Collegiate Lincoln-Douglas Debate
and High School Champions:
Implications of a Survey of Participants
in the Tournament of Champions

Michael W. Shelton and J.W. Patterson

Michael W. Shelton (PhD, University of Kentucky, 1997) is Instructor
and J.W. Patterson (PhD, University of Oklahoma, 1961) is Associate
Professor and Director of Debate, Department of Communication,
University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky 40506

Forensic activities are deeply rooted in the traditional power
of public address, and are richly diverse in their practice. At both
the high school and collegiate levels, coaches and students have the
opportunity to be involved in individual speaking events and debate.
In addition, debate options at both levels have become increasingly
diverse. High school debaters can compete in policy-oriented team
debate, value-oriented Lincoln-Douglas debate, and regional and
state variations of each. At the collegiate level, students may choose
to compete in a variety of policy, value, and parliamentary debate
options sponsored by the National Debate Tournament, the Cross-
Examination Debate Association, the National Educational Debate
Association, the National Forensic Association, and many other
organizational entities. This diversity offers not only opportunities
for students and coaches, but also challenges. Many of those
challenges warrant greater attention from forensic educators and
scholars.

From many forensic topics ripe with possibilities for
investigation, we select one, the relationship between collegiate
Lincoln-Douglas debate and high school Lincoln-Douglas
championship debaters. First, we explore the literature regarding the
high school and college forensic connection. Second, we offer a
research method to guide the present investigation and then we
report the results of the research. Finally, we discuss the
implications for strengthening the relationship between high school
and collegiate Lincoln-Douglas debate programs.
THE HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CONNECTION

Snider (1995) stressed what has been recognized by many for years: "high school and college forensics have common interests and a common fate" (p. 24). Many students begin their forensic endeavors in high school and continue their participation when they enter college. Most coaches, both high school and collegiate, have either competed in collegiate forensics or have been instructed in forensic education at colleges and universities around the nation. Similar policy and value debate resolutions have been employed at both levels. In addition similar issues, concerns, and challenges cut across both the high school and college forensic communities. Research interest, outreach efforts, student populations for potential competitors, and a host of other features tie the two communities together.

Students who participate in forensic activities, particularly debaters, have long attracted the interest of researchers. For example, over half a century ago Howell (1943) evaluated the effects of high school debate participation on the development and refinement of critical thinking skills. More recently, Colbert (1993) assessed the role of high school debate participation on students' verbal aggression and argumentativeness. Forensic researchers at both the high school level (Shelton & Shelton, 1993) and collegiate (Bruschke & Johnson, 1994) explored the possible influence of gender bias on success in debate competition. Anyone who has attended a speech communication convention or conference at the state, regional, or national level can attest to the fact that forensic researchers see the student competitor population of high school and college debaters as an appealing and informative source for investigations.

College and high school forensic programs typically engage in a number of interconnected activities. One of the most obvious interconnections relates to coaching and judging. As noted, most coaches at both levels have either competed in college forensic activities or have been trained at institutions that sponsor debate and
individual events programs. The coaching connection is often more direct. College coaches and debaters work actively with high school programs. Additionally, college competitors and coaches are often called upon to judge at high school tournaments. High school debaters also draw upon college programs for valuable resources. Most handbooks for high school debaters are researched and packaged by college debaters and coaches.

Another longstanding interconnection between high school and college forensics has been the summer institute or workshop. Virtually every summer debate and individual events workshop is sponsored by and hosted at a college or university. College competitors and coaches provide the staff personnel for these workshops. Scholars, such as Pruett (1972) and Matlon and Shoen (1974), recognized the importance of this interconnection nearly a quarter of a century ago. More recently, Balthrop (1984) assessed the overall value of summer debate workshops and Chandler (1987) developed a series of recommendations to assist sponsors in the operation of these summer programs. These summer workshops often contribute to the establishment of both personal and professional relationships between high school and collegiate competitors and coaches.

