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POSITIONAL COMPETITION: MORE THAN JUST A PLAN TEXT

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Introduction

Whether for disadvantages, kritiks, or counterplans, a central question of many contemporary policy debates asks what the affirmative is responsible for defending. Disadvantage link debates often center on the agent or a specific interpretation of fiat. For kritiks, this debate often concerns the method used by the affirmative to accumulate knowledge, the affirmative's ontology, or the representations used to justify the affirmative plan. For counterplan competition, the question of the debate frequently concerns what the affirmative must defend as the mandate of the plan. The negative, in many situations, argues that the affirmative must defend a strict and broad interpretation of fiat as a mandate of the plan—oftentimes necessitating unconditionality, immediacy, and certainty. Many times, as of the First Affirmative Constructive in policy debate (or 1AC), the affirmative team has not taken a position on these questions, yet finds themselves accountable for the baggage associated with a negative-leaning interpretation of fiat. This article focuses on this third concern: counterplan competition. Specifically, I advocate a new model that determines counterplan competition on positions made by the affirmative, not assumptions of the process of the plan: positional competition.

This article proposes an evolved interpretation of functional competition—the idea that competition derives from differences of *actions* of the counterplan and the plan instead of differences of *words* alone—that incorporates the benefits of a context-based discussion, one not solely focused on the one-sentence plan text, while avoiding the disadvantages of functional competition *ad absurdum*. Quite simply, positional competition closely examines the affirmative's claims—in the 1AC, cross-examination of the 1AC, the Second Affirmative Construction (or 2AC) and cross-examination of the 2AC—and allows for competitive counterplans based on interpretations of the plan described in these speeches. This approach considers not solely at the text of the plan (current conceptions of textual competition) nor off of unspoken assumptions of the plan (current conceptions of functional competition). Instead, positions taken by the affirmative

about the mandate of the plan after the 1AC may be thought of as *binding amendments* to the plan text. This article begins by introducing a simple definition of positional competition, and then discusses the benefits of positional competition relative to textual and functional competition.

What is Positional Competition?

Articles about counterplan competition in the last couple of decades have focused mainly on the importance of text, not context, of the affirmative plan. Ross Smith noted the importance of a precise, well thought-out, counterplan text.¹ Roger Solt argued that although context surrounding the plan is important, the notion that philosophical difference alone could garner competition for counterplans is “almost universally rejected by debate theorists.”²

In contemporary policy debate, camps are divided over what “counts” as a legitimate, competitive counterplan. Views of counterplan competition (textual versus functional) diverge on whether the words of the plan should exclusively determine competitiveness of the counterplan or whether the function or action of the plan causes a disadvantage that does not link to the action of the counterplan. Textual competition, too often, facilitates a superficial discussion of the plan and counterplan texts, as if context is entirely irrelevant. Similarly, the negative often uses functional competition to create contrived and self-serving interpretations of normal means that skirt the discussion of the affirmative itself. This paper expands on these theoretical foundations to introduce a more malleable and context-based model for competition: positional competition.

A counterplan competes “positionally” if the affirmative chooses to take a position on a specific question about the implementation of the plan, and the negative can craft a disadvantage to that position that is avoided through a counterplan that differs from the affirmative’s position. My desire is simple; I hope to avoid the answer to cross-examination questions of “we will defend (X) for the purposes of your disadvantages but not for your counterplan competition.” Rather, if the affirmative chooses to defend a specific process as the implementation of the plan, then the negative should be able to have both disadvantage links and counterplan competition based on that position taken by the affirmative. Similarly, if the affirmative chooses to be vague, or not take a

¹ Ross Smith, *The International Counterplan: A Survey of Issues*, DEBATER’S RESEARCH GUIDE, 2008, available at <http://groups.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/DRGArticles/Smith1998Russia.htm>.

² Roger Solt, *Counterplan Competition: Permutations and Beyond*, DEBATER’S RESEARCH GUIDE, 1985, available at <http://groups.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/DRGArticles/Solt1985Water.htm>.

position on a question that the negative asks about the action of the plan, then the negative should have the right to solvency arguments based on this vagueness. However, the negative should not be able to successfully argue that a counterplan is competitive based on a position that the affirmative does not take or claim to defend. To clarify what I mean by “positional competition,” I define terms and provide examples.

In order for the affirmative to “take a position,” they must defend a specific claim or definitively answer a cross-examination question. For example, if the affirmative claims that “only Congressional action is modeled internationally,” then the counterplan that chooses not to use Congress competes if there is a disadvantage to Congressional action that does not also link to the actor of the counterplan. This counterplan competes even if the plan text uses “The United States Federal Government” or “The Congress of the United States” as the actor, because the affirmative has taken a position on who must act (only Congress) to achieve solvency for the modeling portion of their affirmative. This position should be assumed to be a binding amendment to the plan text. As another example, if the negative asks an affirmative that uses the Supreme Court, “Does any justice vote against the plan?” and the affirmative answers “Yes, Justice Kennedy” (possibly for the purposes of link turning the judicial capital disadvantage), then the counterplan to have “The Supreme Court rule, on a 9-0 decision” competes if the negative has a disadvantage to Kennedy voting against the plan, or an advantage to ruling on a 9-0 as compared to a non-unanimous decision.

What does it mean to “differ from the affirmative’s plan?” The answer to this question is simple, yet still allows ample ground for debate. To “differ” means to be “unlike” or “distinct.”³ The examples above are relatively clear as to what it means to “differ,” yet there is a gray area. If there is a disadvantage to the affirmative’s interpretation of the plan’s enactment that can be avoided by a differently worded counterplan text, then that counterplan competes. Several examples will be provided below of positionally competitive counterplans that include all of the words in the affirmative’s plan, plus more. These counterplans would not compete textually, yet are distinct from the position taken by the affirmative.

³ “Differ,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differ>.

Drawbacks of Textual Competition

Policy debate currently conceives of textual competition as the comparison between the words in the plan and the words in the counterplan and asks the questions: “Does the counterplan text remove a component of the plan text?” and “Is there a net-benefit derived from this difference?” While this might seem straight forward, it becomes quite complicated in practice. Assume for example that a plan text reads: “The United States federal government should substantially increase social services for persons living in poverty in the United States.” If the negative wants to disprove the plan, it is often in their strategic interest to “ban the plan” as a counterplan. This counterplan text would read: “The United States federal government should not increase social services for persons living in poverty in the United States.” The single affirmative advantage is domestic poverty. From the standpoint of a judge ascribing to the textual competition camp, this counterplan would not compete because the counterplan is all of the plan text plus one word, “not.” Pragmatically, the two proposals (counterplan and plan) are diametrically opposed. One cannot both increase social services and ban an increase in social services at the same time. Despite the logical nature of the counterplan, it is excluded based on standards of textual competition.

There are several other incarnations of textual competition that are equally illogical. For this example, assume that the plan text reads: “The United States federal government should use nuclear weapons only if attacked with nuclear weapons first.” The single advantage is nuclear non-proliferation credibility. This declaration of No First Use has several widely discussed issues that form an important and (should be) legitimate counterplan ground. Suppose the counterplan text reads: “The United States federal government should only use nuclear weapons if attacked with nuclear or biological weapons first.” Once again, those in the textual competition camp would state that the counterplan adds the words “or biological weapons” and therefore is a plan-plus counterplan (a counter-plan that merely adds something to the plan), and does not compete. Logically, however, the action of the plan is less than the plan. The plan, in a positional sense, says that in the list of attacks on the US (cyber, conventional, biological, chemical, nuclear, etc.) only a nuclear attack merits a nuclear response. The counterplan makes a less strong statement: that both a nuclear and biological attack merits a nuclear response.

It is important to note that these counterplan examples compete based explicit statements made in the 1AC—that social services should be increased and that nuclear weapons would be used in response to only a nuclear attack on the United States. They do not compete off of “normal means” or an implicit assumption

about what the affirmative might eventually look like. These counterplans compete with “positions” taken in the 1AC, and are thus competitive to a judge ascribing to the role of positional competition.

Drawbacks of Functional Competition

Functional competition is most commonly described as the “most real world” or the “only real world” way to evaluate competing advocacies. In making this claim, debaters are stating that instead of simply looking at words, the negative should craft competitive counterplans based on the action of the plan and the action of the counterplan: are the counterplan and the plan different, and is there a net-benefit based on this difference? In many ways, this description is accurate. Functionally competitive counterplans often look at the pragmatic positions taken by the affirmative, and attempt to create a distinction action. However, functional competition *ad absurdum* is far from practical, educational, or real world. Often times, functionally competitive counterplans become a crutch that comes directly at the expense of in-depth topic focused research and debate.⁴

The most often cited example of the anti-educational counterplan produced by a model of competition based purely on function is the “delay” counterplan.⁵ Assume for this example that the plan text reads: The United States federal government should eliminate nearly all cotton subsidies. The single advantage is that cotton subsidies disadvantage African farmers, which causes social dislocation and conflict. Importantly, nothing in the 1AC, 2AC, or cross-examinations has hinted that the plan is immediate, rather, just that the policy of removing subsidies would be beneficial. If the negative chose to read a delay counterplan, with a political capital disadvantage, the counterplan text would read: “The United States federal government should eliminate nearly all cotton subsidies after Congress lifts the debt ceiling.” Textual competitors would say this counterplan fails to compete because it is the plan plus more words. Functional competitors would say this counterplan competes because an affirmative burden is to defend immediacy. Importantly, nothing about the counterplan tests any position actually taken by the affirmative.

