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**To cite this article:** J. Michael Hogan, Jeffrey A. Kurr, Jeremy D. Johnson & Michael J. Bergmaier (2016) Speech and debate as civic education, *Communication Education*, 65:4, 377-381, DOI: [10.1080/03634523.2016.1203002](https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1203002)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1203002>



Published online: 12 Aug 2016.



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## GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

### Speech and debate as civic education

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In light of the U.S. Senate's designation of March 15, 2016 as "National Speech and Debate Education Day" (S. Res. 398, 2016), it only seems fitting that *Communication Education* devote a special section to the role of speech and debate in civic education. Speech and debate have been at the heart of the communication discipline in the U.S. since a group of speech professors broke free from English departments to form the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking in 1914 (Gehrke & Keith 2014). And long before that, of course, a rhetorical tradition dating back to the ancients emphasized training in speech and debate as essential to education for citizenship in a democracy.

America's founders were well schooled in that classical rhetorical tradition. So too were the towering figures of the America's Golden Age of Oratory—Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and others. During the Progressive Era (1900–1917), educational reformers revitalized that neo-classical tradition, reemphasizing rhetorical education in the schools and inventing new forms and forums of speech and debate, such as student government and circuit Chautauqua (Hogan, 2010). Through two world wars and into the Cold War, speech professors routinely invoked the discipline's neo-classical roots to emphasize how, as Brigrance (1961) put it, "democracy and the system of speechmaking were born together" (p. 4). Since ancient times, Brigrance wrote, "we have never had a successful democracy unless a large part, a very large part, of its citizens were effective, intelligent, and responsible speakers" (p. 4). According to Brigrance, America's great experiment in democracy rested upon a citizenry trained not only to speak and debate but also to "listen and judge" (p. 5).

Today, we have a pressing need for another renaissance of speech and debate education. Declining measures of our nation's "civic health" (National Conference on Citizenship, 2010), along with our increasingly shallow and polarized public discourse, have raised alarms that we are living in a "diminished democracy" (Skocpol, 2003), even a "democracy at risk" (Macedo et al., 2005). For the communication discipline, however, the democratic crisis in America represents an opportunity to remind our fellow educators and the broader public of the importance of speech and debate in educating for citizenship. Now is an opportune moment for communication studies to reclaim its historical status as the foundation of civic education in the liberal arts.

In that spirit, the Center for Democratic Deliberation, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Communication Association, invited many of the leading scholars, teachers, coaches, and program administrators in speech

and debate to a conference at Penn State to reflect on challenges, trends, and opportunities in civic education. Some of the work from that conference will appear in a forthcoming volume from the Penn State University Press (Hogan, Kurr, Bergmaier, & Johnson, in press). Five of the conference presentations, however, struck us as particularly suited for *Communication Education*, and those papers have been revised for publication in this special section.

Perhaps it goes without saying—at least for an audience of communication scholars—that speech and debate education benefits students in many ways. It teaches students not only to be better speakers and critical listeners, but also to be more informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. By studying speech and debate, students develop a keen appreciation for solid research, well-reasoned arguments, and effective delivery. Students who study speech and debate develop a better understanding of the rights and responsibilities of free speech, and they become more attuned to the threats to our democracy posed by propaganda and demagoguery. They learn how to solve problems collaboratively, and they develop a better appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and opinions in our complex, multicultural society.

The challenge for communication scholars, of course, lies in making that case to others—school administrators, political leaders and funding agencies, philanthropists and tax-paying citizens, and of course the students themselves. As more schools embrace a workforce training model, favoring STEM disciplines over the liberal arts, that challenge becomes even greater. Yet the case for revitalizing and reinventing civic education has never been stronger, as reflected in a “national call to action” published by the U.S. Department of Education in 2012: *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Calling for a “more comprehensive vision” of civic education—one that goes beyond a narrow focus on U.S. history and government—*A Crucible Moment* challenges us to make civic education an “integral component” of American education at every level, and to “expand education for democracy so it reaches all students in ever more challenging ways” (p. 69). The report also stresses the need to give students more hands-on practice actually “doing” democracy. In short, it calls for a new movement to revive and reinvent civic education for the twenty-first century.

What role might speech and debate educators play in that movement? This special section provides at least some preliminary answers by surveying the landscape of speech and debate education and reporting on some of the efforts to reinvigorate the role of speech and debate in civic education. It offers insights in how speech and debate pedagogies are being used to interest and engage students in civic affairs, and it offers new ideas for incorporating speech and debate pedagogies into civic education programs.

We begin with a first-of-its-kind survey of cocurricular speech and debate programs across the U.S., focusing on their connections to civic education. Taking as their starting point the “declension narrative” so common in both scholarly and popular accounts of collegiate debate, Mark Hlavacik and his colleagues add “some numbers and perspective” to the anecdotal evidence of debate’s decline by reporting the results of a nationwide survey of college debate programs in the U.S. Contrary to popular impressions, they argue, debate is alive and well on many college campuses, and debate programs continue to do what they have always done: educate for citizenship not only through competitive debate but also with educational and civic outreach. At the same time, they concede

that many college administrators fail to appreciate debate's role in civic education, and they conclude that the speech and debate community needs to do a better job promoting the activity's value and visibility on campus.

