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CRISIS AND CEDA REFORM

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During the past five years, CEDA has initiated a series of reforms that have fundamentally altered the nature of the organization. Once viewed as an alternative to NDT-style debate, CEDA is now stylistically and philosophically indistinguishable from that institution. CEDA teams, like their NDT counterparts, have gradually responded to the decline in randomly assigned judging by adopting more homogeneous delivery styles, argumentative strategies and even travel patterns. Institutionally, CEDA has abandoned several of the core philosophical principles that differentiated it from alternative formats, including the dual topic system, the use of value and factual propositions and the gradual but relentless lengthening of the debate season. As the cumulative impact of each individual reform became apparent, many programs began to search for alternatives to CEDA debate, triggering renewed debate regarding a crisis within the activity and further dividing the

membership into internecine factions deeply distrustful of one another. This essay suggests that many of these difficulties stem from the haphazard way in which CEDA undertakes institutional reform. In short, it argues that the way in which CEDA undertakes institutional reform is so seriously deficient that it calls into question both the integrity and the long-term viability of the organization.

To illustrate these deficiencies, this paper examines several recent reforms as case studies in organizational failure. It argues that reform proposals are often poorly crafted and shoddily supported poliymaking documents. Reformers rarely seek to determine potential structural impacts on member programs (factors such as cost and so forth), seldom support their case with sound evidence, and almost never consider potential professional development concerns. As a student of policy argument, these weakness in an institution of policy-making experts are baffling. Obviously, since instruction in critical thinking, evidentiary evaluation and sound policy decision-making is the *raison d'être* of co-curricular debate, one would also expect the organization to exhibit sound decision-making practices. Perhaps the strongest sign of organizational malaise is the curious reversal of the traditional presumption against change and the very low threshold burden of proof on advocates favoring reform.

Make no mistake — the author clearly opposes each of the recent reforms that have been undertaken, and this paper may be rightly criticized for using evidence that is often less reliable than one would hope. These weaknesses, however, only serve to reinforce the primary argument raised in this paper. *Regardless of whether one views recent reforms as wise or foolhardy, everyone should be dissatisfied with the way in which institutional reform debates are currently undertaken.* Because the CEDA constitution is relatively weak as a governing document, changes happen quickly and largely without the benefit of formal study. Evidentiary weaknesses plague both sides of reform debates and the pace of reform precludes serious systematic investigation or debate in refereed journals. To make matters worse, CEDA has no mechanism for post-reform data gathering and no way of knowing if reforms succeed or fail in producing the types of changes promised by their sponsors. The end result is an atmosphere of extreme uncertainty where the organization drifts without an overriding sense of mission or purpose and periodically undertakes radical reform with little advanced notice. As Don Swanson observed at the last CEDA Developmental Conference, "The uncertainties felt by many in the debate community must be reduced in order to maintain a healthy activity. Future change can be managed more effectively when the mission of the activity is made clear (1991, 273)."

Typically, this paper argues, reform proposals ignore potential structural impacts on member programs (such as added coaching costs, added travel costs, increased time commitments and so forth) or on the professional development of coaches and support staff. In lieu of these concerns, reforms focus on game-related aesthetic considerations, such as the degree to which the reform would result in subjectively "better" debate rounds, or the extent to which the reform is favored by debaters. Use of the phrase "game-related" is an attempt to distinguish context-specific, or strategic outcomes from those with durable life-skill applications. Learning to conduct sophisticated research, to write, compose and organize information into coherent arguments, to think critically and to orally present information are durable

life-skill outcomes of debate participation. These skills are developed whether or not one participates in value debate or policy debate; and although debaters clearly become more skilled at different levels of competition, the difference is a matter of degree rather than a difference in kind. Rapid delivery style or mutually preferred-judging, in contrast, are purely aesthetic game-related strategic concerns. Each may help students win particular rounds, but neither serves a valuable life-skill application.¹ Because reform debates are framed in a game-related manner, the outcomes can work at cross purposes with the institution's stated desire to maintain membership, increase the diversity of those who participate in CEDA debate and avoid the debacle that led to the steady decline in NDT membership throughout the nineteen eighties.

