

**Inclusivity at All Levels: Acknowledging the Need to Support & Strengthen Novice and Junior Divisions of NPDA Debate**

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At the 2016 National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) Equity Forum held at the National Tournament in Long Beach, students, judges and coaches from across the nation gathered to discuss ways in which the debate experience could be improved. Following Lauran Schaefer's presentation on rape culture, forum attendees broke into action-oriented, issue-specific groups, tasked to identify how, where, and when problems associated with that issue specifically manifest themselves, and what solutions could be uniquely implemented by individuals, teams and team administrators, tournaments and tournament directors, the NPDA Board and the NPDA community as a whole. Issues discussed included race, gender, team environments and inter-squad relationships, novice and junior divisions, mental and physical well-being, community college experiences, and physical ability and accommodation.<sup>2</sup>

This article will focus on supporting and strengthening novice and junior divisions in NPDA debate, drawing from the findings of the group discussion at the forum, moderated by Western Washington University's Assistant Director of Forensics, Korry Harvey. This piece will be the first of a two part series focused on this topic. Here, I will provide observations regarding the state of novice and junior debate participation, describe the importance of maintaining robust divisions appropriate for all skill levels, and conclude by detailing several factors contributing to

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<sup>2</sup> Findings from the issue groups can be found on [net-benefits.net](http://net-benefits.net) and in the College Parli Debate Facebook Group Page.

limited participation in these divisions. Part II of this series will outline solutions to the challenges for a multitude of actors, following the aforementioned model. This article is not intended to provide a conclusive summary of novice and junior debate participation, nor comprehensively list every benefit and challenge associated with it. Rather, it serves as a catalyst for greater discussion and data collection on this issue.

### **What is the state of novice and junior debate?**

A very brief, preliminary examination of tournament participation data from the 2015-2016 debate season shows that many tournaments did not hold competition in three separate skill divisions. Of the eighteen tournaments listed on Parlitournament.com for the 2015-2016 season, pairing data indicates only two tournaments held competition in three skill divisions. Six tournaments provided two divisions of competition, and ten tournaments only hosted competition in one division.<sup>3</sup>

This is a limited and imperfect sample<sup>4</sup>, but demonstrates that many tournaments received insufficient entries to run both novice and junior divisions, or chose not to provide multiple divisions of competition for one reason or another. This sample also includes tournaments in a variety of regions, indicating that the issue is not limited to one region in

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<sup>3</sup> Hosted all divisions: Steve Hunt Classic, Paul Winters Invitational. Hosted two divisions: Biggest Little City Classic, James Al Johnson Memorial, Mahaffey Memorial, Pacific Scheller, Winter at the Beach, Sunset Cliffs Classic. Hosted one division: Georgia B. Bowman Invitational, Bearcat Classic, Hunsaker Invitational, Mile High Parts I and II, Red Raider Wildcat Parts I and II, Point Loma Round Robin, NPDA Nationals, NPTE Nationals.

<sup>4</sup> This sample includes a round robin (which are traditionally geared toward experienced debaters) and NPTE (where qualification points can only be earned in the open division). Though these are not “regular tournaments,” and are not intended for novice and junior debaters, I left these in my findings because it raises important questions about how many “special, exclusive tournament” opportunities are afforded to experienced debaters vs. less experienced debaters. Some tournaments may have also held “break out” finals rounds for novice or junior division debaters despite collapsing divisions.

particular. It is my hope that these troubling initial findings drive our community to collect more thorough data related to this issue.

### **Why are novice and junior divisions important?**

If the NPDA community is to move forward with efforts to provide and grow novice and junior divisions, we must do so with awareness of its benefits. First and foremost, the strength of novice and junior divisions are often a good metric of the health and sustainability of the activity as a whole. Robust novice pools alleviate gaps in the junior division when students move from junior into the open division or leave the activity. Well-populated junior division pools alleviate gaps in the open division when students graduate or leave the activity. When these gaps become too large, and there are far more students leaving than are joining for long enough, the very existence of our activity can become threatened.

Second, when novice and junior divisions do not contain enough participants, tournament directors are often forced to choose between collapsing divisions or creating “round robin” experiences in which teams may debate the same team multiple times, producing detrimental psychological and educational effects. The former is unfortunate because when students new to the activity are forced into rounds against students who have much more debate experience, they are more likely to lose, and lose badly. Those rounds can often overwhelm, confuse, and cause students to question whether or not they will ever succeed in the activity given that they may not follow the pace, jargon, or arguments of the other team. They may also be ridiculed or become subject to micro-aggressions for their lack of awareness. Students are also sometimes not informed that tournaments will collapse divisions until the morning of the tournament when entries are finalized, eliminating the ability for students to mentally and academically prepare for the sudden increase in rigor, causing added anxiety.

I would like to pause to note that the debaters competing in the novice and junior divisions are in a more emotionally, socially, and competitively vulnerable position than are those with years of debate experience. Many are trying an extremely challenging activity for the first time (an activity that often involves a tremendous amount of esoteric argumentative construction and jargon). They likely don't know competitors or judges beyond their own teams, are susceptible to micro-aggressions related to their experience, and might not even have a strong support system from their own teams yet. These are often students with nothing to lose by leaving the activity if they have a negative experience.