Now, imagine an affirmative that had an advantage (position) that demanded immediacy. For example, if the plan text read: The United States federal

⁴ Phil Kerpen, *The Problem of Plan-Contingent Counterplans*, NDCA NEWSLETTER, 2002, available at <http://www.philkerpen.com/?q=node/7>

⁵ Theodore Prosis & Trond Jacobsen, *Policy Advocacy and Delaying Action as Refutation: Implications for Argumentative Pedagogy*, 17 CONTEM. ARG. & DEBATE, at 53–66 (1996).

government should ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and had an advantage based on the plan passing before the Nuclear Posture Review in December, 2010. Therefore, in a world of positional competition, the counterplan would compete if it reads: “The United States federal government should ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty after the Nuclear Posture Review.” For positional competitors, this counterplan competes because it is distinct from a specific mandate of the affirmative: that the plan happens before the Nuclear Posture Review.

Some argue that the interpretation that a counterplan must be both textually and functionally competitive may resolve some of these concerns. While it may address many of the disadvantages to functional competition, it is too universal because it excludes non-textually competitive counterplans that are necessary tests of the affirmative. For example, a uniqueness counterplan that bans the plan is not competitive. Moreover, the delay counterplan *never* competes in this model, even when the affirmative has taken a position that the plan must happen immediately to solve an affirmative advantage. Several other examples are discussed below; but, an advantage of positional competition is that it allows competition to be determined by stances taken in a specific debate, not based on a strict and universal standard.

In Defense of Positional Competition

Prior authors have argued for the legitimacy of the plan-inclusive counterplan (PIC) because:

- (1) It tests all parts of the affirmative from different angles.
- (2) It proves that in the face of a substantial harm in the status quo, “the affirmative could not come up with the best plan.”
- (3) It “discourages affirmatives from putting extra mandates in their plans to avoid negative arguments.” Otherwise, affirmatives would “ditch parts” of the plan as the negative attacked them.⁶

These arguments in favor of plan-inclusive counterplans apply equally to positional competition. The affirmative has nearly infinite preparation time to decipher the most advantageous way to implement the plan, and think of possible negative objections. If the affirmative is allowed to say that a specific part of the

⁶ See, e.g., Paul Skiermont, *The Affirmative's Juvenile Complaint: In Defense of Plan-Inclusive Counterplans* DEBATER'S RESEARCH GUIDE 1996, available at <http://groups.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/DRGArticles/Skiermont1996JuvenileCrime.htm>.

plan only happens “for purposes of the negative’s disadvantages” then the affirmative has the cards stacked even further in their favor, and can avoid arguments that the affirmative should be held accountable for. Moreover, if the affirmative chooses to “spike” negative arguments by interpreting the plan in specific ways, the negative should be able to test those spikes via both counterplans *and* disadvantages. For example, if the affirmative argues that their plan happens only after consultation with Japan, then, even if this position is not the plan text, the negative should be able to read disadvantages based on the consultation, and a counterplan that competes based on reasons why consultation with Japan is bad as well.

Positional competition is the most logical model for counterplan competition. The notion that the plan text, as written, is wholly representative of the affirmative advocacy (textual competition) denies that the implementation of the plan is equally, if not more, important.

The emergence of implementation as a subject for policy analysis coincides closely with the discovery by policy analysts that decisions are not self-executing. Analysis of policy choices matter very little if the mechanism for implementing those choices is poorly understood⁷

Similarly, the notion that the affirmative must defend any possible interpretation of normal means (functional competition) is equally illogical. Returning to limited affirmative choice for counterplan competition is the best middle ground.

Positional competition discourages functionally competitive counterplans that are either not based in the literature, or compete based on claims not made by the affirmative. In most instances, assuming the affirmative chooses not to take a stance on these issues, the delay, consult, condition, steal the funding, and recommendation counterplans would not compete. However, if the affirmative chose to defend that the plan was immediate, unilateral, unconditional, certain, etc., then this choice would be an informed choice and the affirmative would most likely have advantages based on that decision. This choice model is consistent with the academic notion that affirmatives should be held responsible for choices that they make with regards to the representations surrounding the plan.⁸ The

⁷ Roger Elmore, Roger, *Backward Mapping: Implementation Research and Policy Decisions*, 94 POLI. SCI. QUARTERLY 4, at 601–16 (1980).

⁸ Steve Woods, *Changing the Game? Embracing the Advocacy Standard*, 24 CONTEMP. ARG. & DEBATE at 85–99 (2003).

counterplans listed above often encourage lazy debate and research not focused on the topic; therefore, the educational value of the community would be better served to limit this weapon in the negative's ever-expanding argumentative arsenal.

Although positional competition is not perfect, its advantages outweigh its disadvantages. First, opponents might argue that positional competition encourages affirmative vagueness, which is undoubtedly the strongest counter-argument, but positional competition actually discourages vagueness. In the current models of competition, it has become acceptable to answer questions related to implementation with "we will defend this for the negative's disadvantages, but not for counterplan competition." This illogical answer is vague and anti-educational. Essentially, the affirmative gets all of the advantages of a specific form of implementation, but does not allow counterplans to test that advantage. In the world of positional competition, this answer does not suffice. If a form of implementation is true for disadvantages, then, in positional competition, it is also true for counterplan competition.

As noted earlier, there are also significant risks to affirmative teams choosing to be vague in positional competition. The vaguer the affirmative chooses to be about the plan, the more leeway the negative has to make solvency arguments or advantage take-outs based on that vagueness. For example, if the affirmative chooses not to take a stance on the immediacy of the plan, then, in positional competition, the negative can argue that the process of implementation takes too long to solve an advantage with a short time frame. In positional competition, the affirmative has an incentive to predict likely negative questions, and support their answers with offensive arguments. Moreover, affirmative vagueness is not unique to positional competition. Debate, in its current form, encourages the affirmative to defend less and less about the plan. Positional competition can help rectify this problem.

The model of positional competition deters such vagueness and asks the affirmative to weigh the costs and benefits of choosing to defend a specific action. If an affirmative plan read, "The United States federal government should eliminate nearly all domestic cotton subsidies," but refused to take a stance on what "nearly all" meant, or who defined "nearly all," then the negative should have ample ground to argue that the vagueness of the plan hurts affirmative solvency. More clearly, if politicians were asked to eliminate "nearly all" subsidies, they may possibly conclude that "nearly all" means 51%, or something considerably less than the intuitive interpretation of "nearly all." The negative could also run a market-based disadvantage to the vagueness of the plan that the

failure to inform farmers which subsidies would be eliminated would result in massive market uncertainty that caused substantial increases in food prices across the board. Although, in this instance, the affirmative team's vagueness denied some counterplan or disadvantage link ground, the negative was able to use that vagueness against the affirmative. Hence, positional competition deters overly vague plans and nebulous interpretations of implementation.

If this criticism of positional competition is correct, and affirmative teams will respond by sandbagging their defense of specific proposals, this remedy could be addressed through counterplans introduced in the second negative constructive. Although this corrective carries a new set of theoretical disadvantages, judges may more sympathetic to 2NC counterplans if they are in response to a particular 2AC specification or clarification.

Second, opponents of positional competition might argue that forcing specification makes it too hard on the affirmative, for not all political proposals come ready-made with a defense of the entire implementation process. However, if the negative cannot craft a disadvantage based on vagueness, then the affirmative has no penalty for taking a non-position, and thus there is little impact to the division of ground. Positional competition puts counterplan competition back in the affirmative's hands: if they are not prepared to defend a part of the implementation of the plan, then they need not take a position on that question. The only penalty against the affirmative, in this instance, is that they also cannot claim advantages that require that a specific form of implementation. For example, if the affirmative does not take a stance on the immediacy of the plan, then it also cannot read advantages that require immediate action to be solved. Therefore, there is a reciprocity embedded in positional competition. The more the affirmative chooses to clarify, the larger the room for counterplan competition. Therefore, affirmatives would only take a stance on the position of the plan if they were able to craft a solvency deficit to a counterplan that changed that process.