Structurally, the essay begins by examining the topic-extension and early-release reforms as case-studies in organizational decision-making and as a means of highlighting weakness in CEDA's governing structure. The author argues that neither of these reform proposals included membership or professional development impact statements, that they were each driven by game-related concerns, and that, ironically, when judged by the standards of policy decision-making, each failed to make a *prima facie* case for reform. The second section of this essay proposes several changes that will avoid these problems in the future. In particular, the author suggests that CEDA should sponsor a constitutional convention within the next two years in an attempt to firmly delineate the basic structure and mission of the institution and codify a system for future reform proposals.

Failed Reform Proposals: Two Case Studies

Of all of the reforms that have been proposed and adopted during the past several years, the move to eliminate the two-topic system and to extend the length of the season have undoubtedly had the greatest impact on CEDA as an institution and on its membership. Within a two year period, the organization fundamentally redefined itself and facilitated a merger with the NDT, or a take-over by the NDT, depending on how one looks at it. The purpose of this essay is not to debate the merits of these reforms *per se*, but rather to describe the extent to which the proposals failed to make a case for reform when viewed from the vantage point of policy deliberation, and the impact of each reform on the diversity of CEDA's membership and the professional development of CEDA coaches and support staff.

At the outset, it should be noted that the lack of a proscribed formula for proposing institutional reform complicates the task of characterizing the various proposals. Because CEDA does not suggest to its members a uniform set of issues that should be addressed in reform proposals, ensuing reform debates are haphazard and incomplete, key reform documents are often "authored" by multiple actors working independently of one another, and the bulk of reform debates are conducted electronically. In addition, CEDA does not maintain an office of institutional research and there is little hard data that advocates can rely upon to prove their assertions. As a consequence, the use of evidence on both sides of reform debates is highly problematic and most claims are based on opinion or anecdotal evidence.

Reform advocates have little incentive to forge compromises or find common ground. Since most reform proposals deal with amendments to the CEDA by-laws, they require only a simple majority of those voting to be adopted. Consequently, failed reforms have a way of re-emerging. Rather than

altering the proposal to reflect a genuine compromise, sponsors of defeated amendments simply re-submit the amendment to the next business meeting in the hope that it will be passed by a different constituency. The proposal to lengthen the season by announcing the topic on August first is an excellent example. When it was originally proposed at the 1996 national CEDA business meeting, it was extensively discussed and was rejected by a considerable margin. At the November 1996 SCA business meeting, however, when a much smaller representative share of CEDA members were present, the proposal was passed. The combined total of those members voting for and against the proposal at the SCA meeting represented well less than half of CEDA's total membership. To summarize, CEDA does not require those who advocate reform to present their proposals in a manner minimally consistent with policy debate, does not ask its members to address any specific concerns in the process of making a reform proposal, does not have a proscribed forum in which reforms can be thoughtfully considered, and permits fundamental change in institutional rules and practices without requiring *a majority vote of the entire membership*.

Mindful of the caveats mentioned above, the arguments in favor of abolishing the two-topic system and accelerating the topic release date can be grouped broadly into the following categories: 1) game-related advantages, particularly more case-specific research and in-round clash; 2) increased retention of novice debaters; 3) more efficient use of non-peak academic time; 4) diminished research burdens for "small programs;" and, 5) miscellaneous concerns, such as the relative appeal of the single-topic system to NDT programs, the increased utility of summer debate workshop evidence, and constitutionality of the proposed reform. In each of these areas, a plethora of voices argued for and against the proposal and no summary could adequately embrace all of the issues raised in the literally hundreds of individual threads generated during that period. Unfortunately, a complete transcription of the numerous arguments and counter-arguments is well beyond the scope of this paper and curious readers are directed to the CEDA-L digest for a more detailed understanding of the issues discussed here.

Perceived game-related benefits received the most extensive discussion on CEDA-L prior to the by-law vote abolishing the two-topic system. Two separate strains of arguments emerged: First, advocates argued that topic extension would result in a reduction of generic argumentation and, consequently, in an aesthetic improvement in in-round debating. Secondly, and sometimes intermingled with a discussion of the first point, advocates debated the relative merits of extending the Mexico topic rather than debating one of the five information-technology topics under consideration for the spring semester. In large measure, many of the latter arguments ignored the philosophical implications of moving to a single topic format and focused on the competitive advantages or detriments of a topic extension vote.

