



Why Debate

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This collection of essays belong in the hands of all those looking to persuade a thinking public.

Shawn Briscoe's collection of essays *Why Debate* is a compelling argument for the inclusion of debate and forensics programs in American high schools and universities. In the wake of an election season in which civility and rational discourse were given over to hate-based and fear-based insults and attacks, Briscoe and his co-contributors offer the democratic alternative: truth-seeking, evidence-based rhetoric, hailed since Plato and Aristotle as key to an enlightened electorate.

Essayists include successful students, teachers, and professionals, each bringing their own personal experience to the topic. A MIT undergraduate credits her high school debate years for curing her "unusual knack for social awkwardness" and kick-starting her on the path to local and national honors in academics and debate; an attorney recalls how his time with the debate team at the University of Alaska taught him analytical thinking that has enabled him to confront and manage his fear of the unknown. A pediatrician tells how the "confidence, presence, and poise" that she developed as a high-school debater has been an asset in her advocacy for transgender children.

The individual success stories are powerful, but they are not the only source of evidence in support of Briscoe's proposal. The essayists take pains to demonstrate how the debate culture yields what Briscoe calls "educational merits," such as speech training, critical thinking, writing and research skills, and argument and persuasive strategies, as well as the "growth merits" of open-mindedness, creativity, teamwork, respect for diversity, social and competitive skills. As these essays show: the debater is preparing for an academic career and a position in the workplace.

But perhaps the most important benefit of debate, echoing throughout these essays and answering the question posed in the title, is that it molds caring and committed citizens of local and global communities. Thomas Allison's final entry in the collection cites Martin Luther King's observation that "a riot is the language of the unheard." A lawyer and civic leader, Allison claims that debate "helped end my silencing." Debate, it is shown, helps to make one into an effective advocate, and feeds the desire to serve others.

Why Debate belongs in the hands of American teachers, educational administrators, students, and parents for the way that it successfully advances the idea that the true persuasion of an educated public will not consist of ad hominem attacks, campaign slogans, or quick fixes, but of "cogent arguments" backed by facts, reasons, and valid evidence.

JOE TAYLOR (December 21, 2016)

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