Third, opponents of positional competition might argue that positional competition makes a PIC out of representations compete. While positional competitors would place a higher value on the information surrounding the plan, positional competition requires a change in the plan text that moots a decision explicitly made by the affirmative. For example, if the negative chose to PIC out of the disease rhetoric of the 1AC, and read the same plan text, this would not compete because the affirmative did not commit to having disease representations be an essential part of the plan.

Fourth, opponents of positional competition might argue that positional competition is the same as functional competition. This is incorrect. Functional competition allows counterplans to compete based on the *negative's* interpretation of normal means. Positional competition allows counterplans to compete based on *affirmative's* choices about the plan text, and the implementation of the plan. So while functional competitors argue about the nature of fiat, positional competitors will come to an agreement about the affirmative's interpretation of their own plan, and the negative can then craft counterplans and disadvantages that are based on that interpretation.

Fifth, opponents of positional competition might argue that it is impossible to differentiate between an explicit statement by the affirmative and implicit assumptions made by the negative about the affirmative. There is certainly a gray area that places a very high burden on the judge, because positions may be found in speeches, cross-examination questions or even clarifications made in preparation time. It is possible that debates will focus too much on the question of what *exactly* the affirmative said. This is a significant cost, but at least it places the arguments in the hands of the affirmative—a necessary reversal of the current trends in counterplan competition.

Conclusion

The goal of debaters, debate coaches, and debate scholars should be to uphold an activity that balances a plethora of academic goals and personal interests. Allowing the affirmative to avoid counterplans that test the implementation of the plan by assuming that something can be true “for the negative's disadvantages, but not for the negative's counterplans” is averse to our interest in creating an educational and intellectual activity. The problems of continued reliance on textual and functional competition as the gold standards of counterplan competition does little to promote a discussion of a relevant educational goal—holding the affirmative accountable for choices that they made about implementation of the plan. Positional competition avoids this problem. Even if new problems arise with positional competition, highlighting the current conceptions of competition and considering alternatives serve a strong purpose of advancing the intellectual and academic interests of the debate community.

HOW FORENSICS SAVED MY LIFE: THE IMPACT OF FORENSICS ON LOWER-SES STUDENTS

BY JOSH HAMILTON*

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When I was a young boy, my parents never communicated with one another in an effective manner. Of course, back then, I am sure it sounded like, “Mama, why do you and daddy yell?” or, “Why are you and Dad not talking?” Reflecting upon and understanding effective communication, or lack thereof, has been prominent in my life for as far back as I can remember. By second grade my parents had decided it was time to end the marriage and my mom, with only a GED and minimal work experience, packed us up and moved us to a small town in North East Texas; Royse City to be exact. During my adolescence and teen years, we were definitely a family of lower socioeconomic status (SES). So when I enrolled in school, the administration classified me as low-SES classification. Elementary and middle school were a bit of an awkward blur, but I clearly remember my high school experience.

I remember thinking to myself my first day of high school that for a poor kid from a trailer park in this small town, the end result will only be one of two ways, no middle road in sight. Looking back now I realize what I meant by that thought process. The reality of my situation was not like that of many of my peers; my reality was that to get out of this small town, and out of poverty, I would have to make my way out or prepare to settle in this town. Admittedly in high school, I was not an above average student, probably below average truthfully. Although I was below average in my core classes, I have always felt above average socially, finding it very easy to have a conversation with someone and make a new friend. So for my freshman year, the class I excelled in was public speaking. As time progressed my then-speech teacher, who was also the debate coach, took an interest in having me join the Royse City High School Speech & Debate Team. I also played high school football, so for me debate maybe was not the coolest place to end up in high school, but after some convincing by my teacher and older brother, I was in, and that lead me out.

High School Forensics not only led me to college where I have now earned my B.S. in Communications, Masters of Education, and pursuing a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction, it also gave me the skills to excel in my profession and hobbies. I am currently the debate coach for John Guyer High School in Denton, Texas. Prior to this I worked at an extremely diverse high school in Mesquite, Texas, John Horn High, and my first two years of coaching debate and teaching were spent in my hometown, back at Royse City High School. Over the summer, as I prepared lessons and researched topics, I began thinking about my students of the past and who my students of the future would be, and in doing this I came back to the same thought: Will I have the opportunity to mentor students who faced struggles similar to the ones I did? If the answer to this was yes, then man I would be thrilled! If no, well then I would not only be disheartened, but determined to seek out the students that were experiencing the same hardships I once had. Why? Because I believe the state of forensics today is one that must strive to meet the needs of our lower-SES students. Research suggests numerous benefits to participation in forensics programs for lower-SES students. The benefits for an educator in being apart of that student's journey that of which, no scholarly article can define.

As a teacher I believe my duty and obligation in life is to provide the best educational experience for every student, regardless of his or her circumstances. Therefore, I strive to give every student a chance in my forensics program. The benefit to a diverse squad is not only found in these intercultural connections being made amongst students, but can be found simply in the data that suggests the benefits for students, specifically minority and lower-SES students in participating in debate.

“Debate participation may influence academic performance through several mechanisms, including increasing social engagement with school, providing a forum for the practice of academic skills, particularly reading and writing, and providing students with a structured activity with a defined goal (i.e. winning debate tournaments).”⁹

⁹ S. Anderson & B. Mezuk, *Participating in a Policy Debate Program and Academic Achievement among At-Risk Adolescents in an Urban Public School District: 1997-2007*, 35 JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENCE 5, at 1225-35 (2012); B. Mezuk, *Urban Debate and High School Educational Outcomes for African American Males: The Case of the Chicago Debate League*, 78 J. OF NEGRO EDUC. 3, at 290-304 (2009).

The above-quoted study investigated the effects of competitive debate programs in Chicago over ten years, specifically researching the effects on lower-SES students. So although this study focused on big-city Chicago and my experience was small-town Texas, the results from this long-term study and my personal experience were similar with regards to this simple fact: debate participation amongst high-risk students increases their probability of success across the board. “The primary finding from this study is that students who participated in the Chicago Debate League were more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to drop out than students who did not participate in debate.”¹⁰ I remember thinking at times after I became a coach that “minority and lower-SES students have no desire to participate in debate, or any other activity for that matter.” On the contrary, I found that once I began opening up to the idea of teaching someone like me, doors began to open. Research suggests that “as the percent minority increases, the probability of participation decreases in high-SES schools and rises in low-SES schools.”¹¹ In basic terms (or to provide you a tagline): participation in lower-SES schools increases with an increase in minority populations. I find myself reading this and beginning to understand more fully the state we are in. It is my belief that if we do not go further in embracing minority and lower-SES students into our programs forensics will not die off, but it will suffer. Suffer because it will not be providing the greatest good, not for the greatest number of people, but it will not be providing for all the people.

As a forensics coach I understand the state many programs currently face, a lack of support, funding, and all-around understanding for our discipline, and in poor districts, these obstacles only increase. Gary Fine, author of *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*, explains a potential solution for schools facing this dilemma: “For poor school districts, money is not to be had from the administration, parents, community fundraising, or local businesses. The only hope for these programs is a commitment from charitable fundraising agency.”¹² To be honest, I know that for some this type of undertaking may seem not worth the effort. On the other hand I would urge teachers to think about why they entered teaching to begin with. If that reason is anything like mine, which is to

¹⁰ Anderson & B. Mezuk, *supra* note 9 at 1234.

¹¹ D. G. Okamoto, D. Herda, C. & Hartzog, *Beyond Good Grades: School Composition & Immigrant Youth Participation in Extracurricular Activities*, 42 SOC. SCI. RESEARCH 1, at 164 (2013).

¹² G.A. FINE, *GIFTED TONGUES: HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE AND ADOLESCENT CULTURE* 197 (Princeton University Press) (2010).

make a difference in the lives of students, then I think we can agree the effort is more than worth it.

Imagine if you saved one student from what might have been. Imagine if you were the coach of that program that saved me. Imagine how that would make a difference unlike anything we may find on a standardized test. Take it one-step further and forget your forensics program and simply think about the classes you teach. Vickie Gill, author and teacher, tells of her classroom experiences in the book *The Ten Students You'll Meet in Your Classroom: Classroom Management Tips*. In the book, Ms. Gill describes an assignment that became a contest later where students write and deliver a speech that is a CD of the songs of their life. In one particular story, she speaks about a young man named Randy who has gone through some extreme circumstances. To put it simply, he was not dealt the easiest cards in life, I can relate. When he went to deliver his speech, Ms. Gill had established they would play his songs rather than him speak, but when he went to the front of the class, things changed. "He opened the CD and began talking about each of the ten songs he'd chosen. It was by far the most consecutive sentences any of the students had heard him say all year."¹³ Those are the moments we should all be hoping for when we are involved with forensics. Even if that student never joins your forensics team, forensics programs must involve opportunities for students to have similar moments, without our students feeling confident speaking, regardless of their circumstance, we face a difficult future.