Those who favored abolishing the two topic system for game-related or aesthetic reasons suggested that the reform would result in an increase of case-specific research and preparation, a decrease in dependence on Lexis/Nexis, a return to more qualified expert sources of evidence, and a general decline in generic argumentation. A typical expression of these arguments was advanced by Benjamin Bates. "The longer the season is for a topic," he argued, "the more likely that we will be able to use the evidence that we have researched specifically for a team on the other side of the nation"

1995, p. 1). Reflecting similar sentiment, David Berube wrote, "It is diminishingly instructive to teach a student to superficially research a topic. We seldom have time for deep research given the restraints imposed by courses and personal lives" (1995, p. 1). Skip Rutledge felt that topic extension could result in an increase in "the depth of on-point argumentation," and the direct refutation of substantive issues. "Too often I see teams unprepared to take on a case or a plan straight up, even when there is plenty of evidence easily available to refute the affirmative claims," he noted. "Instead, we see teams come in with one of possibly two 'negative cases' (that seem only tangentially linked at best) and spend the whole round arguing why they should get to defend their stock negative ground" (1995, p.1).

In retrospect, of course, it is difficult to support the contention that topic extension has accomplished the game-related or aesthetic benefits that were promised. Tom Dougherty predicted that topic extension would fail to produce qualitative improvements in in-round debating because affirmatives would adapt to increased negative preparation:

If we prolong the topic to a full year, it is only logical that the cases would get even smaller, so the depth of debate that everyone is searching for would just be lost...If we do not switch topics, the research burden is still going to be the same, people are not going to run the same case for a whole year, and the only thing that you have is generics. No real depth is achieved (1995a, p. 1).

Even a cursory review of the case lists from major tournaments suggests that Dougherty's prediction came to fruition. As negative teams amassed case-specific evidence, affirmative teams modified their strategies or switched cases. There was no noticeable reduction in generic argumentation. As was the case during the spring 1996 debates under the Mexico topic, the experience during the 1996-97 season with the year-long environmental topic suggests that most debates have gravitated toward one or two generic disadvantages (usually Bi-Partisanship or Bond Market Collapse), a generic agent of change counterplan (such as States or some form of international action), and often, a generic critique argument (such as Social Ecology). As the season progressed, affirmatives were much more likely to switch to "narrow" cases dealing with a single site, a single pollutant or an unusual regulatory approach in an effort to maximize the strategic benefit of the affirmative right to defend the topic by example.

One of the clear problems with the topic extension proposal was the failure of advocates to define their terms and provide examples of the types of in-round changes that they hoped would result from the change. Although almost every post favoring topic extension lamented generic argumentation, it was not clear what the advocates meant in using this term. For example, did the authors mean to imply that they opposed generic disadvantages with case-specific links? Did they believe that topic extension would sound the death knell for generic agent of change counterplans or critique arguments? At the level of skill acquisition, what particular types of arguments led to inferior intellectual advancement or undercut the educational value of research? In reviewing the numerous arguments transmitted electronically on this subject, one quickly reaches the conclusion that advocates of topic extension were opposed to "bad, blippy debate" and favored "good, case-specific debate."

Nowhere, however, did those who favored topic extension clearly present a case that the inferior argumentative practices they criticized were intrinsically (or even substantially) connected to the length of the season, rather than other more obvious causes — such as the movement toward extremely broad propositions with few controlling phrases.

If they failed to present an identifiable inherency argument, they were equally remiss in calibrating the level of solvency they expected topic extension to produce. Although data is admittedly difficult to locate, advocates were hard-pressed to prove their contention that eliminating the two-topic season would uniquely result in qualitative improvements in in-round debating. Most pointed to the perceived qualitative superiority of NDT-style debate, but ignored the crucial fact that NDT debated much narrower propositions that contained highly controlling language. When NDT debated broad propositions with few controlling phrases, such as the 1984-85 proposition, "Resolved: That the United States Federal Government should significantly increase the exploration and/or development of space beyond the earth's mesosphere" (Freeley, 1996 p. 411), it experienced an increase in generic arguments (and corresponding complaints) similar to the game-related criticisms leveled by reform advocates. The answer, for those truly concerned with promoting case-specific clash and in-depth research, seems obvious: return to the narrowly worded and highly controlling types of propositions that have been historically debated. In 1926-27, for example, debaters spent the entire year discussing the proposition, "Resolved: That the essential features of the McNavy-Haugen bill be enacted into law" (Freeley, 1996 p. 409). Likewise, the 1932-33 proposition, "Resolved: That the United States should agree to the cancellation of the inter-allied debt," (Freeley, 1996 p. 40) seems calculated to focus debates on a very particular issue that the community felt was important at the time.

