A Coach's Notes[1]

Everett Rutan
Connecticut Debate Association
ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association

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THBT the college admissions process should be based on objectively measured student performance.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the December 2022 CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Joel Barlow presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Frameworks

I've been thinking a lot about frameworks lately. They are a key piece of a successful case—pro and con—but debaters rarely treat them in a way that matches their importance. A good framework can win the round, a bad one can easily lose it.

A good framework explains what the debate is going to be about: what is the central issue and how should that issue be decided. This is similar to Lincoln-Douglas debate, where, under the resolution, a team is expected to present a value they will support and also a criterion which measures whether or not the value is achieved.[2]

In the final round at Joel Barlow, after presenting definitions, Gov tells us their framework is simply "equity". What is equity? Is it equal opportunity? Equal outcomes? Applied to individuals? Applied to social/economic/ethnic/racial/political groups? In the context of this motion, must it occur at each college individually? Across colleges in the same tier (e.g., elite, mid-rank, small, large, private, state-sponsored)? Across higher education as a whole? If you have 50 people in the room and say your framework is "equity", my guess is you have 50 ideas as to what it means.

Listening to the PMC—since most debaters do not do a good job with definitions and framework, i.e., "top of case", I always consider what their case tells me about these issues is more important—I believe they intend something like:

> *Our framework is equity. By equity, we mean that each student should be treated fairly in the same manner in the college admissions process. Equity and fairness have always been key American values. This occurs under the motion because two students with the same objective measures of performance will either both be accepted or both be rejected. A student with better scores will be more likely to be accepted. This does not occur in the status quo, which is inherently unfair due to the use of many subjective measures in college admissions.*

Now I know what Gov wants the debate to be about, why it is a reasonable policy objective, and how they intend to determine whether it is achieved.

Opp never comments on Gov's framework or definitions, but their case tells me they object on two levels. First, objective measures are not good basis for equity when evaluating college applicants. This isn't a framework argument as it accepts equity measured by equal treatment as the framework. It's a solvency argument: admissions decisions based exclusively on objective measures of student performance won't be equitable. These objective measures ignore other important personal qualities and are themselves unfair due to inequities in society like wealth, income and social status. The motion doesn't live up to the standard Gov wants to set. The Opp first and third contentions present these arguments.

The second Opp contention, diversity, is both a solvency argument—Gov will harm equity as measured by diversity—but also a framework argument. Why bother to present it as a framework issue? To seize the high ground! Arguing Gov doesn't meet its own goal is one thing: to win you still have to reply to each Gov argument. But, if you can convince the judge Gov is supporting the wrong objective, you invalidate the entire Gov case in one step. It's the moment in the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when Indy and Sallah gleefully realize about the Nazis, "They're digging in the wrong place!" Not only

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does Gov have to answer the solvency argument, but they have to go back and justify why their equity should supersede your diversity.

I think diversity works best as a better measure of equity rather than an alternative value. Society is filled with all sorts of inequities that give some unfair advantage over others. Only when the student population broadly reflects the diversity of the population can we overcome those many harms, both in the present, and, through education, in the future. If talent and ability are equally distributed, how can the outcome be equitable if it doesn't reflect the country's diversity?

None of these arguments are bullet proof. There is still a debate to be had. But it's a lot more obvious what the debate is about.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

I suspect most of the debates, like the final round, focused on specific "objective measures" like GPA or test scores. One can argue whether or not these are objective or biased, what their impact on admissions will be, and so forth. But it is easy to get lost in these details, and debates about details require evidence. Given limited prep time and research material debaters end up making a lot of conflicting assertions. Like a vague framework, it can lead to a messy debate.

Like a clear framework, another way to seize the high ground is to present a case that avoids arguing over things you don't know much about. Good parli is built on good explanations, not in depth research.