Some research has suggested that involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities have yet to grasp the impact of involvement on students. One study suggests that, "such research should investigate aspects of participation including what motivates participation, how and why students participate, and how such participation impacts on their outcomes."¹⁴ For myself, the study's findings happen everyday inside each and every classroom. Good teachers, and good forensics' coaches, know what motivates their students and why they participate, and tap into that motivation. Anne Payne, my high school debate coach, knew that I was seeking a way out, that I needed to find my voice, and when she let me do that, she sat back and watched, and I would hope that what she has seen over the years has made her proud.

¹³ *Id.* at 10; See generally V. GILL, *THE TEN STUDENTS YOU'LL MEET IN YOUR CLASSROOM: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TIPS* (Corwin Press) (2007).

¹⁴ B. Shulruf, *Do Extra-curricular Activities in Schools Improve Educational Outcomes? A Critical Review and Meta-analysis of the Literature*, 56 INT'L REV. OF EDUC. 6, at 591-612 (2010).

For me, it is easy to see how forensics led me out of Royse City and on to bigger and better things. As I look back, those Saturdays spent at tournaments learning how to communicate more effectively, argue efficiently, and respect those on a team led me to understand that I was something greater than the expectations others had for me. Growing up in poverty, in a small-town trailer park, tends to lead young people down one path: a destructive one. I remember watching so many of my friends fall victim to crime, drugs, alcohol, and teen pregnancy growing up in this environment. To be honest many people, including myself, wondered when my turn to fall would arrive. It never came. Admittedly, I have had some hiccups along the way, but in the end I know what kept me from becoming another statistic: debate. After-school practices and Saturdays at tournaments are what kept me from falling into the trap that was laid out in front of me. Having a coach, big brother, and peers that supported me in this endeavor kept me from falling victim. I can honestly say that without speech and debate, and all of those that were apart of my experience, I may not have made it to where I am today. Many of my peers do not have the education, career opportunities, or life that I am blessed to have today. Sadly some of them lost their lives along the way, both metaphorically and physically. I, however, have not. I got to choose a different path, a higher one that involved speech and debate, which lead me to the place I am now.

So with the state of forensics changing, from the legislature in some states to the lack of funds of many programs, I ask you this: Why should we continue forensics programs? I believe we must continue regardless of our obstacles for those students like me. Students who may not know where the next meal may come from, but do know that when they arrive at school they will be greeted by their coach, their inspiration, their possible way-out. If we commit ourselves to being open to and embracing to each and every student that walks through our doors then the state of forensics will not only benefit in the short-term, but the long as well. With a decreased drop-out rate and improved academics in the short, and a potential congressman/woman, lawyer, entrepreneur, inventor, motivational speaker, or maybe even the next life-changing teacher in the long term. Speech and Debate saved my life, both in a physical sense in keeping me busy and off the streets, and as a metaphor because without it I may not have had the opportunity to have the life that I am blessed to have today.

Growing up in a trailer park, I was always drawn to and grew to love hip-hop and rap music. Kendrick Lamar, hip-hop/rap artist, quotes his mother in one of his popular songs. If I had an assignment from Ms. Gill on songs about my life, I would choose Lamar's song "Real" as one of my tracks, and this line would stick out:

Let ‘em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person. But when you do make it, give back, with your words of encouragement, and that's the best way to give back. To your city¹⁵

That is my hope for the state of forensics, that we give back, with our words, and teach our students to do the same.

¹⁵ Lamar, K. (2012). Real. On *Good Kidd M.A.D.D. City*. Location: Interscope Records.

OVERCOMING THE FICTION OF “SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH DEBATE”: WHAT’S TO LEARN FROM 2PAC’S *CHANGES*?

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Introduction

In his immortal *Changes*, the supposedly late Tupac (2PAC) Shakur lamented, “I see no changes.”¹⁶ 2PAC expresses in *Changes* both his frustration with social racism and his hope for change.¹⁷ Acknowledging that race-based social inequalities would likely never completely disappear, he provocatively presented a model for improved communication and understanding to minimize racial inequalities.¹⁸ In 1999, *Changes* was released, topped international charts, and for many years thereafter, impressed a global audience (including The Vatican).¹⁹

Many students who participate in competitive interscholastic debate in high school and college²⁰ frequently argue during debates that their speech acts, performances, or presentations criticizing a particular concept in a debate round could, just like 2PAC’s *Changes*, actually affect social inequities or issues inside and outside of the debate community. To preserve the activity, coaches and judges should discourage debaters from attempting to use—or deceiving others that they are using—competitive interscholastic debate to create social change.

Those in the debate community who believe (or argue) that competitive interscholastic debate²¹ can reach an audience beyond the debate room, and their opponents, coaches, and judges, should consider this question: “What can I learn

¹⁶ Tupac Shakur, *Changes* (Interscope Records 1999).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Jo Piazza, *Tupac Song Selected for Vatican Playlist*, CABLE NEWS NETWORK (CNN), Dec. 4, 2009, available at edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Music/12/04/tupac.vatican.playlist.

²⁰ This article refers to these students as “debaters.”

²¹ This article uses the term “competitive interscholastic debate” to refer generally to organizational debates for which tournaments are held to determine winners. It uses “debate round” to refer an individual debate (at those tournaments) in which two teams from different schools are competing against each other to win a judge’s ballot or judges’ ballots.

from 2PAC's success in communicating his message in *Changes?* Those who have wed themselves to the fiction that in-round speech acts in a competitive interscholastic debate setting can and does create actual social change (due to either some strategic reasoning or simple denial) will have a difficult time reaching the honest answer to that question: "*I am* wrong."

The structure of competitive interscholastic debate renders any message communicated in a debate round virtually incapable of creating any social change, either in the debate community or in general society. And to the extent that the fiction of social change through debate can be proven or disproven through empirical studies or surveys, academics instead have analyzed debate with non-applicable rhetorical theory that fails to account for the unique aspects of competitive interscholastic debate. Rather, the current debate relating to activism and competitive interscholastic debate concerns the following: "What is the best model to promote social change?" But a more fundamental question that must be addressed first is: "Can debate cause social change?" Despite over two decades of opportunity to conduct and publish empirical studies or surveys, academic proponents of the fiction that debate can create social change have chosen not to prove this fundamental assumption, which—as this article argues—is merely a fiction that is harmful in most, if not all, respects.

The position that competitive interscholastic debate can create social change is more properly characterized as a fiction than an argument. A fiction is an invented or fabricated idea purporting to be factual but is not provable by any human senses or rational thinking capability or is unproven by valid statistical studies. An argument, most basically, consists of a claim and some support for why the claim is true. If the support for the claim is false or its relation to the claim is illogical, then we can deduce that the particular argument does not help in ascertaining whether the claim is true. Interscholastic competitive debate is premised upon the assumption that debate is argumentation. Because fictions are necessarily not true or cannot be proven true by any means of argumentation, the competitive interscholastic debate community should be incredibly critical of those fictions and adopt them only if they promote the activity and its purposes.

Competitive Interscholastic Debate: The Break Down

Competitive interscholastic debate is uniquely different from other types of persuasive activities. Each individual component of the term "competitive interscholastic debate" describes the essential structures of the activity from which very important precepts can be discerned. These precepts are fundamental to any application of any rhetorical theory regarding speech acts within a debate

round because the precepts necessarily affect the scope of two crucial aspects of all communication: audience and purpose. The debate community's members, many of whom are shorthand enthusiasts, simply refer to the activity as "debate." But what that simple term omits, and what many frequently forget when uncritically accepting the "social change through debate" fiction, is any reference to the essential structures from which the community spawned: a competition of argumentation during which students from one school compete against students from other schools for the votes of judges.

Therefore, before any plausible argument can be made concerning the purposes or benefits of debate, the assumptions upon which those arguments are based must be identified and explained. The following discussion (perhaps painstakingly) analyzes the essential components of competitive interscholastic debate to identify the essential precepts that debunk the assumptions relied upon by those endorsing the fiction that competitive interscholastic debate can create social change.

"Debate"

"Debate," in its simplest and most basic form, is the presentation of seemingly inconsistent positions to convince an audience. A position could be a factual or empirical position that describes current or historical fact (e.g. $A = B$). The presentation of a seemingly inconsistent position to convince an audience (e.g. $A \neq B$) would constitute an empirical debate about what facts are (or were) true or false (or neither). A position could also be a normative position (i.e. a position about how the way things should have been or should be (e.g. "A should not have been or should be A). The presentation of inconsistent normative positions to convince an audience (e.g. A should not or should be A) constitutes a normative debate.