Modern propositions could easily be modeled after the historical examples presented above and could provide the community with a mechanism to *guarantee* an increase in case-specific argumentation, if that is truly what reform advocates seek. For example, the proposition "Resolved: That the United States Congress should repeal the Omnibus Welfare Reform Act of 1996," would provide affirmative teams with ample ground to defend the resolution by example (IE: political rationales, economic rationales, equity issues, or the unfairness of particular provisions, such as the limitations imposed on lifetime benefits or the restrictions for benefits to legal immigrants), while at the same time, restricting debates to a highly limited sphere of argument. Although critique arguments and generic counterplans would not necessarily be prohibited, framers could modify resolutorial wording to eliminate serious consideration of these issues if they so desired. Using the above example, the proposition could be reworded to state that, "Resolved: Assuming the prevailing political and economic order, the United States Congress should repeal the Omnibus Welfare Reform Act of 1996."

The point of this digression is not to advocate a change in the philosophy that underlies propositional wording, but rather, to point out the more obvious cause, (or in other words, the inherency mechanism) of the unsatisfactory in-round practices cited by reform advocates. Addressing these problems at the level of cause seems much more likely to produce a workable solution than tinkering with essentially unrelated factors such as the length of the season or the number of propositions debated. Quite simply, broad propositions produce

more generic argumentative strategies than their narrow counterparts, and modifying other structural characteristics in order to limit generic argumentation is at best inefficient, if not utterly unworkable.

The quality of research employed in debate rounds was another central concern of reform advocates. Steve Rowe, for example, suggested that releasing a new topic each December undermined library research because it forced debaters to research "the easy sources like Lexis and the internet," which necessarily contained "less of the deeper-level arguments (especially Lexis) than do books and journals in the library" (1995a, p. 1). Rowe attributed the problem to the need to quickly research a topic, rather than the breadth of topics and the "moving-target" nature of affirmative cases. "If I have to start anew for a new topic," he noted, "I don't have time to cut many books or look for many obscure articles. I need research fast and furious which means Lexis and the Internet" (1995b, p. 1).

There is little evidence to suggest that the problems Rowe cited have been reduced by moving to a year-long topic. In fact, given a year to innovate increasingly smaller cases, it seems just as likely that dependence on Lexis/Nexis has increased, rather than diminished. Rowe's assumption that a longer topic uniquely promoted improvements in the quality of evidence read during rounds is not supportable and, as mentioned above, seems to have much more to do with the breadth of the topic than with the length of time it is debated. Rowe also ignored the potential strategic benefit of disregarding the herd-mentality and selecting arguments on both the affirmative and negative that do not appear in the general news archive on Lexis/Nexis (see, for example, Voight 1996). In any event, there is no evidence that year-long topics have either improved the quality of evidence used in debate rounds, or diminished reliance on Lexis/Nexis as the primary vehicle of argument invention.

Some proponents of topic extension suggested that year long topics would lead to an increase in the number of novices participating in debate and that announcing the topic earlier would accomplish the same result by increasing the utility of summer debate workshop evidence and encouraging novice debaters to seek intensive instruction during the summer. These assertions were problematic in two respects: First, they rested on the untested assumption that novices were more likely to join during the fall semester, and hence, were likely to be discouraged by switching topics at semester-break. As Pat Gehrke observed, easing the transition for fall novices only complicated the task of spring recruits:

What am I going to do with the second semester new students? As it is, they are a couple of tournaments behind by the time school starts. If they are a whole semester behind, they're going to be completely overwhelmed. (1995, p. 1).