High school and college programs have other, more pragmatic, ties. College debate and individual events programs are heavily dependent upon harvesting student competitors from high school debaters and speakers. Colleges often go to great lengths to recruit high school competitors to their programs. The recruitment process is sometimes intense and problematic. College programs often need to convince high school students that it would be beneficial to continue their involvement in forensic activities at the collegiate level. Although they were specifically interested in female forensic participation, Griffin and Raider's (1992) observation is germane: "Because most college debaters were first exposed to the activity in high school, examining participation at the high school level is a necessary first step" (p. 8). The high school level is certainly a necessary first step, as it is the most frequent introduction
to forensic activities for students and it often measures their long term interest in the activity.

Scholars at the collegiate level have recognized the importance of the high school forensic community to the health of college programs. The first Developmental Conference on Forensics (McBath, 1975) pleaded with college programs to encourage high school debate. Snider (1995) announced the establishment of a formal high school outreach program by the Cross-Examination Debate Association. Although generally critical of current developmental relationships between high school and college forensic programs, Brand (1996) acknowledged the existence of some "community service" outreach programs and encouraged their expansion.

Despite the existence of similar research interests, the sponsorship of summer workshops, and the development of outreach efforts, the actual strength of the connection between high school and collegiate forensic programs has been questioned. Indeed, some observers criticized the nature of this relationship. Snider (1994) noted: "The reality is that there is a strict division between forensics at the high school and college level" (p. 28). Brand (1996) expressed a similar view when he stated, "The collegiate forensic community lacks effective ways to reach out to the high school speech and debate community" (p. 37). Misunderstandings and complications also plague the high school and college connection in forensics. In a discussion of "myths" that frustrate the development of connecting ties, Snider (1995) observed: "High school and college debate are not separate entities, but a continuum through which students and coaches move. For too long the high school and collegiate debate communities have acted as if they existed in separate worlds, unaware of the reality of the continuum" (p. 24).

It would be difficult to identify the extent of the specific relationship between any single collegiate forensic activity and its high school counterpart, and to measure the level of disconnection between the two. It is possible, though, to discuss the relationship of Lincoln-Douglas debating in high schools and colleges. Lincoln-
Douglas debate is sponsored at both the high school and collegiate levels with some common ties. The National Forensic League [NFL] at the high school level and the National Forensic Association [NFA] at the collegiate level, initiated Lincoln-Douglas debate as a response to perceived excesses in traditional policy-oriented team debate. Bile (1996) explained that "The development of NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate has significantly expanded opportunities for students to experience the benefits of educational debate" (p. 37). Many of those students were initiated into L-D debate at the high school level. Indeed, Morris and Herbeek (1996) noted that NFA L-D has served to "accommodate an influx of interested and talented students...." (p. 1).

The relationship between NFL and NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate can be assessed and then strengthened more thoroughly. The literature, as reported here, suggests that greater attention should be assigned to the high school and college connection. The potential value of expanding and strengthening that connection would be particularly compelling for the NFA. High school and NFA debate are similar stylistically, they share many theoretical underpinnings, and they attract students who have decided, for whatever reason, not to participate in traditional team debate. Further, the linkage between successful high school L-D debaters and NFA collegiate programs warrants greater investigation. Although writing about gender issues, Griffin and Raider (1992) stressed an important general point that applies as well to males: "It is unlikely that a female who has not experienced some competition and success in the activity while in high school will remain, much less begin, debating in college" (p. 8). The competitive success of high school debaters, both males and females, often colors their outlook on competing in college. Additionally, those L-D debaters who have been successful at the high school level represent a trained and talented pool for NFA L-D programs to draw upon.

Many questions come to mind in regard to the connection between high school and NFA L-D. For example, do successful high school L-D debaters continue their interest in competition as
they prepare to enter college? Do factors, such as the amount of high school competition and years of experience, influence a successful high school debater's interest in collegiate competition? Do the factors that influence the development of championship L-D skills at the high school level also inform competitive success at the collegiate level? The present investigation is an initial effort to help find answers to such questions.