The intent-to-convince element is an indispensable part of any debate. Presenting apparently conflicting positions with the intent to convince requires an audience of some sort, as an audience is necessary for someone to be convinced. For instance, if a person writes an article on the propriety of the verdict in the Trayvon Martin trial to convince others that the verdict was wrong, but then no one reads it, there is no consideration of the position by the intended audience because no one (other than the author himself) could be persuaded. An audience can be as simple as a single person (e.g. having an internal debate with oneself to consider the validity of two seemingly inconsistent positions). An audience could constitute only one person when someone presents two seemingly inconsistent

positions for that one-person audience to consider (e.g. an attorney advising his²² client that he has two options and presents the pros and cons of both for his client to make a decision). Two people could comprise an audience. For example, a debate could involve two people who present apparently inconsistent positions to try to convince each other of the rightness of their respective positions.

A seeming or apparent inconsistency between positions is also a necessary component of a debate. If two positions are clearly consistent, then there is no debate. Conversely, an actual inconsistency is not necessary for a debate. The following hypothetical demonstrates why an actual inconsistency is not required for a debate: Two debaters go on a date appear to disagree over which movie, *Django Unchained* or *Kill Bill*, to see at Quinton Tarantino's privately owned theater on Friday night at 10 p.m. This appears to be a conflict because the two cannot watch both in different theaters together at the same time. Both of them want to see the most violent Tarantino movie with a revenge theme at that time. During the exchange their arguments for why *Django Unchained* or *Kill Bill* is more violent, one debater mentions *Inglorious Bastards* and both agree that *Inglorious Bastards* is the most violent Tarantino movie with a revenge theme. Fortunately, *Inglorious Bastards* is also playing at the theater at the same time. Just because the two debaters did not decide between *Kill Bill* and *Django Unchained* does not mean that they did not have a debate. During their debate, they realized that their apparently conflicting positions were not actually conflicting; they had the same position—wanting to see the most violent Tarantino revenge movie. And in this example, neither audience member was convinced of either initial position.

Therefore, in any “debate” there will be some audience that must resolve an apparent conflict of positions. In all communications, there is some audience. Sometimes the audience has a specific goal, such as being entertained, informed, or persuaded. The discussion about what debate “is” demonstrates that identifying the audience is essential to understanding how the context of a speech act can advance or hinder the speaker's goals.

²² This article does not endorse the uncritical use of the pronoun “he.” For those superficial enough to be more concerned more with the author's used a “gendered pronoun” than with the content of this article, please consider the following: When writing about a particular person, the author uses the general that fits the particular; in the absence of a specific person, the author expresses his gender and acknowledges the gender lens through which he sees and perceives events.

A Competitive Activity

A second component of competitive interscholastic debate is that it necessarily involves a competition. Not all debates must occur within the context of a competition, as the Tarantino example above suggests. But most—if not all—debates in the debate community occur either to win a debate round at a debate tournament or in preparation for winning a debate round at a debate tournament. The tournament structure is a *sin qua non* (a fundamental component) of the debate community. And in the very rare case that debaters host a public debate (and in the very fortunate case that an audience attends and does not leave during the first speech), the purpose is ordinarily not to convince the audience of a particular side, but to demonstrate what the school's debate team does.

At a typical tournament, there are a pre-determined number of preliminary rounds in which all entered schools' debaters compete against debaters from other schools that have entered the tournament. The tournament usually determines beforehand the number of debaters that will advance to elimination rounds, and that number usually equals four to thirty-two teams divided into brackets (semi-finals to double octafinals). If a team loses an elimination round, as the term suggests, then they are eliminated from the tournament. The prevailing team advances further into the tournament until the "winner" is left with no competitor.

A hypothetically neutral critic will be assigned as a "judge." The judge, or a panel of an odd number of judges, will vote for the debaters who they believe won the debate by doing "the better debating." Many judges have written paradigms; and the vast majority of written paradigms express a preference for *how* the debate should occur, but express little or no concern about *what* (in terms of content) is argued. In almost all debate rounds, the judge will make his decision based on *how* the debate occurs, not based on *what* persuaded the judge.

A primary (and probably the best) example of this point is a "dropped" argument. Many debate rounds are won, not on the basis of the persuasiveness of an argument, but because the opponents failed to directly respond to the argument. Judges will ordinarily permit the opponent to then "blow up the impact" of this drop in the following speech. Thus, the competitive nature of debate causes, to a great degree, the *how* to precede the *what* (unless the point is immaterial or non-essential). As a result, many judges divorce their human experiences and logical reasoning skills of objectively evaluating the persuasiveness of an argument from the decision of which team to vote for. And even when there is a "point-for-point and warrant-for-warrant" debate, many judges will vote based on who does the

better job (technically speaking) extending and explaining the argument (even if the argument is atrociously absurd).

The target audience is solely the judge, and the sole issue the judge must decide is which side “did the better debating.” Mandatory switch-side debating confirms that the debaters themselves are not the audience for persuasion in mandatory switch-side debating. And because fair opportunity is valued when there are winners and losers in competitions, most judges approach their paradigms with an attempt to be objective. Tournaments hire judges to objectively evaluate debates based on direct language from the ballot, the ballot the judge must sign his or her name to: who did the “better debating” or who “won the round” (which is a rephrasing of who did the better debating).

Competitive debate is a very narrow slice of “debate.” One could persuasively argue that competitive debate barely qualifies as “debate” because the target audience (the judge) is persuaded not by the truth of an argument, but who “does the better debating.” Hence, the only point on which the judge of a competitive debate is seeking to be persuaded of is who to vote for.

This conclusion narrows the previous section’s conclusions regarding “debate” (generally) because the “competition” element narrows the audience in the debate to the judge, not the competitors. The debaters are not competing to be persuaded. They are competing to persuade. And the only issue on which the audience—the judge—is asked to resolve is which competitors did the better debating. The judges are not present to objectively evaluate the content of messages and arguments for their persuasive value outside of the narrow issue of who did the better debating.

An Interscholastic Activity

The final essential component of competitive interscholastic debate is that students from different schools compete at debate tournaments. Many academics who have spent decades competing in and coaching debate have probably never encountered an *intrascholastic* debate competition, at least not in any of the formats in the debate community. The interscholastic element further narrows “competitive debate” to a student activity that faces resource constraint (e.g. time, budget, rooms available, etc.). Perhaps, noting that the competitive debates are interscholastic highlights the more important point about what competitive student debate is not: “academic debate” or “public debate.”

The interscholastic element determines how the competitive debates take place. Generally, several factors constrain interest in and participation on a school's debate team. First, a school likely could not afford to send every enrolled student to travel to and register in debate tournaments. Even if some schools could afford this, not all could. But even the possibility of all schools' students would be problematic in terms of one school making up more than half of the field. And even if all schools could afford to send all students to a debate competition, debate tournaments likely could not occur (perhaps, only during the summer) because debate tournaments would last several weeks.

The tournament structure means that only a select few will be included in the first place to compete, and as tournaments progress, more and more debaters are excluded. Because only a limited number of teams can be sent to tournaments, coaches must decide who "makes the team" and which teams go to what tournaments. But these decisions (while they could be made for a good reason, bad reason, or no reason at all) will likely be influenced by a student's natural ability or potential to become skilled at *how* to do our community's particular formats of competitive debate. And because teams generally can and do not compete against other teams from their schools, a competitive interscholastic debate will result in one school advancing over the other whose chances of advancing then diminish if not disappear.

Finally, the interscholastic nature of competitive interscholastic debate is a point of differentiation from other types of competitive debates: the debaters are all students from different schools. They are either in college or high school. This distinguishes competitive interscholastic debate from other types of debate—particularly academic debate. High schoolers are generally still developing physically and mentally, as well as start developing intellectually. Most college students continue their intellectual development as they obtain their associate's or bachelor's degrees.

It is not until students begin studying for a master's, law, or doctorate degree that they must study a particular field in depth, reading publications from academics in their respective fields. Many former competitive interscholastic debaters must, for the first time, become familiar with the academics in the particular field for the sole purpose of learning, not "cutting cards" for debate. It is at the end of a master's studies or PhD program that students finally must contribute something novel within their particular field of study that contributes something to that field of study. This is the point at which students have made an *academic* contribution (assuming that what is written is selected for publication).

Thus, competitive interscholastic debate is radically different from every other kind of debate. It is not “academic debate,” and it is not “public debate.”²³ Because schools’ resources limit debate participation, it is necessarily an exclusive activity to which no students have the right to participate in. And without accounting for how the structures unique to competitive interscholastic debate—exclusion, competition, a limited audience, very narrow audience purpose, etc.—affect the application of a general communications or rhetorical theory in this specific context, the application should be reconsidered or viewed highly skeptically if not outright rejected.

Let’s Talk 2PAC

To illustrate many of the reasons why “social change through debate” is a fiction, consider the question posed in the introduction: “How did 2PAC’s *Changes* reach a substantial and diverse cross-section of a global audience?” Any reader who picked up on the humor of the “supposedly-late” descriptor above would immediately know that it is a trick question: 2PAC didn’t make any impression by releasing *Changes* in 1999; 2PAC died in 1996. 2PAC’s estate contracted with players in the music industry to produce *Changes* by splicing together several of 2PAC’s pre-death recordings, and released *Changes* in 1999. The song was advertised and played on the radio and CD players internationally.