Furthermore, when tournaments force small divisions into round robin experiences, this often limits students' exposure to unique perspectives and argumentative styles from additional teams, harming education. Pairings and results in these types of tournaments can also be skewed if one squad brings a disproportionately higher number of novice or junior debaters relative to other squads participating in those divisions, creating an above average number of pull-ups to avoid same-squad debates.

Third, participants without previous debate experience often receive their first impression of debate and the NPDA community in the novice or junior division. Their experiences here determine how comfortable they are continuing to participate in other divisions, and how much effort they want to put into the activity competitively, academically, and socially. As a community, we should welcome new debaters, and place great value on making sure they have positive first experiences.

Fourth, some programs rely almost exclusively on debaters that may not have a great deal of previous debate experience, or that may not have the time to gain the skills necessary to comfortably compete in the open division. This is true for programs that do not have strong high

school or middle school feeder programs, community colleges where students may only receive a few years of debate instruction, and those without substantial scholarship money to recruit students who are familiar enough with the activity to bypass the novice and junior divisions.

Fifth, debate provides limitless opportunities for education, personal development, and social and professional growth. Every student deserves the chance to reap maximum benefits of debate by participating in a division in which they feel comfortable competing. When new debaters leave the activity early because they were made to feel like they did not belong, our community has prevented them from accessing opportunities to gain valuable advocacy skills.

Sixth, healthy novice and junior divisions foster diverse student participation. The community has long observed that higher numbers of racial and gender minority students participate in novice and junior divisions. Additionally, international students, ESL students, and students who only have a quarter or semester to try debate may not feel comfortable competing in the open division. The NPDA community should provide opportunities for those students to compete in an appropriate division, and should acknowledge the great value those students bring to the activity.

### **What are some factors perceived to be limiting the novice and junior divisions?**

Listed below are individual challenges to novice and junior division participation. However, there is not one sole cause limiting participation, and exclusion based on experience often intersects with other physical, mental, emotional, experiential, or spiritual traits that exacerbate these feelings of exclusion. Therefore, conversations on this issue cannot happen in a vacuum. While there are steps our community can take to make an immediate impact, we must simultaneously construct solutions across all areas of inequity in our activity in order to thoroughly combat this particular issue.

First, novice and junior divisions and their participants are not always met with a sense of welcome and respect in and outside of competition. In competition, this often stems from an overemphasis on “traditional” debate practices, and hesitancy to equally evaluate alternative presentations created by choice or lack of awareness of “normative” debate. Judges often audibly express dismay when receiving novice or junior ballots, and may exhibit hurtful behaviors during these debates such as eye-rolling, sighing, and/or multi-tasking on their computers. These practices reinforce the idea that these divisions are lesser, and that speeches not given in a normative fashion are somehow undeserving of attention. Newer students may also be excluded from social events hosted by debate participants, or feel isolated or intimidated when they attend these social events.

Second, students in the novice and junior divisions are sometimes ill prepared for competitions, facing difficulties addressing particular arguments, argumentative styles, or keeping up with fast paced debates they may encounter in tournaments. In large doses, this can damage self-esteem, and lead students to believe they’ll never succeed competitively. As described earlier, this tendency can be worsened when divisions collapse, increasing the number of “mismatched” rounds in which very experienced debaters compete directly against new debaters.

Third, team administrators occasionally “sand bag” divisions. This competitive practice, in which students are registered in inappropriate skill divisions to favor their competitive chances and/or increase the chance of winning a team sweepstakes award tend to result in additional losses for less experienced students.

Fourth, the NPDA community often culturally deprioritizes novice and junior divisions in a multitude of ways. At tournaments, the “best” judges often are assigned to the open division

and students can be pushed through skill divisions too rapidly due to perceived lack of value in the novice and junior divisions or to force tournaments to hold extra out rounds resulting in additional NPTE points. Individual team cultures often revolve around experienced teams, and some teams do not expend extra effort building their novice teams given their ability to maintain robust team membership in the open division.

Fifth, there is little recognition for newer debaters at tournaments. Many debaters will go through years of debate without ever winning a trophy, or hearing their name called at an awards ceremony. This problem is compounded when divisions collapse and highly experienced debaters outperform newer debaters. Even when tournaments are able to host separate novice and junior divisions (or have “break out” novice and junior final rounds), the emphasis during award ceremonies is primarily on the open division. While there is great value in recognizing great effort and talent, we should also remember to appreciate the important perspectives brought to our activity by all students, not just those who garner our adulation at award ceremonies.

Sixth, institutional and individual financial and resource barriers can limit debate participation, especially in the novice and junior divisions. For many teams, funding allocated toward traveling new debaters directly trades off with travel opportunities for open debaters. Given that more experienced debaters have greater demonstrated commitment to the team, have the opportunity to earn NPTE points, and provide a chance of succeeding at the “highest” level of competition thus earning favor with university administrators and the media, teams often choose to fund these teams instead. Coaches may also not have the time to both train experienced debaters, and introduce new debaters to the fundamentals. Additionally, some programs require students to pay for their competitive travel. In these instances, new students may be disincentivized from participation due to financial inability.

Lastly, not all challenges center on the retention of novice and junior debaters. Even if all retention efforts are successful, the consistent recruitment of diverse students into the novice and junior divisions is necessary to maintain all three divisions of competition. Many team administrators lack the will or ability to recruit and train new debate students who would begin in the novice and junior divisions.

In conclusion, I would like to call upon the NPDA community to increase discussion on this vital issue. Let us join forces to ensure the benefits of debate are accessible to all students, regardless of experience.