**METHOD**

A twelve-item survey was constructed for use among participants at the 1997 high school debate Tournament of Champions (see Appendix). All Tournament of Champions participants were asked to complete and return the survey, although only results for the Lincoln-Douglas participants are reported here. Seventy-six L-D debaters participated in the 1997 Tournament of Champions. All participants had to meet a double qualification standard at selected national L-D tournaments. Fifty percent (38) of the L-D participants completed and returned the survey. Eleven female participants and twenty-seven male participants were represented by the returned surveys. Twenty-five of the respondents were high school seniors, twelve were juniors, and one was a sophomore. Number of years of tournament competition ranged from four to two; and there were no first year L-D debaters among the respondents. The mean number of years of competition for respondents was 3.45, with a distribution of twenty who had competed for four years, fifteen who had competed for three years, and three who had competed for two years. L-D participants were asked to respond to a number of substantive items, in addition to providing basic demographic information. These items included questions about the number of tournaments the student had competed in that academic year, attendance at summer debate workshops, plans for debating at the collegiate level, whether this student competed in other forensic activities, and information regarding the student's perception of factors influential in his or her success.
RESULTS

L-D participants at the 1997 Tournament of Champions were asked to report the number of tournaments in which they had competed during the past year. Most students had participated in more than ten tournaments. The mean (average) number of tournaments in which students had participated was 11.42. The mode was close to the mean as ten students reported they had competed in twelve tournaments. The range was from a low of three tournaments of competition to a high of twenty tournaments.

The L-D participants were asked to respond to two survey items regarding attendance at summer debate workshops. The first question asked if the student had attended a debate workshop the previous summer. Fifteen students reported that they had attended a workshop that summer and twenty-three students reported that they had not attended a summer workshop. L-D participants were also asked to report the total number of summer workshops that they had attended during their high school debate careers up to that point. The mean (average) number of workshops attended was 1.21. The mode, however, was zero as fifteen respondents indicated that they had never attended a summer debate workshop. The range for attendance varied from one workshop to as many as four: eight reported attendance at one workshop, nine had attended two, four had attended three, and two students had attended four.

L-D participants were queried as to their plans for competing in debate at the collegiate level. Students were asked to indicate if they did plan to compete in college, if they did not plan to compete, or if they were uncertain regarding their collegiate debate competition plans. Only three students responded with a definite "yes" to competing in college debate. Another sixteen students reported that they definitely planned not to participate at the collegiate level. Nineteen students indicated that they were uncertain about collegiate competition.

The L-D participants were given two survey items regarding their participation in alternative forensic activities during high
school. Students were asked to report whether they had ever participated in individual speaking events or in team (policy or cross-examination) debate. Twenty-three of the respondents indicated that they had participated in individual events. Another fifteen students reported that they had not participated in individual events. Although two students did not respond to the question concerning team debate, ten did report that they had participated in that form of debate as well as L-D. Twenty-six students reported that they had not participated in an alternative debate format.

L-D participants were asked an open-ended question seeking to determine what the students perceived to be the most important factor in their ability to qualify for the Tournament of Champions. Several students indicated multiple factors that they felt accounted for their competitive success. The responses of students could be sorted into eleven overall categories as reported in Table I. Four factors seemed to predominate the responses: thirteen students attributed their success to team effort and preparation, twelve reported coaching as being most important, eleven indicated that individual effort and qualities were most important, and ten reported experience as the key to their success.

**DISCUSSION**

Collegiate forensic scholars and educators could potentially glean a host of variable information from these data, but some of the most important implications are particularly germane to those who sponsor and coach NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate. The participants at the Tournament of Champions represent the most successful high school L-D debaters and as such they should be of general interest to the collegiate L-D community. Obviously, the most important question that a collegiate L-D coach might wish to consider is whether these high school champions plan to debate in college. Although sixteen of the survey respondents reported that they did not plan to participate in debate at the collegiate level, a close examination of the other responses provides much more promising
and insightful information for college coaches.