The similarities and differences between 2PAC when recording *Changes* and a student arguing that competitive interscholastic debate can create social change are informative. Although 2PAC wrote and recorded parts of *Changes*, several other individuals in a very complex series of transactions and communications were responsible for the song’s global successes. When 2PAC recorded the various parts of *Changes*, he merely spoke and sang words into a microphone in an Interscope Records studio where the audience was solely concerned with operating equipment for quality assurance purposes. Similarly, a debater who is asserting that debate can cause social change, like 2PAC in Interscope Records’ recording studio, is speaking to an audience who typically cares little (if at all) about the debater’s intended message and cares about recording it “on the flow.” But unlike 2PAC’s audience (the recording studio that likely had solely a financial interest in re-communicating 2PAC’s message), the judge generally does

²³ Although some debaters, acknowledging these structures, have tried “deconstructing” rounds to make them less formal. However, this deconstruction necessarily takes place in a competitive context and therefore is just a less structured competitive interscholastic debate subject to all of the same essential structures of every other competitive interscholastic debate.

not re-communicate the debater's message for any persuasive purpose, and the judge usually has little or no interest or incentive to do so.²⁴

Changes's commercial context is part of what allowed the song to spread worldwide. Those initially re-communicating 2PAC's message did so for financial reasons; the fact that 2PAC's message was concerned with minimizing racial inequalities likely contributed only a limited extent to the song's success. Pys's *Gangnam Style* had similar success at reaching a global audience, and it made fun of Korean culture. What *Changes*, *Gangnam Style* (both messages disseminated in a commercial context), and debate (a competitive activity and, yet ironically, one increasingly marked by anti-capitalist sentiments) have in common is that form is so much more important than substance.

But the difference between the form of international hit songs and debate is that the form of musical productions—with a catchy tune, visually stimulating music video, and sometimes a valuable message—makes the message appealing to a general audience. The form of modern competitive interscholastic debate—with, at its worse, rapid fire spreading of dense philosophical verbiage or personal attacks tangentially related (at best) to the topic—is simply unappealing to a general audience. If anything, the form in which messages are communicated in competitive interscholastic debate repels audiences outside of the community.

To the extent that *Changes* was made more popular by its message, the crucial difference between the message of *Changes* and messages communicated in a debate round is that the in original production of *Changes*, and the re-communication of that original message, the message has never changed (save

²⁴ The three obvious exceptions to this argument are all constrained by the audience's limited purposes, which are all necessarily contained within the competitive context and not a persuasive context. First, a judge will re-communicate the messages to the competitors. But the judge is not attempting to persuade the competitors that the other teams arguments are true or more persuasive. The judge is re-communicating the messages to explain the reason for deciding who did the better debating. Second, the competitors (and perhaps any other person who might be watching the debate—which would likely be for a solely competitive purpose such as learning how to compete, scouting, etc.) might re-communicate the messages they made in the debate round to their coach, who is usually interested only in the arguments for competitive purposes rather than for being persuaded by the arguments. Third, the arguments in the round might be recorded and disseminated electronically—the two primary examples of this would be on debate websites in forums or in YouTube videos. However, those who read and watch are only debaters and coaches who are concerned with what competitive value the can be derived from watching or reading them. Until and unless the competitive element is removed from competitive interscholastic debate (which would render the activity something else entirely), arguments made *within* a debate round will always be tainted by the ultimate question as to *the competition* that a judge must resolve at the end of a round.

some remixes) or contradicted itself. The original version of *Changes* was the same as it was when it was released until (and after) the time that it made the Pope's playlist. Conversely, debaters who communicate messages in a debate round will, almost always, contradict their argument (again for persuasive reasons, not because they were convinced that they were wrong initially) in another round, read a different part of the card they were reading previously, reading different phrasings of the same argument by a different author, etc. Therefore, the message-repetition element is missing from competitive interscholastic debate. The multiple points of distinction between 2PAC's *Changes* and messages made in debate rounds demonstrate why the dissemination of messages outside of a debate round for persuasive purposes is highly unlikely.

The Kicker

As the question, "How did 2PAC reach a substantial and diverse cross-section of that global audience?" was trick question, so (to some extent) was this article's initial question: "What can I learn from 2PAC's success in communicating his message in *Changes*?" While one lesson we can learn from the success 2PAC's changes concerns the factors that make messages more likely to be disseminated worldwide, there is pretty much nothing else to learn in terms of persuasion in the context of competitive interscholastic debate.

Up to this point, this article has shown how each of the essential components of "competitive interscholastic debate" makes it very different from any other kind of debate. But one thing that is persuasive in any kind of debate is some sort of properly conducted study (or even a mere survey) that provides empirical proof or even substantial anecdotal support. To date, none of the many academics who coach or participate in the debate community have published a study or survey to support the social change fiction. (Perhaps they have tried, and discovered they were just wrong.) But until such an empirical study of competitive interscholastic debate is conducted, students, judges, and coaches should not take it for granted.

Similarly, no one has studied whether 2PAC's *Changes* had any effect on people's attitudes toward racial equality. (Thus, it would be equally supported to say that 2PAC's *Changes* increased racial violence.) No survey or statistical studies have been conducted, constrained by academic standards, and then published, that suggest that 2PAC's *Changes* had any real effect on anyone (other than the objectively measurable effect that purchasing the song had on the buyer's wallet). Similarly, no one has studied whether any individual debate round, a team's year-long "project," or a debate team's seemingly perpetual social campaign has created any social change regarding the position they support.

While it is theoretically possible that someone has listened to 2PAC and thought to himself, “Hmm, perhaps I should not be so racist,” it is as equally possible that, according to the arguments of Judith Butler or Jacques Derrida (or insert any other philosophy academic or rhetorical theorist—from Aristotle to Slavoj Žižek—here), debate has created some sort of social change. The problem is that nothing supports that debate rounds can create social change other than the adage, “Anything is possible.” The reasoning that debate can create social change is circular at its best. The absurdity is that judges prefer specific, predictive, and empirical evidence over general theoretical possibilities in almost every single context *except* when it comes to attempts to use debate to create social change. Bald theoretical assertions with flowery language from philosophers are accepted over uncarded but logical analytical arguments. Any explanation for why coaches and students (at least pretend to) believe that debate can create social change would require an unacceptable degree of speculation. The bottom line is that the proposition that competitive interscholastic debate will (or more accurately, can) result in social change is merely speculation without any logical or empirical support.

Overcoming the Fiction

Merely labeling a proposition a fiction is insufficient to merit the proposition’s abandonment. This article uses the term “fiction” because the idea that debate rounds could likely create any social change is, in all meanings of the term, is a fiction. A fiction is a conclusion that is feigned, invented, or imagined. It is an imaginary thing or event, postulated for the purposes of argument or explanation. One can distinguish a fiction from a statement of fact (which can be determined true or false) or a scientific hypothesis (a falsifiable theory answering a posed question). A fiction, on the other hand, is something that is either false or has not been attempted to be proven true.

A fiction is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Rather, it is a tool to achieve some other purpose. Fictional stories frequently convey a moral to be extracted or lesson to be learned.²⁵ In law, a legal fiction is a legal rule that is known to be factually false (such as the legal fiction that all people are presumed to know the law) that is endorsed for some greater public policy purpose (such as to avoid ignorance and discourage intentionally avoiding knowledge of the law). After identifying whether a proposition is a fiction (or a truth or hypothesis),

²⁵ See, e.g., Aesop’s Fables.

determining whether the fiction is worthwhile requires weighing the pros and cons of the fiction against the purposes of the context in which it is used.