In our second essay, Danielle Leek suggests a debate-centered solution to a common criticism of service-learning programs: that even when they involve students in meaningful service, they often fail to produce real *political learning and engagement*. Many such programs promote civic engagement by “encouraging volunteerism and a philanthropic mindset,” but they often fail to help students “draw connections” between community problems and larger political issues. They also are not very good at encouraging students to “get involved with politics, even broadly defined.” To get the most out of service-learning, Leek argues, students need to acquire not only political *knowledge*, but also the skill set necessary for effective political engagement. And that, of course, is where debate comes in. Leek argues that by integrating policy debate into their pedagogy, service-learning programs can deepen political learning and promote “the acquisition of skills essential to political engagement.” By cultivating information literacy and the ability to test the reasoning and evidence of advocates in public debate, debate pedagogies can help service-learning educators “facilitate the political learning students need to build their political efficacy and capacity for political engagement.”

Our third essay, by Joseph Roidt and his colleagues, suggests a different but complementary approach to integrating debate pedagogies into the curriculum. Reporting on the success of a First Year Symposium required of all students at Davis & Elkins College, the authors describe a unique three-week program utilizing speech and debate to educate for citizenship—one that might serve as a model for other colleges and universities. Inspired by the literature on the declining civic health of America, along with *A Crucible Moment's* call for new modes of civic education, the First Year Symposium focuses on the three main dimensions of the perceived “civic deficit” among young people: civic habits and dispositions, political knowledge, and the skills needed for civic engagement. Utilizing speaking, writing, and argument assignments as “the principal tools both for cultivating civic-minded practices and for assessing student learning during the course,” the program has had encouraging results, including increases not only in civic knowledge and political tolerance, but also in the students' self-confidence and sense of political efficacy.

In the spirit of *A Crucible Moment's* call to make civic education an “integral component” of American education at every level, “from grade school through graduate school” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 14), the last two essays shift the focus from colleges and universities to the secondary schools. In both cases, the essays reflect on the relationship between debate pedagogies, civic education, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Those standards (or some state version of those standards) are now in effect in more than 40 states.

The first of those two essays, by Jonathan McIntosh and Myra Milam, argues that the new standards present an “opportunity for growth” for the educational debate community, as the CCSS's emphasis on performance and competency-based curricula invite new experiments in speech and debate pedagogies. Based on interviews with debate teachers and coaches from secondary schools in the New York area, McIntosh and Milam articulate a vision of debate in the secondary schools that shifts the emphasis from the competitive “game” to civic learning and community engagement, transforming debate into “something that touches, cultivates, and restores the communities of our debaters in the

present moment.” Debate, they argue, has proven an especially effective way to level the educational playing field in urban areas where poverty and other inequities prevail, as demonstrated by the success of the Urban Debate League. At the same time, they suggest how debate pedagogies might fulfill the CCSS’s call for competency-based curricula by fostering a “progression of knowledge and skill mastery” along a continuum of multiple competencies.

Leslie Zorwick and James Wade make an even more sweeping case for argumentation and debate pedagogies in the secondary schools. Debate pedagogies are “uniquely well suited” for programs designed to promote “engagement with civic life,” they argue, and they can do so not just in speech or debate courses but “across the curriculum.” Reviewing the educational literature on civic literacy and engagement, they point out that a debate and argumentation model of learning has long proven effective at improving student reading, speaking, critical thinking, and even student conduct and self-confidence. Debate demands “a depth of knowledge that is seldom required in ordinary classes,” they note, as debaters must develop “a comprehensive grasp of issues relevant to their topic in order to explain their positions and evaluate the arguments of others.” By demanding this “deeper understanding,” they conclude, debate fosters an “ethos of education that is both critical and cooperative,” preparing students for engaged citizenship guided by an ethical code emphasizing reasoned and respectful debate and the “values and responsibilities of citizenship.”

Speech and debate have a lot to contribute to the movement to reform and reinvigorate civic education in America. Going beyond the legalistic political information dispensed in traditional civics courses, speech and debate pedagogies help students develop substantive knowledge about important political controversies, along with the skills and confidence they need to engage in civic life. As we learn from the essays in this special section of *Communication Education*, speech and debate pedagogies can enrich service-learning programs, and they provide a good foundation for a first-year experience, introducing new students not only to college but to life as a citizen. In the nation’s secondary schools, speech and debate pedagogies provide a good answer to the call for competency-based standards, and they can be utilized across the curriculum, at all levels of education and at all sorts of schools. In short, the movement to reform civic education in America represents an opportunity for the communication discipline. In response to *A Crucible Moment’s* call for giving students more experience actually “doing” democracy, speech and debate educators offer solutions that have proven effective since the invention of democracy itself. Engaging students in substantive debate over important public issues is a time-tested method of educating for citizenship. We just need to make that case more effectively.

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