Although direct comparisons are again complicated by the lack of institutional research in this regard, it can safely be said that there has not been a dramatic influx of novice debaters as a result of enacting the reforms.

The second assumption, that the reforms would result in the placement of a higher priority on summer workshop attendance and evidence, while no doubt correct, is philosophically troubling. By extending the length of the season, this reform adds a minimum of two weeks of uncompensated time to

the already arduous burdens faced by most coaches and directors. From the vantage-point of diversity, it also imposes serious costs on academically or financially strapped debaters. Students who need summer jobs to help fund their education must either sacrifice two weeks of their earning potential and invest between \$700 and \$1500 dollars on summer debate practice, or face competitive detriment of working through the end of August while their counterparts are aggressively researching the new topic. Likewise, coaches and directors may feel pressured to encourage at least one team member to attend each of the three major debate workshops out of a fear that the squad will be unable to make up lost ground if research on the new topic is delayed until students report for school in the fall.

The creeping professionalism of undergraduate debaters is another troubling philosophical objection to topic extension and the move to debating year-long propositions. Three years ago, CEDA debaters could easily take the fall semester off to go abroad, participate in internships, accomplish difficult coursework, or participate in campus or community service without jeopardizing their competitive prospects at the national tournament. In this "best of both worlds" environment, students could, over a four year period, acquire all of the valuable life-skills that debate participation imparts without experiencing the opportunity costs forced by rigorous travel patterns, time-intensive practice sessions, or the often overwhelming demands placed on squads with few participants in terms of conducting debate research. Pat Gehrke framed the issue as an ethical question:

In a normal, two semester year, a team which only debated one tournament on the fall topic but made a real push in the spring could realistically do well at nationals. With topic extension, these same debaters will be in the equivalent situation of starting a new spring topic in the middle of February. How ethical is it for our community, which praises inclusion and openness, to vote for extending a topic when it knowingly will hamstring debaters who are either more academically stressed or financially unendowed?...Remember this, a year-long topic will require a year-long commitment from debaters if they want to be competitive. (1995b, p. 1-2).

Although Gehrke's ethical objections may have been resolved by removing the option of extending the fall topic, and hence resolving potential uncertainty at the beginning of the year, his observations concerning creeping professionalism are a valid criticism of reform.

Currently, to be nationally competitive, CEDA coaches and debaters, like their NDT counterparts, must actively follow debate from August first, (or even early July if one accepts the notion that knowing the topic area alone is sufficient to begin the research process in earnest), through Easter weekend. No other activity demands such an extensive time commitment of its participants. Consequently, CEDA will attract and retain only those students who are willing to accept an eight or nine-month annual time commitment. This stands in stark contrast to the goals enunciated in a letter outlining CEDA's vision statement, mailed to members last fall, and reprinted in *Argumentation and Advocacy*. In that document, CEDA's current President, Vice President and second Vice President argued that they hoped to encourage the participation of "more members of under-represented groups," including

students who did not debate in high school, or who do not have scholarships; to reduce the costs of debate "to allow greater participation;" and to help ensure that "academic performance is rewarded and does not suffer as a result of participation in debate," and that "the debate season allows all participants to grow and experience quality of life outside of debate" (Simerly, 1996 p. 84). Given the grave inconsistency between the goals outlined in the vision statement and the effects of recently initiated reforms, it is somewhat surprising that the letter did not contain a proposal to repeal the reforms, or at least re-examine their impact on the feasibility of reaching the objectives outlined in the vision statement.

Proponents of reform argue that these choices are essentially self-imposed and that the decisions reached by individual programs or students, are unaffected by institutional reform. Each member school and each debater is free to decide the terms under which debate participation takes place. In a strict sense, of course, they're correct: A program or student may always elect to initiate the debate season in October or January, regardless of the competitive implications of the choice. The experience of NDT debate throughout the nineteen-eighties and early nineties, however, ought to serve as a cautionary note for the potentially debilitating institutional implications of this attitude. Serially non-competitive programs do not long remain in an activity. Faced with declining support from departments and administrators, unable to attract and retain students and increasingly forced to question why they devote limited time and resources to an activity in which they cannot hope to achieve excellence, programs flee to other forensics activities or collapse.