The Fiction

The idea or proposition that competitive interscholastic debate can result in social change is properly characterized as a fiction because it is false and has not been proven true. The proposition that debate rounds can create social change is a fiction because it is false on a theoretical level. Those who attempt to apply theories about academic debate (i.e. arguments published in books and journals by PhDs who argue about concepts within their respective fields of study), social movements, rhetorical acts, and performances are not discussing competitive interscholastic debate. Philosophers and rhetorical theorists have never written an article or book using competitive interscholastic debate as an example of their theory or position. Their theories draw upon historical (i.e. anecdotal) examples to demonstrate their theories. None of them have ever cited a debate round or “debate movement” as an example of their theories.²⁶ Those who attempt to apply academic theories to competitive interscholastic debate (primarily communications academics, who also frequently happen to be participants in the debate community), decontextualize the broader theories to apply them to competitive interscholastic debate without adequately accounting for the competitive and interscholastic structures of competitive interscholastic debate.²⁷

²⁶ Traditionally, articles about debate have been viewed negatively when used in debate rounds. The point that other philosophical and rhetorical theories have never cited a debate round as an example of their theories shows that this view lacks merit. Instead, in competitive interscholastic debate rounds, academic articles written by those with decades of experience in the debate community and have witnessed trends come and go, articles concerning the specific practices of competitive interscholastic debate are necessarily preferable to general rhetorical theory. First, the general theory does not account for competitive structures and nuances of the debate community. Second, the experience of coaches and competitive interscholastic debate scholars is specific to the debate community. Third, at the very least, articles written by academics with years of in the community are certainly preferable to theory arguments developed by high school and college students. Fourth, articles are generally drafted from a neutral position, take into account all counterarguments, and come to a conclusion rather than starting from a desired conclusion and then finding justifications to support it. Fifth, the academic author who publishes an article indefinitely commits himself to a position, whereas debaters do not, in a debate round, commit themselves to any position (e.g. conditionality bad) beyond the scope of the debate round (and sometimes not even to the end of the debate round).

²⁷ See, e.g., Kelly Young, *Impossible Convictions: Convictions and Intentionality in Performance and Switch-Sides Debate*, 31 CONTEMP. ARG. & DEBATE (2012).

Although some “competition” is part of any debate, this part is more accurately described as the presence of seemingly conflicting positions, which is discussed above and exemplified by the Tarantino hypothetical. In social movements or public debate, there are two (or more) apparently conflicting positions. Competitive interscholastic debate is uniquely different because there is not a possibility for compromise on the ultimate question of who did the better debating; most tournaments prohibit double wins, and no debaters would agree to a double loss. The competition is absolute; one side must win and one side must lose. This is radically different from the ability of individuals to be persuaded by the other side of a social movement. The switching of sides outside of the debate context comes from a person’s willingness to be persuaded by a particular position; it is not forced by tournament rules. Thus, the competitive structures of competitive interscholastic debate render the applicability of philosophical or rhetorical theory inapplicable to the extent that it does not account for particular competitive interscholastic debate context.

The unique structures of debate rounds rob all arguments or positions therein (or in a series of rounds) of any persuasive value beyond the very narrow issue of “which side did the better debating.” The competitive element and tournament structure of competitive interscholastic debate taint all positions proffered in a debate round to create social change with a stench of “I am actually lying about my goals; I am clearly just using this argument to win the ballot.” Even debates about how debates should proceed (i.e. theory arguments or arguments about the practices in debate, or “meta-debate” (debates about debate)) are not proffered for the truth of the proposition, but to win the debate. The audience—only the judge—is solely concerned with the ultimate question: “Which side did the better debating?” Competitive interscholastic debate is certainly a venue in which students can become aware of societal issues and topics of concern. But the persuasive value of arguments presented in a debate round to convince debaters of the truth of either side on a topic is virtually nil.²⁸

²⁸ Theory debates provide a great non-“critical” example of how arguments in debate do not persuade the audience the particular position but only about who did the better debating. Judges frequently vote for a team based on winning positions contradictory to each other round; for example, voting for conditionality good then conditionality bad. Competitive interscholastic debate judges decide these theory debates not on the soundness of the theory that a team could be “abused” by an argument, but rather through the standard, technical practice of “extensions” and “drops.” That some sort of theory argument is now run as a stock argument in almost every single debate round, and ran in the converse (e.g. running agent specification good if there is no agent specified, and running agent specification bad if the agent is specified), further proves that meta-debates occurring within a competitive interscholastic debate do not actually persuade of the preferred practices of debate but are considered by judges only to the extent that they are relevant to determining the narrow issue of who did the better debating.

Students will generally form opinions about issues they learn about in a debate round outside of their debate rounds. The issues debaters become aware of include issues external to debate (e.g. affirmative action, foreign policy) and issues internal to debate (e.g. theory, community issues). When debaters choose to bring those issues into a debate round, they necessarily use those issues as a competitive means to the ultimate end of convincing the judge that they did the better debating. This requires the opposing team to adopt a competitive counter-strategy to that position; it forecloses the option of the opposing team being fully persuaded by the other team's position. Even an attempt to "compromise" via a permutation (as a competitive strategy rather than a persuasive position) will meet vigorous, usually-pre-scripted opposition. As a result, any in-round action (whether a speech act or the judge voting for one team or the other) will have no out-of-round effect consistent with or contemplated by any cited authors or postulated by the high school or college student making the assertion.

Even arguments about competitive interscholastic debate—primarily theory and issues about inequalities in the debate community—will necessarily lose all persuasive value about those particular issues when they are raised in a debate round. Although more specific to competitive interscholastic debate and not general theories about academic debate, meta-debate loses its power to convince anyone in the round because the audience—only the judge—is solely concerned with the question of "which team did the better debating." Theory and arguments about "social issues in debate" made in a debate inherently reek of disingenuousness. Most debaters and judges do not even consider adopting a position on the meta-debate until after the round in reflective discussion and thought about the issue, thought that never incorporates the truthfulness of an argument because "it was dropped" in a debate round. In the particular debate, the result is always based on who, in the judge's opinion, did the better debating. It is not based on who convinced the judge of some proposition irrelevant to deciding which team did the better debating.

The preceding discussion demonstrates why arguments about social change—even social change within the debate community—have persuasive value only outside of a debate round. The debate community has developed multiple forums in which members of the community engage in noncompetitive and, sometimes, academic debate on issues within the debate community. These include discussions before and after rounds with judges, teammates, and competitors; on forums or online message boards; or in academic publications. For the social issues external to the debate community, there are almost an unlimited number of ways that students form opinions. And, after students form their opinions and join

causes and organizations, there are about an equal number of non-competitive ways that students can use techniques and modes of persuasion discussed by academics and rhetorical theories.

Debate rounds, at the very most, operate as venue solely for raising awareness about social issues and debate practices. It would be illogical to conclude that, because issues were debated in a particular debate and out-of-round discussion about that practice followed, the in-round debate created a social change. Because coaches and students strategically consider their arguments and practices prior to a debate round, the social issues or the “concern” about a debate tactic initially spawns outside of debate rounds, not from within a singular debate round. And just because one event occurred before another does not make the former the cause of the latter. To the extent that the in-round practice causes a subsequent out-of-round discussion, debate is admittedly a form for raising awareness about practices and social issues for students. But the arguments presented in the debate round will lack persuasive value insofar as convincing the judge in the round of anything beyond the ultimate question of who did the better debating.

But even if this article’s arguments up to this point have no validity, and creating social change through debate rounds is more likely than just theoretically possible, this is insufficient to adopt the proposition that competitive interscholastic debate creates social change. It remains a fiction because no academics—not even those who have remained in the debate community for decades—have attempted to prove its validity with any form of study or survey. No studies or surveys have been conducted on any particular application of philosophical or rhetorical theory to the practices within competitive interscholastic debate. Thus, competitive interscholastic debates and meta-debates therein claiming to create some sort of change either within the community or outside the community have no empirical support. They simply present the possibility, but fail to show any probability of success. Because any critically thinking person (in or out of the debate community) should be hesitant to presume probability based on mere possibility, the probability of the general theory being applicable in the competitive interscholastic debate context should be presumed to be zero, as no probability has been proven. Although practices have certainly evolved, no empirical study has causally linked this evolution to in-round arguments to the exclusion of out-of-round, non-competitive discussions.

Why We Should Get Over This Fiction

Fictions are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Fictions must be judged based on whether they serve some relevant purpose to the context in which the

fiction is adopted. The legal fiction that all people are presumed to know the law is one such fiction. If no one follows laws, then passing laws is pointless. Therefore, compliance with the law is fundamental. The fiction that people are presumed to know the law encourages individuals to know the law and increases compliance. If individuals can shield themselves from the ramifications of violating the law by not knowing the law, people would be encouraged to avoid learning about the law to excuse or justify non-compliance.

The methodology for determining whether a fiction is good or bad must include: (1) an identification of whether the proposition is a fiction; (2) what the purposes of the context, field, or activity that is considering adoption of the fiction; and (3) whether the fiction advances or hinders those purposes. Up until this point, this article has argued why it is a fiction to believe that debate rounds cause social change. And, as was discussed at length in *Nix the Nixonism: Identifying the Purposes of Debate by Understanding Constituency, Transparency & Accountability*, the primary purposes of debate are self-preservation and “o promote skills including public speaking, researching, and critical thinking as judged by the larger academic community and the general public.”²⁹ Thus, deciding whether to dispense with the fiction of “social change through debate” is a worthwhile endeavor will require determining whether this fiction promotes or hinders the self-preservation of the community and promotes skills including public speaking, research, and critical thinking.