The motion reads: *THBT the college admissions process should be based on objectively measured student performance.* I'm not sure what "objectively measured student performance" is. I can give arguments why GPAs and SATs both are and are not "objective". But I also know there are a lot of softer, yet still arguably objective (or not), measures like the scores they give in performance contests like gymnastics or music or even debate, or the rating an interviewer might give to a set of candidates.[3]

Consider this Gov "plan":

> *We on Gov are not experts at college admissions, so we can't tell you what the ideal college admissions process is. Instead, we note that the real problem is that the admissions process is both secretive and purposely obscure giving colleges free rein to admit whomever they will. We therefore interpret the motion as requiring each college to come up with their own selection process using measures of student performance that they deem objective, with the proviso that they fully document and publish their selection criteria. To ensure they follow these criteria, each year they must provide sufficient information so that process can be audited to demonstrate that they meet their own standards. Objectivity requires the process be brought into the light, not hidden.*

Think about it. What does the rest of this case look like? How does Opp reply?

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[3] If you don't believe ratings can be objective, you will have quite a shock when you work for your first large company and find almost all of them base bonuses, raises and promotions on performance ratings!

Contentions

There is a difference between a contention and a tag line or signpost. ***A contention is always a full sentence that gives the judge a reason to vote for you.*** Once you've presented that, you can reduce it to something shorter that lets you signal the judge when you are moving from one issue to the next in your speech in order to avoid having to repeat the full statement.

In this final round, Opp tells us their contentions are "Diminishes collegiate values, campus diversity, and classism". If you walked up to someone on the street and said that, would they have any idea what you were talking about? Probably not, and I didn't either. Note Opp never gave a full statement of their contentions at any point in the round, leaving the judges to guess.

Based on the details presented under each contention I think Opp meant was something like:

> *We will present three contentions:*
> - *First, colleges fail to uphold their own educational values unless they consider the whole student, not simply grades or test scores.*
> - *Second, a diverse student body is necessary for a good education, and this can only be achieved by considering the whole student, not just "objective measures."*
> - *Third, money and status provide an advantage in both worlds, but their impact will be even worse if colleges only consider grades and test scores.*
>
> *For brevity, we will refer to these three as educational values, diversity and money.*

See the difference?

The Gov contentions are a bit better, but still have a few problems:

- *G1: Students must meet the college's requirements to succeed.*
- *G2: Subjective measures result in discrimination.*
- *G3: Colleges are selective and secretive.*

As written, the first and third aren't necessarily reasons to vote Gov, and the second only hints at a reason rather than stating it clearly. See if you can do better!

One POI at a Time, Thanks!

If you were paying attention to the final round you may have noticed the series of POIs posed to the MG by the Opposition[4]:

> *POI: How will you abolish legacy admissions[5]?*
> *Answer: Ignore them, keep them off the admissions form.*
> *POI: What about the impact of donations?*
> *Answer: We want admissions based on "objectively measured student performance" and donations don't measure student performance.*
> *POI: Can't admissions officers tell by looking at the name?*

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[4] I don't take notes word for word, so this dialog is a recreation of what was said.
[5] Legacy admissions of students whose parents or other relatives went to the school.

Answer: Too many questions. I've already answered two.

Exactly! Too many questions. The MG almost got "POI-ed to death", letting Opp ask 3 POIs in a row before finally cutting them off.

As speaker the time is your own, and every POI gives some of that scarce resource to the other team. POIs are an opportunity to show you can handle a potentially hostile interruption, not only without disturbing the flow of your arguments, but by using your answer to extend them. Accept too many POIs, however, and you cede control of your time to your opponents.

Repeated POIs transform what should be a brief interruption into a cross-examination session. Having recently switched to Parli from a cross-examination debate format you might think this is an example of old CDA habits dying hard. But I often see inexperienced debaters take multiple POIs in this fashion. We are—most of us—raised to be polite and answer questions when asked. Public speaking is about being in control first, and polite second.

As a debater you have to suppress the urge to answer every question presented to you. Take one POI, and only take it when it is convenient for you. Don't be afraid to say, "I'll take it when I finish this point." After your answer, make sure you get a complete argument in--cover an entire contention--before taking another. Remember you can simply wave off or ignore a persistent questioner. So long as you take 2 or 3 POIs during your speech, the judge should not hold this against you.

Gotcha!

POIs differ in purpose from cross-examination. Cross-examination allows you to probe into an argument in order to build a case against it. POIs are intended to disrupt, either by putting the speaker off their flow or turning the judge or audience against what the speaker is saying.