There is good evidence that this is already occurring. Despite the influx of NDT subscribers this year, CEDA's net membership increased by only six schools. A similar decline in traditional CEDA schools next year would amount to a net loss of thirty or forty subscribers since the pool of new potential NDT members has already been exhausted. Meanwhile, membership in competing forensics organizations continues to grow. In the West, many traditional CEDA schools have switched to parliamentary debate and NEDA's membership has doubled in recent years (Horn, 1996 p. 97). Although the first wave of departures may easily be written off as malcontents, (as they were by NDT schools during the early eighties), as participation at regional tournaments begins to decline, and as budgetary pressures escalate, the trickle soon turns into a flood. Declining membership burdens smaller and more vulnerable programs, who increasingly find themselves attending tournaments to seed their opponents for elimination rounds. Although the strongest NDT schools remained quite strong when measured in terms of number of students, scholarship support, budgetary resources, staffing and so forth, the impact of attrition on NDT schools with a single coach or a handful of experienced participants was already severe when the merger with CEDA was undertaken. By that point, a handful of schools represented more than two thirds of the entries at major NDT tournaments, as well as nearly all of the elimination-round participants; while smaller programs found it difficult to compete, or qualify for the NDT national tournament, even given the drastically reduced numerical competition for each available elimination-round or national-qualifying slot.

Paralleling the initial stages of NDT's decline, smaller programs in CEDA have begun to reach critical mass during the past several years and many have initiated the search for alternatives, or are on the verge of doing so. In

announcing the demise of the St. Anselm CEDA program two years ago, for example, David Trumble observed, "Today, most students have part-time jobs, internships, and/or volunteer in the community, in addition to being full time students. Given the professionalization of varsity debate and the broadening scope of topics, a small squad has little chance to keep up with the large schools" (1995, p. 1). Although resource and staffing differences between programs will always exist, enacting structural changes that discourage the participation of smaller programs ultimately undermines the foundation upon which the vitality of the CEDA is built. Furthermore, asking members to accept unquestioningly the notion that they will remain serially non-competitive is unrealistic. Put simply, the organization is only as healthy as the weakest third of its members and to see where CEDA is headed, one need only look at where NDT has just been.

Advocates also asserted that reform would maximize the use of non-peak academic time by shifting it into the summer, minimize research obligations over the holiday break, and provide relief to small programs by allowing them to somehow "catch-up" with the research-machines of their larger counterparts. All three of these arguments rest on the spurious assumption that debate research is finite and that once "done," debaters essentially stand-still until their opponents catch-up with them. In order for research burdens to be lessened during the holiday break, for example, debaters would have to be confident that their opponents would eschew the library in favor of quality family time. Likewise the "research break" at the beginning of the fall semester presupposes that debaters have "finished" the research they feel they need between July and September, and feel confident to focus on their classwork until after the first tournament. These predictions were utterly at odds with the competitive psychology fostered by debate. As Carson Brackney quipped, "We aren't going to get a real X-mas break no matter what happens with topic selection" (1995, p. 1). Given the move toward extremely broad topics, debate research is never "finished," and it is the foolhardy debater indeed who assumes that his colleagues will avoid doing research at the beginning of the semester or during the Christmas recess.

At another level, these arguments undermine the reform proposal's primary stated rationale of improving the depth and quality of in-round arguments. "Now here's an interesting contradiction," noted Aaron Klemz, "you have folks saying that it would be good to extend Mexico because they want to have a break over Christmas. Then you have others saying it would be good to extend Mexico because you can do more in-depth research over the break. Which one people?" (1995, p. 1). In reality, the answer is neither: The breadth of the topic combined with the length of the season created an incentives for affirmatives to research more obscure cases — hence minimizing the risk of a negative case-specific "hit," and maximizing their own chances of winning. Simultaneously, the failure of teams to "stand still" and let their opponents catch-up with them created an incentive for debaters to do more, rather than less research, in the hopes of increasing their odds.

For the same reasons, the suggestion that reform would competitively aid smaller programs was perhaps the cruelest hoax of all. A comparison of the elimination-round participation by small programs does not lead to the conclusion that they have benefited from reform and, in fact, the small programs that were most vocal in their support for reform seem to have fared considerably better under the old system than the new. The reason is simple