Although only three students reported that they would definitely compete in debate at the collegiate level, another nineteen reported that they were uncertain for a total potential of twenty-two college competitors from among the participants at the 1997 Tournament of Champions. It is most illuminating to tie this survey item to questions regarding attendance at summer debate workshops. Of the three respondents who reported that they planned to compete in college debate, all had attended a workshop the previous summer. Overall comparisons are also striking. Of the twenty-two students who were either definitely planning to debate in college or who were uncertain, seventeen or 77% reported that they had attended a summer workshop at some time. These results are nearly reversed for those who reported that they definitely did not plan to debate in college. Of the sixteen who did not plan to compete, 62.5% had never attended a summer workshop. These data suggest a number of important implications for NFA L-D debate.

High school L-D debaters who have attended a summer debate workshop tend to be more favorable toward the possibility of continuing their debate careers at the collegiate level. A number of potential explanations may inform this tendency. Many high school debaters who attend summer debate workshops are exposed to the vitality of college debate activities, extensive research, and organizational efforts. High school students often establish bonds with the college debaters and coaches who comprise the staffs at most summer workshops. And, those high school students who attend summer workshops are simply in a more convenient position to receive both formal and informal recruiting information by those individuals attempting to attract them to collegiate competition. Regardless of the specific causative factor for this heightened tendency to consider participation in collegiate level debate, the obvious implication would be for college programs to use this knowledge to inform their plans regarding summer workshops.

The implications regarding summer workshops are several fold. More NFA L-D programs may wish to consider sponsoring a
Such sponsorship could potentially have positive consequences for both the sponsoring institution and NFA L-D as a whole. Sponsors may garner the practical benefit of enhancing their own recruitment efforts. The NFA L-D community would benefit from expanded sponsorship by potentially increasing the overall pool of trained and skilled high school debaters who might consider competing at the collegiate level. Further, college L-D programs could further capitalize on the operation of existing summer workshops. The staff and sponsors of summer workshops might do even more to create a positive image of collegiate L-D debate and to stimulate interest in future competition. This might include making more information regarding admissions and scholarships available, as well as establishing more formal liaison efforts between collegiate summer workshop sponsors and the high school programs that send students to those workshops.

Nearly sixty percent (59.09%) of the twenty-two students who were either definitely planning to debate in college or were uncertain about future debate plans reported that they had also participated in individual speaking events at one time. This might also be illuminating data for NFA L-D programs. Many of the persuasive and delivery skills that are necessary in NFA L-D are also important to individual events competition. More important, as Minch and Borchers (1996) reported, most NFA L-D competitions are held in conjunction with individual events tournaments. The students who are favorable toward participation in collegiate debate also possess some level of skill in individual events, and college programs might maximize recruitment by targeting these students. Such efforts might contribute to the overall health of a forensic program in debate and individual events.

Gender data related to plans for potential collegiate debate competition are remarkable. Of those sixteen students who reported that they definitely did not intend to debate in college, fifteen were male and only one was female. More importantly, ten females reported that they were either definitely planning to debate in college or were uncertain about doing so, and there were only eleven female
respondents in the entire population of respondents to the Tournament of Champions survey. This suggests that virtually all of the females who had qualified for the Tournament of Champions were open to the possibility of debating in college. This may well confirm Griffin and Raider's (1992) contention that female debaters required some level of high school success to consider competing at the college level. Additionally, this may suggest generally that more females are considering participation in debate at the collegiate level. If this is the case for female L-D debaters then the NFA has a wonderful opportunity to combat further the gender bias that Bruschke and Johnson (1994) and others contend is so pervasive in college debate ranks.

Data regarding those factors that high school L-D champions perceive as playing an important role in their competitive success are illuminating. Although only four respondents attributed their success to attendance at a summer workshop, these students spoke very positively of the workshop experience. One student simply noted "my lab leaders contributed to my qualifying [for the Tournament of Champions]." Another said, "I found institute extremely beneficial in my preparation for competition." A student elaborated on the value of the summer workshop experience by stating that "my summer experience...gave me the reputation and relationship with students and coaches that I needed to compete on a national level." Such remarks reinforce the efficacy of sponsoring summer workshops by NFA L-D programs.