Most debaters will look for POIs that disrupt an argument by pointing out a contradiction or other logical flaw, or by raising a counterpoint. But the best POIs have an emotional impact, a "Gotcha!"[6] moment that best comes with an under- (or over-) tone of outrage and leaves the speaker stumbling for a reply. You can construct an ordinary POI from the clash between the speaker's arguments and your own. The speaker has to offer you the opportunity for a "Gotcha!" POI, and you need to develop an ear for those opportunities or they will pass unnoticed.

There were two offered in the final round at Joel Barlow, one each by Gov and Opp. The first was in the PMC:

> **PM** (supporting the use of a GPA-only admissions standard): In the Harvard case, admitting by GPA would raise the proportion of Asian-Americans from 24% now to 51% of the class.

The statistic is from the Economist article on page 3 of the packet. Just above it on page 3, at the end of the US News article that starts on page 2, it notes the number accepted by

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[6] Colloquial version of "Got you!", if "gotcha!" is not familiar.

Harvard is "disproportionately higher than their percentage of the U.S. population".[7] Within the Gov framework of "equity" the POI should be obvious.

The second occurs in the LO's reply to the third Gov contention, that the college admissions process is selective and secretive:

> *LO: It is the prerogative of a college to set any admissions standards they like.*

That is quite an invitation to colleges to discriminate arbitrarily, especially considering the history of bias exhibited by some colleges against some groups. Again, a good POI should be obvious.

Learning to listen is the key to debating well!

RFD

Most RFDs are never seen by anyone other than the teams and their coaches. Why post an RFD?

Debaters listening to a round often wonder why a judge decided the way they did, especially if the debater would have voted for the other team. New judges may wonder what more experienced judges consider in a round and how they explain their decision to the teams involved on the ballot. This RFD is my opinion; yours may differ. Even so, I hope it will help you learn to better express your own decisions.

Some of the points below have already been covered in more detail above.

This was a difficult debate to judge because neither side did a good job explaining what the debate was about, they merely implied it. Start with the framework, which Gov tells me is equity. That is the sort of thing debaters usually say, but it isn't very useful. Only in the PMR am I told what equity is—look at everyone equally—but I am never told why that is a good thing, and Gov only implies "objective" evaluation will do that, not how it will do that. The Gov contentions don't do that either. The first, that students need to meet certain standards to succeed argues for neither side; the second (subjective measures invite discrimination) and third (colleges are both selective and secretive) suggest there is a problem that Gov implies the motion will fix, but Gov doesn't spend much time explaining how.

Opp doesn't offer an alternative to equity but seems to argue that subjective evaluation is needed to ensure diversity. As with equity, diversity is never defined and it is never explained why diversity is good or why it won't occur under the motion (or that it is occurring now, for that matter). It isn't clear if Opp is proposing diversity as an alternative to equity, in which case they never explain why one is more important; or, if Opp is arguing you can't achieve equity without diversity, they never clearly say that.

I vote Gov because ultimately their case is more coherent: colleges use subjective measures in a secretive process that treats some student differently from others. That is unfair, so falls under the equity framework, and in one sense discriminatory and

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[7] The Asian-American share of the US population is 6-7%, which you can check in a good almanac, one of the resources permitted by CDA, but which I rarely see brought to or used at our tournaments by debaters.

discrimination works against diversity. Opp doesn't really challenge this, spending little time replying to the Gov case. The most serious direct challenge—many students meet the GPA standard, how do we distinguish among them?—is only mentioned in passing in the LOC. Opp argues diversity is good and money provides and advantage, but never explains why these will be worse under the motion.

Gov also has an advantage is being a bit more organized. The MGC provides well-balanced replies to each of the Opp contentions and each of Opp's replies to the Gov contentions. The LOC replies to Gov are brief assertions and the MOC only replies to the first Gov contention before returning to the Opp case. I think I give a reasonable decision on the arguments above, but I will admit that organization and coverage tend to influence my interpretation of the flow.

Finally, debates sometimes have--at least to my ear--a "gotcha" moment, an odd point that could turn the momentum in the debate in one team's favor. Here it is in the PMC, where we are told that if Harvard admitted by GPA the proportion of Asian students would go from 25% to 51%. Asians make up 6-7% of the US population. POI opportunities like that don't come often.