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The Re-Education of an Old Debater

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As an intercollegiate debater during the latter half of the 1960s, I remember receiving a constant message about oral argument from my coach, Dr. David A. Williams (now a professor at the University of Arizona): “Remember, Jim, real people don’t think and argue like we do in debate rounds. Academic debate is a laboratory skill; real-life argument is different.” That was hard advice to internalize at the time, because all my closest friends were debaters, too, and our discussions sounded like some sort of argumentative nightmare that no non-debater could decipher.

Then I finished my undergraduate degree.

In graduate school I soon found myself in the midst of a lot of graduate students who had not been debaters, so they didn’t know “the game,” and I encountered a number of professors who disliked intensely the debate-inspired strategies of slash and attack. It took some time, but I finally determined that life was not a first-negative constructive speech, that I had better modify my communication behavior if I was to be successful. Since no one outside an academic debate round carried a flow sheet to follow arguments, it was silly to argue as if they did. It took awhile, but I learned Dr. Williams’ lesson—or so I thought.

In the thirty-plus years since I last graced the podium in a debate round, and in the twenty-plus years since I’ve seen an intercollegiate debate, I have modified my style of argumentation to better match that of non-debaters. I rid myself of the tendency to scream for evidence to support all claims, to attack an opponent with a cross-examiner’s vitriolic viciousness, and, most thankfully, stopped yelling, “Look at the flow!”. I thought I had become human; I thought I had shed the robes of the first negative speaker.

Then it happened.

“It” was the decision by my university to look carefully and seriously at the possibility of changing from the quarter system to a semester system, something that has affected a great many universities in this country the past decade. Putting on my debater’s hat of wanting to research the topic in detail before rendering a verdict, I went on an evidence binge much like my debate days in District I. And it was sort of fun to start digging out information like that again.

After pulling together materials that measure just over two inches thick in a three-ring binder, I reached the conclusion that my university would be better served by converting to a semester system, abandoning the calendar structure we had been on for 30 years. Since I

am the chair of the department with the largest number of majors on campus, and since I have served as the elected president of the faculty on four occasions, my views on the calendar were sought out, and I was more than willing to share them. When other faculty throughout the university began to express their preference for quarters, the leadership of our faculty governance system decided to hold a debate to have these opinions aired. I was asked to be a participant in that debate.

It took me almost a full second to agree to take part, although I was a bit concerned about the not-yet-determined format for the debate. My only "requirement" for my participation was that there be an actual debate, that it not be structured like the putative Presidential "debates" of every four years. The final format was to my liking: two debaters on each side of the issue, each giving an eight-minute constructive; each debater would be cross-examined for three minutes by an opposing debater; ten minutes of audience questions to both sides; and one final five-minute summary by each side. It was the cross-x part that had me excited the most.

I was paired with another former debater; our opponents were both non-debaters. Since we were advocating change, we were assigned the affirmative side on the calendar issue, and my partner and I leapt into the chore of organizing our "case." Because of my experience in dealing with "the spread" decades before in District I, and because of the huge amount of research I had accumulated on the topic, we decided that I would be the second affirmative speaker so that I could resupport our case and counter the negative's arguments. For simplicity's sake, we opted for an easily-understandable comparative advantage structure that would be clear and rational for the general faculty audience. We were ready.

THE GREAT DEBATE

After a few weeks of publicity for the debate, the big day finally came. I was disappointed to find only about 40 of the university faculty showed up—out of 500, but the show went on as scheduled. And it was quite a show.

As my partner rolled out our first affirmative case, I was bouncing up and down in anxious anticipation of negative refutation. It had been so long since I had defended a case in a formal debate format that I found myself to really be excited. I felt like I was visiting an old friend I hadn't seen for decades, and I could feel the "rush" of anticipated verbal combat pushing up my blood pressure. That is a feeling that only a former debater can recall.

After our case was presented, I was dismayed to find the faculty upholding the negative position virtually disregarding our case in favor of their pre-planned and pre-written presentation. It was like the college debates of the 1930s, wherein there was no direct clash, no head-to-head meeting of the main issues? Not surprisingly, the audience looked confused.

So, remembering what Dave Williams taught me (if he reads this, he'll probably flinch), I took the podium and banged away at the negative's argumentative transgressions, gleefully pointing out that the affirmative case had gone ninety-five percent untouched. Then, I resupported our position with additional evidence and concluded my constructive with three minutes of refutation of the principal negative positions.

While that speech was okay, although I did find it difficult to try to return to my "warp speed" of debate delivery of 30 years before, my cross-examination of the second negative speaker was very enjoyable: three solid minutes of face-to-face hammering. If it had been a prizefight, the referee would have stopped the bout on cuts. The negative could avoid our case in prepared speeches, but they could not avoid the heat of directed cross-examination.

That experience so pumped me up that it carried over to our final summation presentation. Suddenly, all those years disappeared; I felt like it was 1968 again. I was incredibly articulate, funny, punishing, etc., It was a wonderful end to the debate, and the nonverbals from the audience were obvious: we had cleaned clock. Not only had I driven silver nails

into the negative coffin, I had smashed the coffin itself with a silver hammer. Even one of the negative speakers told me that he would never again face me in public debate, that he felt like a child who had just been rebuked by a parent.

