

**The University of Massachusetts Policy Debate Team
Request for Administrative Support**

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Executive Summary:

The University of Massachusetts Policy Debate Team is hoping to gain the Administration's support in our search to find a coach. Whether through association and funding from one or many academic departments or through some other means, the team is willing to work with whomever and through whatever means necessary to facilitate this process.

Debate is an important activity to any university. Over 400 colleges and universities across the nation sponsor teams, and it is considered an essential part of a modern university education. Debate is important to a University because it fosters skills such as critical thinking, oral presentation, and extensive research, which are essential for success not only in a collegiate setting but also in life. Furthermore, because debate allows for direct competition with other institutions and recruitment of top students it fits into the broader vision that the administration has advocated for the university.

A coach is critical for the success of any debate program. This University has a long and interesting history concerning policy debate. For a period of about thirty years from the 1950s until the 1980s, UMass had one of the strongest debate programs in the nation, yet by the mid 1990s the program was gone. One of the reasons for this is that in 1980 the team lost their coach and leader of their program. The team was all but extinct until four years ago when a group of students took it upon themselves to resuscitate the program. The historical example of our own university clearly illustrates how essential a coach is for the success of a debate program.

Request and Process:

Our primary request is for the resources to acquire a coach. Because of the nature of debate, a coach is critical to both the competitive success and longevity of any program. Policy debate is a specialized activity that requires hours of research and preparation, and skills which only comes from years of experience. Going to tournaments imposes many logistical barriers, which require substantial amounts of time to surmount. Teams which we compete against have coaches who are able to devote time to these activities that we as undergraduates simply do not have. Additionally, general debate history demonstrates that student run teams tend to fail after core members graduate. The presence of a coach provides the support necessary to be competitive and the foundation for an enduring team. Most long-term debate programs have a faculty member who is responsible for administering the program and one or more assistant coaches. A director of debate is usually a tenure-track position, but hired coaches in staff positions or graduate students run some programs where faculty directors are not a viable option.

As well as coaching, in order to reestablish ourselves as one of the preeminent programs in the country it would be necessary to obtain additional resources. One thing we need is more funding; it varies immensely from school to school, but most competitive programs have a travel budget between \$15,000-\$30,000. Program facilities, of which we currently

have none, would also be beneficial. For other schools, facilities vary from a closet (which enables debaters to store evidence) to a floor of an academic building. Many debate programs have a central squad room where students can work and practice. Access to a photocopier and computer resources are a significant help.

Though it undoubtedly is missing details and possibilities, the following is our initial conceptualization of how we may be able to secure the resources necessary for our team. Advised by members in the debate community, our first step is to discuss our situation with either the Chancellor or Vice Chancellor, and Provost. Recognizing they may not be able to directly help us, we hope to garner their support and solicit ideas for how to proceed. With the support of administration, we will then present our idea to potentially interested schools and departments within in the University, with the hope of being instituted as a high level activity within an academic department. Working with whatever institutional support we have gained along the way, to determine the most viable coaching option, we would then create a process for hiring a coach. Regardless of what is decided to be the most feasible option, due to the nature of our squad, the team would like to maintain an active role in the selection of a coach.

Justification:

Numerous studies have documented the enormous benefits that competitive policy debating offers students. Professionals across all fields cite their experience on their high school and college debate teams as a key aspect of their current success. In a study by former UMass Policy Debate Coach Ron Matlon, 30% of former debaters had become university educators, 15% top corporate executives, and 10% workers in the executive or legislative branches of government. Also, of 703 former debaters surveyed 633 had at least 1 advanced degree, 209 had more than one, 40% had law degrees, 40% had master's degrees, and 20% had doctoral degrees.¹ In addition, 70.3% of law school deans recommend participation in intercollegiate debate² The professions that include former debaters amongst their highest ranks include law, academics, politics, broadcasting, business, government, public relations, and literature. Debate is truly one of the best co-curricular activities that students can engage in to better themselves and advance their careers.

Moreover, debate is an amazing method of education. Debate encourages self-aware, critical students whose own interests drive their research and advocacy. This type of education draws out the best in students. For one, it fosters critical thinking because policy debaters are required to process and apply a vast amount of information. Furthermore, debaters become skilled at addressing multiple sides of an argument, which allows students to develop critical understanding. Debate also requires students to do a significant amount of research. The process of gathering, evaluating, and preparing

¹ Matlon, R. J., and Keele, L.M. "A Survey of Participants in the National Debate Tournament, 1947-1980." *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 20 (1984): 194-205.

²Swanson, D.R. and Zeuschner, R.F. "Participating in Collegiate Forensics". Dubuque, IA: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1983.

information creates core skills that will benefit students for the rest of their lives. Finally, competitive academic debating fosters effective oral presentation skills. The very nature of debate as a competitive speaking activity dictates that students will learn to speak effectively and persuasively.

Even beyond the benefits to the students, a strong debate team at UMass would also have many benefits for the university itself. By competing at regional and national tournaments, team members would interact with students from all over the country, representing the University in a positive way. Since debate is a prestigious high school activity, debate would also allow for the recruitment of many excellent students. Finally, because of the long and storied history of debate at UMass, we have a potentially strong alumni network, that, as evidenced from their support of the team even when the team did not exist, would only continue to grow.

Organizational Information:

Today the Debate Program at UMass consists of about 12 core members. We are a Registered Student Organization and have been since the spring of 2001. As the team constitution stipulates there are two co-chairs, a treasurer and a facilitator that are elected to a one-year term as voted by a majority of the team. We have two general team meetings a week and also an additional officers meeting.

Despite the relative obscurity of the UMass Policy Debate Team in the last few years, debate has a long and interesting history here. The program began in 1909 and has had many notable members including Calvin Coolidge and William Prince (the namesake of Prince dormitory). In the late 1950's debate was instated as a high level activity within the Department of Speech. In 1966, Ronald Matlon, the program's most successful coach, was appointed as director. For the next twenty years, UMass was known as a national power, regularly winning tournaments, qualifying for the National Debate Tournament, and hosting a variety of debated related activities. During this span of time, which could be referred to as the program's golden years, the team reached its pinnacle of success. In fact, many members of the team during those years are now program directors and coaches at other schools.

When Matlon left UMass for the University of Arizona sometime around 1980, however, the team slowly began to crumble. With Matlon's departure the Communication Department took away the faculty position that he had held. Although pleas from the team convinced the department to hire a series of non-faculty coaches, the program continued to loose momentum. While it is not known when the team formally ended, it was non-existent on the campus by the late 1990s.

In the fall of 2000, a small group of students decided to start a policy debate team, unaware of the long history preceding them. The active membership for the first year was four people. Due to the SGA meltdown during the 00/01 school year, the team was not recognized as an RSO until the spring of 2001. In the fall of 2001, the team joined the

Cross-Examination Debate Association (CEDA), and began actively competing with other schools. Since that time, the team has continually grown, each year participating in more tournaments and with greater success.

Conclusion:

The UMass Policy Debate team is at a critical juncture in its current history. Core members of the original group who started the team are graduating, and we need support to continue momentum. Hopefully, this document has given some idea of the benefits of debate and ways the team could move forward. All suggestions and help are very appreciated, and we would like to thank you for taking the time to consider our proposal.