students in general, but in no way targets the specific group of Latinas, specifically.

Method

In a 4x4 factorial design, the cumulative results from 7 different Southern California Urban Debate League high school tournaments were evaluated. Both

speaker and partner ethnicity were coded and included the following categories: Latina, non-Latina female, Latino, and non-Latino male. The dependent variables were the number of wins speaker points per round. Speaker points were divided by the number of rounds for the tournament to create an average number of speaker points per round, and wins were divided by the number of rounds to create the win percentage. The unit of analysis was an individual debater's performance at a given tournament.

Results

Win percentage

Although the results of the ANOVA test showed no statistical significance at the .05 level between ethnicity and wins per round, a p level of .053 was obtained ($F(3, 234) = 2.6$) and was deemed of sufficient importance to warrant further analysis. The lowest winning percentage was for Latinas (.45), followed by Latinos (.51), non-Latino males (.55) and non-Latina females (.58). There was a significant interaction between speaker ethnicity and partner ethnicity ($F(9, 234) = 2.30, p = .017$). The average wins for two Latinas is only .39. The average wins for a Latina with a female non-Hispanic partner is .39; Latina and Latino is .52, and Latina with male non-Latino is .56. This shows that a Latina partnered with another Latina debater will only win about 39% of their debate rounds. The highest win percentage, however, was .85 and was obtained for teams consisting of a non-Latina female and a non-Latino male. These results indicate that gender may not affect the tournament results for a team, except

when the ethnicity of that female is Hispanic. Because of the extremely small cell sizes for the interaction (cell sizes ranged between 6 and 34), we suggest interpreting these results with caution. Still, it is clear that Latinas had the lowest success rates, enjoyed success only when debating males and especially non-Latino males, and even in those instances did not enjoy as much success debating with non-Latino males as did non-Latina females.

Speaker Points

There was no relationship between gender and ethnicity of a debate team and speaker points ($F(3, 234) = 1.73, p = .76$). The interaction between speaker ethnicity and partner ethnicity was similarly non-significant. This indicates that the ethnicity of the female speaker does not directly influence the judge's decision to award speaker points.

Discussion

Results of this study reveal that the amount of wins a debater earned was directly correlated to his or her gender/ethnicity. Latinas had the lowest overall winning percentage, followed by non-Latina females, followed by Latinos and then finally, non-Latino males. These findings are particularly important given the fact that they measure success in the Urban Debate League, an organization that seeks to provide opportunities for underserved students. Even within the UDL, systemic discrimination continues. A positive finding of the study, and indeed a reason to believe that debate has untapped potential for enfranchising Latinas, is that no correlation was found between gender/ethnicity and speaker points. Latinas had roughly the same speaker points as all other non-Latina debaters.

This fact provides us with hope that although the SCUDL may still experience systemic discrimination, this discrimination is not so widespread and endemic that it could not be addressed and, potentially, alleviated.

Recommendations

What can and must be done to ensure that UDLs address the specific needs of Latinas which are currently not being served? First, all hope is not lost. By virtue of providing space for all underserved students, including Latinas, to participate in policy debate, the UDL is opening the door for more widespread participation. The AAUW study indicates that participation in extra-curricular activities such as student government or sports, have been shown to facilitate academic success in Latinas (Ginorio and Huston, 2000). Additionally, academic programs which improve academic skills, have been found to counter institutional barriers found at the school level. (Romo, 1998). Additionally, Romo (1998) found that “school programs that promote self-efficacy, self-confidence and high expectations are as important as programs that provide opportunities for academic and career success (p. 4). We have already demonstrated that debate offers these skills, as well as many others to debaters. Debate via the UDLs has the potential to empower Latinas to succeed in high school and beyond. Reforms must be meaningful and take into account the needs of distinct populations if UDLs are truly going to serve those who would benefit from debate the most.

Recognizing the problem is the most important step. Throughout this paper, we have argued that even among those who are considered underserved

students, Latinas are their own special class who warrant their own attention, study and consideration. We must recognize that we are failing Latinas before we can begin to address the issues surrounding the failure. Those students which the UDL seeks to assist, those students most in need of the skills that debate affords its participants are not just underserved students in general, they are Latinas, specifically. UDLs everywhere need to recognize that of all the students the public school system is failing, they are failing Latinas the worst.

Recognition is only the first step to combating this problem. Several other steps need to be taken in order for the mission of the UDLs to be furthered with regard to Latina debaters. Romo (1998) cites various factors as key to Latinas' success including: valuing students language and culture, involving parents, providing staff training, and creating a sense of community. The most important factor for Latinas' success is the belief that they can succeed. In the debate context, teacher and judge training that would include cultural sensitivity components of all cultures that highlight the needs of Latinas could go a long way to increasing the likelihood that Latinas would feel as though they could succeed in debate and, more importantly, in school. Latina role-models should be sought out and utilized as a means of illustrating to young Latina debaters that they are not the only Latinas out there debating. Finally, some high school debate institutes have experimented with having all-female lab groups as a means of combating sexism in debate. This strategy has been utilized at the Emory National Debate Institute, as well as several other institutes across the country. We advocate concentrating Latinas in their own lab as a means of creating

community and combating the double edged sword of sexism and racism Latinas face on a daily basis.

In conclusion, debate can be a useful vehicle for providing empowerment and educational opportunities lacking in the public school system. We could not agree more with Melissa Wade's (1998) assessment: "Tournament debate has offered profound skills for many who have used them to achieve national leadership roles in government, business, and education, among others. It is only fair that all have access to such a rich experiential education" (p. 65). In keeping with this endeavor, this study has found that it is not enough to simply include Latinas in debate activities. UDLs must actively recruit and more importantly work to retain Latinas if they are to remain active participants in debate. A Latina debater participating in the SCUDL had the following to say about her debate experiences:

As far as debate, I am very interested in it. I enjoy debating because it just seems to be a part of me. My mother has always said I could not stop arguing with her, nor have I stopped. I have a natural enjoyment for it. I find it very exciting being up in front of a judge and showing him why I am right! I love my partner, Edgar, with the heart of a sister. I work extraordinarily well with him and can't see myself in the position I am now without him. We are the perfect team because we have come to know each other to the point it scares us. This perhaps is one of the reasons we work so well. He is a reason I enjoy debate so much.

This Latina debater's statement embodies the cultural considerations of family and community that must be taken into account when building a debate program that will include and retain Latina debaters.

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