Dave Williams would have been proud!

THE REAL DEBATE

The public debate took place on a late Tuesday afternoon, and the faculty list-serve came alive with semester v. quarter messages the next day. Since so many faculty had not attended the debate, there were many requests for information about what had happened, what had been the main arguments, etc. It reminded me of students trying to find notes for a class they had missed.

After several days of this sort of informational inquiry, an interesting thing happened. Opponents of the semester calendar began to flood the list-serve with messages of doom and fear, messages that indicated the world would end if we changed calendars. Despite the absence of any supporting evidence, these folks began to claim that (a) faculty workload would be increased dramatically under semesters, (b) faculty's retirement plans might be jeopardized, and (c) just about every other fear you could imagine, short of the complete collapse of western civilization. It reminded me of several junior varsity debaters years before who attacked every affirmative case with the argument that "the affirmative will destroy the food chain." The fears advanced were equally silly.

It was interesting to observe that the primary proponents of these unsupported gloom-and-doom prophesies were senior level faculty in the Department of English, people, it turned out, who were fearful they might have to give up their poorly subscribed esoteric literature courses to teach a basic composition course now and again. They reasoned that any change in calendars inherently would work to their disadvantage, and they feared having to teach first-year students how to write. Their word choice made it very clear that they considered the instruction of basic composition to be beneath them, that that was the province of lowly instructors and lecturers.

This list-serve debate (and, yes, I waded in with a wide array of arguments, refutation, and evidence) went on for several weeks, and the fears of change increased exponentially during that time. Regardless of the fact that 90 percent of the country's colleges and universities were on semesters, and regardless of the fact that all of them were doing well, the proponents of fear maintained a daily barrage of impending death and destruction. I kept remembering Spiro Agnew's great alliterative line of "nattering nabobs of negativism" as one slippery slope argument after another came forth from the naysayers.

As this e-mail extravaganza continued, I was dismayed by two developments. First, the university administration refused to take any part in the discussion, especially as it related to faculty workload concerns. Instead of assuring faculty that there would not be a draconian increase in workload, the administration only made vague comments that the conversion must be "revenue neutral." That unexplained phrase did nothing to allay fears promulgated by the opponents of change.

More troubling to me, however, in the final two weeks of the list-serve debate, was the presentation of fabricated "evidence" by the negativists, information that purported to prove (a) all institutions who had switched to semesters lost a big chunk of enrollment, (b) summer teaching opportunities for faculty would be reduced drastically, and (c) the costs of conversion would take resources away from faculty raise pools. Although I had hard evidence to refute those claims, the negativists kept repeating their contentions without responding to my factual refutation. That was the part of the matter that frustrated me the most. They never would have been able to do that sort of thing in a debate round because

of face-to-face confrontation, but they could assert whatever they wanted with impunity via our computer system.

THE FACULTY VOTE

After six weeks of faceless debate, the administration held a formal faculty vote on the calendar question. I knew that the proponents of fear would carry the day, because I had not been able to dispell the daily barrage of impending doom, but I was surprised by the vote margin. I thought that the negativists would win with a 55-45 split; I was astounded when the vote came in at 65-35 against change. All the research, arguments, and evidence I had offered had not been persuasive. The faculty decided to stay with our archaic—but safe—system.

MY LESSONS

After countless hours of research and oral/e-mail argument, I reflected upon this debate experience to see what I had learned, trying to keep my ego out of consideration. These are the lessons I learned:

First, despite a preponderance of evidence and specific refutation, I found that people will refuse to hear what they do not want to hear. As I noted earlier, my evidentiary-based refutation had little impact, because fears of change were so great that my arguments and evidence made no headway against those fears.

Second, I found that fear is an even more persuasive factor than I had realized. Combined with personal self-interest, fear can be a great motivating factor, and it caused a usually-lethargic university faculty to vote on the calendar issue in unprecedented numbers.

Third, I lost a great deal of respect for several faculty in other departments, especially those who were willing to manufacture arguments and/or evidence to support their opposition to change. I concluded that some of these folks were not concerned with ethics when their own selfish interests were involved.

Fourth, inertia is an even more powerful force in higher education than ever has been noted in any issue of *THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION*.

Fifth, I was frustrated by the complete absence of leadership by the members of the central administration on the issue. Our provost, our chief academic officer, took a Pilate-like position during the many weeks of debate and discussion, a complete hands-off posture. Since many of the fears of change were based upon unknowns (teaching load; summer teaching opportunities), the provost could have provided specific information that would have either exploded or concretized those fears, providing real information upon which to base a decision. However, the provost—and all members of the central administration—took the position of non-involved spectators, a total lack of leadership in an important issue.

Finally, although I ended up on the “losing” side, I did enjoy the experience, especially the actual debate encounter itself. Not only was the faculty debate fun, it proved that lessons learned from Dave Williams decades ago can resurface and be applicable today. And, as Dr. Williams said to me so many times years ago, I learned that you could win “the flow,” but still lose the decision in the real world of argumentative reasoning.

REFERENCES AND NOTES.

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