Although either maintaining or dispensing with the fiction would likely be neutral with respect to promoting public speaking, researching, and critical thinking skills, the fiction continues to deal damaging blows to the debate community. These damaging effects can be shown anecdotally. The fiction has damaged the legitimacy of the debate community by encouraging a race to the bottom in terms of debaters—in a competitive flurry—trying to outdo each other and themselves. The best examples of this are in college policy debate, which has existed for much longer than any other interscholastic debate format in the U.S. The development of the “kritik” opened possibilities for deployment of a new body of literature in rounds. The race to the bottom has caused the debate community’s acceptance of the following in-round tactics: stripping nude to de-mystify the female body; dance-offs; defecating into a bag to face our waste; simulating an abortion; actual in round violence between debate partners to illustrate and dramatize domestic violence; voting down white debaters because they were white in order to promote minority participation in competitive interscholastic debate; and debating

²⁹ Michael J. Ritter, *Identifying the Purposes of Debate by Understanding Constituency, Transparency & Accountability*, 1 NAT’L J. SPEECH & DEBATE 2, at 8 (2013).

with the lights off to performatively save energy. Those outside of the debate community in academic and professional circles have noticed this downward trend in competitive interscholastic debate. As a result of this trend, debate is currently viewed as having diminished educational value. This presents a very real threat to the existence of schools' debate programs.³⁰

A possible advantage of adopting the fiction is that if students believe in the persuasive power of their positions, then they would be more likely to re-communicate the message in non-competitive formats outside of the competitive interscholastic debate community. Not only has this argument been empirically disproven, the opposite has proven to be true. Most debaters are involved in few, if any, other extra-curricular activities. Sometimes debate programs discourage participation in other activities to hone skills unique to competitive interscholastic debate (e.g. spreading). Furthermore, to the extent that debaters are convinced of their own argument that debate can create social change, the fiction discourages participation in more effective methods of persuasion that do not require the participants to contradict themselves. Students are led to believe that they have accomplished something when, in fact, they have contributed nothing (except to the decline of the community).

Additionally, arguing that debate can create social change by the judge voting for the argument is also unethical. The fiction of social change through debate is powerful because it abuses debate's structures designed to ensure fairness and minimize arbitrariness in judges' decision-making. One primary structure is the contractual requirement that when the judges sign their ballots, they are voting for the team that does the better debating, as they have contracted with the tournament to do so. When the judge agrees with the host school to judge, he has promised to vote for the debaters who do the better debating. An argument that voting for one team over the other solely because of some out-of-round benefit compromises the judge's objectivity of evaluating who did the better debating through the arguments made in the particular debate round. In essence, it is a promise for a benefit outside of the debate round in exchange for the ballot that would outweigh the judge's sense of duty to remain objective and decide the round on who did the better debating. In this sense, endorsing the fiction of social change through debate is, by definition, endorsing bribery. The only way this ethical dilemma would not exist would be for debaters relying on the fiction to admit that there really is no out-of-round benefit, which is this article's ultimate point.

³⁰ Josh Hamilton, *How Forensics Saved My Life: The Impact of Forensics on Lower-SES Students*, 2 NAT'L J. SPEECH & DEBATE 1, at 15 (2013).

Not only does the fiction unfairly place the judge in an ethical dilemma, it is also unfair by asking the judge to consider and accept out-of-round benefits of voting for a particular team but ignore all of the judge's and other debaters' personal out-of-round experiences. In debate rounds, judges attempt to adopt neutral, objective paradigms by not disregarding an argument simply because they personally disagree or do not like it. The general motivation for this is to be fair to the students and allow them an opportunity to succeed despite the judge's idiosyncratic preferences, the full disclosure of which would take too long to explain prior to a debate or write in a paradigm (although some judges definitely try). The fiction of social change through debate invites the judge to insert his or her subjective preferences *only to the extent the judge personally agrees*. If the judge personally disagrees with the team's particular social goals, the judge will be shunned by rejecting the team's argument absent some argument that the opposing team wins "on the flow." But if the judge personally agrees with the team's particular social goals (or at least what the debaters purport their social goals to be), then the debaters relying on the fiction of social change through debate invites and attempts to justify judges' intervention only to the extent it benefits them even if the argument is not won "on the flow." This is true because arguments about what the ballot can would, if the argument is true (or dropped), outweigh a technically bad performance by the debaters relying on those arguments.

By placing the judge in an ethical dilemma, bribing the judge, and inviting and justifying one-sided intervention, the fiction of social change through debate encourages debaters to commit the ultimate in-round abuse. Arguments and strategies are not, by themselves, properly considered unfair or abusive to another debater. There are always counter-arguments and counter-strategies. Tactics—or the in-round conduct of debaters—can be unfair and abusive. For example, card clipping (purporting to read the entirety of a card but only reading part of it), hiding the other team's evidence, name-calling, promising the judge money or job in exchange for voting for a particular team, blanket refusal to answer questions in cross-examination, and other rule violations (meaning the actual rules of the debate tournament or the organization under which the tournament is conducted) are all examples of tactics that are unfair and abusive. These tactics and the fiction of social change through debate place the judge in an ethical dilemma, bribe the judge with out-of-round compensation to vote for a team who does not do the better debating, and invite and justify one-sided intervention. They compromise the integrity of the activity and are thus the ultimate unfair tactics and the worst forms of in round abuse.

The fiction of social change through debate abuses the win-loss structure of debate and permits debaters to otherize, demonize, dehumanize, and exclude opponents. The win-loss structure of debate rounds requires a judge to vote for one side or the other, as judges generally cannot give a double win. This precludes the possibility of compromise on any major position in the debate when the resolution of the position would determine the ultimate issue of “which team did the better debating.” Thus, the fiction of social change through debate encourages debaters to construct narratives of good versus evil in which the other team is representative of some evil that threatens to bring about our destruction if it is endorsed (e.g. capitalism). The team relying on the fiction of social change through debate then paints themselves as agents of the good, and gives the judge a George W. Bush-like “option”: “You’re either with us or you’re against us.” The fiction of social change through debate—like Bush’s rhetorical fear tactics and creation of a false, polarizing, and exclusionary dichotomy to justify all parts of the War on Terror—enables the otherization, demonization, dehumanization, and exclusion of the opposing team. When the unfairness of this tactic is brought to light—particularly in egregious situations when a team is arguing that the other team should lose because of their skin color—all can see that the debate centers on personal attacks against opposing debaters. This causes tensions between debaters that frequently result in debaters losing interest or quitting. By alienating and excluding members of the competitive interscholastic debate community for the purpose of winning a debate, it also makes the reaching of any compromise outside of the debate—the only place where compromise is possible—much less likely. By bringing the social issue into a debate round, debaters impede out-of-round progress on the resolution of social issues within and outside the debate community by prompting backlash.

Finally, the fiction of social change through debate teaches debaters to engage in unethical tactics that justify—and, if those students then become government leaders or corporate executives, could result in—the tactics used by oppressive governments and corrupt corporations to maintain their positions of power. One such unethical tactic is requiring a person to make a decision in a limited amount of time based solely on a limited amount of biased or false information. North Korea, for example, campaigns for support with propaganda and lies, and then forcefully limits its people’s access to other sources of information. Nazi Germany also used comparable propaganda tactics to convince people of the superiority of an Aryan race. Corrupt corporations similarly scam consumers by presenting misleading and biased information and falsely promising great benefits after the consumer hands over his monetary endorsement.

The fiction of social change through debate encourages these same tactics in a debate round and teaches students that these tactics are effective and rewarding. It places the judge in the position of supporting or rejecting a particular cause based on very limited information presented in a single debate round. It frequently requires the judge to act based solely on the particular, biased information presented by the debaters. The possibility of the other side presenting counter-arguments is inadequate because debate teams purposefully research arguments to run that other debate teams likely do not have specific responsive evidence to. Furthermore, by requiring the judge to decide in the debate round whether to support or reject a cause, debaters seek to limit the judge's access to other sources of information that would enable the judge to come to an informed decision. Thus, arguments made in a debate round are not the driving force convincing students of those arguments. It is the competitive tactics and strategies that students that are positively reinforced with the ballot that the debate community should be concerned about.

Conclusion

The idea that speech acts in a debate round can create social change is a fiction. The successes of 2PAC's *Changes* demonstrate that communication and persuasive attempts in competitive interscholastic debate is entirely different from all other forms of persuasive communication that have been successful at reaching a broad audience. The fiction of social change through debate undermines the fundamental purposes of the competitive interscholastic debate activity—primarily self-preservation and the development of skills. It encourages tactics that undermine the prevalent values endorsed in the community (fairness, education, objectivity, ethics, morality, etc.) and tactics that mirror the most commonly criticized notions (unjust governments, corporate abuse, capitalism etc.). It is long past time for academics in our community who endorse the fiction of social change through debate to prove it by publishing some sort of valid academic study or survey. Despite the past decades of in-round argumentation that debate can create social change, one must lament, "I see no changes," at least none for the better.