Some of the other factors reported for success in L-D competition might also be important to NFA L-D programs. A large number of students attributed much of their success to their coaches. Many students reported "good coaching" or "my coaches" as significant factors in their competitive success. This suggests that NFA L-D programs might do even more to expand efforts related to the training and development of high school L-D coaches. NFA programs that sponsor summer workshops might include a program for coaches. NFA L-D programs might take steps to increase information and resource options to high school L-D coaches in
order to establish a greater bond and to enhance cooperation, research, recruitment, and other ends.

A number of respondents attributed their success to team effort. Many students reported that "superior team preparation" was important to their competitive success. This could be important to NFA L-D programs. These data suggest that many students are accustomed to an organized team effort that often contributes to successful collegiate competition. Further, these data speak to the positive potential benefits in team collegiality that these students might bring to NFA L-D programs. Unlike so many high school students who have fallen victim to the negative consequences of a "star system," these L-D champions recognize the essential value of team work and might easily be integrated into competitive collegiate programs.

Although not particularly germane to the focus of this work, some comments are in order regarding other survey responses of L-D participants at the 1997 Tournament of Champions. Preliminary calculations suggest that none of the other factors examined through this survey—number of tournaments attended, years of high school competition, or any other—had the same relationship with a favorable attitude toward potentially debating in college as did attendance at a summer workshop. Thus, "burnout" from years of competition, nor any other factor examined here, can explain attitudes toward college competition as strongly as summer workshop attendance. This strengthens the importance NFA L-D programs' sponsoring workshops for this may be one of the most important recruitment and outreach options to consider.

Future forensic researchers might harvest some important implications from this project. NFA L-D coaches and researchers might wish to explore the attitudes and qualities of championship-level high school L-D debaters. Such research might reveal the best way to assure long-term debate involvement of students who have already developed highly refined competitive skills. Additionally, researchers may also wish to garner information of the type reported here from students at general competition tournaments. This might
provide further data regarding the role of summer workshops, potential for female recruitment, and the development of ties between the high school and college L-D communities. Indeed, the most significant contribution of the present investigation might be to draw attention to the possibility of researching and extending the bonds between L-D debate sponsored by the NFL at one level and the NFA at the college level.

NOTES

1 The survey instrument was distributed to team debaters as well, but fewer than fifteen percent of the participants returned the survey.

2 Fifty percent is a generally healthy return rate for a survey instrument. Indeed, Shelton and Shelton (1984) have reported that forensic survey results that approach such a return rate are quite good.

3 Some of the students who had never attended a workshop held very negative views of such summer programs. One student said "I wouldn't be caught dead at one" and another said "debate camps are for losers."

REFERENCES


**TABLE 1**

Most Important Factors in Tournament of Champions Qualification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team work/effort</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual effort/qualities</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Schedule</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luck</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Qualification</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space Availability</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX
SURVEY

1. Gender ____ Male ____ Female
2. Year in high school ______ .
3. Number of years you have debated
4. Number of tournaments you have competed in this year_____ .
5. Did you attend a debate workshop last summer?
   ____ Yes ____ No.
6. Total number of workshops you have attended during your debate career______ .
7. Have you also competed in individual events?
   ____ Yes ____ No.
8. Do you anticipate participating in debate during college?
   ____ Yes ____ No ____ Uncertain
9. Do you compete in Lincoln-Douglas______
or team debate ____ ?
10. Have you ever competed in another (L-D or team) format of debate? ____ Yes ____ No.
11. If a team debater, mark all speaker positions which you have ever performed. ____ 1st Affirmative _____ 2nd Affirmative
    _____ 1st Negative _____ 2nd Negative
12. What do you believe was the most important factor contributing to your ability to qualify for the Tournament of Champions?