

EDUCATION IN REVIEW

Colleges Are Looking on Debating With Greater Interest and Want No Censor

By BENJAMIN FINE

The annual intercollegiate debating tournament last week at West Point focused attention on an extracurricular activity that enjoys great popularity on American campuses.

Thirty-four debating teams, representing the best in the land, came to West Point to vie for the honor of being named the champion debating college of 1955.

Debating, as an extracurricular activity, is now in its seventy-fourth year. It began when a team from New York University challenged Rutgers. The Rutgers team won, successfully upholding the thesis that voting should be open to all citizens, except women and children.

A sampling of representative colleges and universities, made by this department, shows that debating is now enjoying its greatest popularity. Almost every institution reports that it has more debating teams and more men and women engaging in this activity than ever before.

One reason advanced by educators for the current interest is the furor caused last fall when the national topic for 1954-55 was chosen. When it was announced that colleges would debate the question whether the United States should recognize Communist China, officials of both West Point and Annapolis withdrew their institutions from the debating arena. Several colleges challenged West Point and Annapolis to debate the issue itself—that is, whether it was in the best interests of academic freedom to be forced to remain silent. But these institutions made no statements beyond the brief explanation that it was contrary to service policy for personnel to debate a controversial subject on which national policy already had been established.

More Debates and Debaters

Colleges such as Brown, Cornell, Colgate, Princeton and Harvard report a decided increase in student interest this past year. Debating, these institutions note, attracts not only more students, but larger audiences as well. For example, the Brown University Debating Union has expanded its debating program from thirty-five debates three years ago to more than fifty this year.

Similarly, Cornell reports that it has 50 per cent more debaters now than two years ago. The Cornell-Oxford debate this year drew an audience of 500. A spokesman for Dartmouth reports: "We had more boys turn out for debating than for football this year."

Harvard notes a marked increase in student debating during the past year. An alumni committee has been formed to promote the forensic program. As a result, the university administration has just created the position of executive adviser to the Harvard Debate Council—the first time in Harvard's history that provision has been made for faculty support of this extracurricular activity.

All the colleges reached by this department expressed the belief that students should debate the question of Communist recognition—or, indeed, any other question. Student officers of the various debating teams at Harvard, Brown and elsewhere sent telegrams of protest to the superintendents of the service academies last fall. The student debaters at Princeton were seriously concerned that any question should be censored. The student newspaper joined in the campaign of protest. The students stressed that they could take either side of the controversial issue without becoming "brain-washed."

Good Training

Many reasons were advanced by debate coaches, English instructors and speech professors as to why debating is useful to the student. N. Edd Miller, debating coach at the University of Michigan, listed these five major advantages to be gained from intercollegiate debating:

- (1) It gives a student a background of information on current problems.
- (2) It provides training in clear, logical thinking.
- (3) It puts stress on the ability to organize information.

(4) It offers training in recognizing that there are different points of view on any given subject.

(5) It provides training in the skills of public speaking.

Robert Newman, debating coach at the University of Pittsburgh, observes:

"Debating is good practical experience for future lawyers, teachers, salesmen and others who will have to speak in public. It helps students acquire interest in current issues above and beyond that acquired in classrooms. It helps them to recognize the two-sidedness of most questions, and teaches them to approach issues with open minds."

The Light Touch

Not all debating teams take themselves seriously. Each year Yale University puts on a humorous debate with Princeton just before the annual Yale-Princeton football game. Last year's debate topic, "Resolved, that the Dior look falls flat," attracted considerable attention from coast to coast. The jesting attitude is approved by Rollin G. Osterweis, director of debating activities, who said:

"These humorous debates help our boys acquire ease of delivery, something the British seem to possess instinctively. The British know how to inject humor into a serious debate. That is something we have to learn. American debating is too formal and stylized. We have been doing much better against Oxford and Cambridge, on their annual trips to America, since we started humorous debating."

The colleges debated the question of Communist recognition from 5,000 to 7,000 times during the past year, according to Prof. Karl Richards Wallace, head of the speech department at the University of Illinois. Dr. Wallace, who was president last year of the Speech Association of America, said that no exact tally was kept of the number of debates held by the colleges. Nor is there any way of knowing, he said, how many colleges won the "negative" or how many the "affirmative" side of the question.

Based on previous experience, and the results up to about mid-December, the results would be just about on a fifty-fifty ratio, Prof. Wallace said. It is not the popularity of the question that determines the winner of a debate, he pointed out. Rather, factors such as presentation, logic, and the arguments used are considered by the judges.