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COMMENTARY



TOM SCARRITT

Debaters earn skills for life

Competitive debaters are rarely surprised. They research their topics carefully, and they anticipate the arguments their opponents are likely to make. They know what to expect, and they prepare for it.

It is unlikely, though, that members of Birmingham's SpeakFirst debate team were prepared for the great surprise they received Wednesday. That is when the high school students learned that the University of Alabama and UAB pledged to provide full scholarships for all students who complete three years with the SpeakFirst program.

That was great news for the hard-working students and their parents. It also was a strong affirmation that the universities are reaching out to the right kinds of students and encouraging the right values. These are students who will succeed in college if given the opportunity, and now they will have that chance.

At a time when the headlines are dominated by the Hoover school system's extraordinary efforts to help football players meet the minimum requirements to be eligible for college, the SpeakFirst program is actually preparing students to flourish in college.

The debate program and the enrichment efforts that go along with it are giving Birmingham students some of the same advantages that students have in the top suburban school systems, such as Hoover at its best.

Birmingham lawyer Stephen Black started the SpeakFirst program after reading a newspaper article about the impact of debate on high school students. "They interviewed admissions people at Ivy League schools who said competitive, successful debate in high school has replaced SGA president as the most coveted quality in a college applicant," Black told *The News' Kathy Kemp* last year.

Debate is not just a gold star on a college applicant's resume. It can be a real predictor of success.

The skills debaters learn are skills that help them in college and in life. They learn to do research, distill their findings into cogent arguments and present those arguments in public. "It's absolutely the most academic and educational thing I've seen for kids, bar none," Mountain Brook High School debate coach Jeff Roberts said earlier this year.

The SpeakFirst students also learn the value of hard work, practicing three days a week for three hours at a time. College students, debate coaches and Birmingham lawyers help train the team.

While getting disadvantaged students into college is an important step, it is not enough. As Black noted in an essay about SpeakFirst for *The News*, college enrollment has soared over the past 25 years, but the proportion of students receiving degrees has remained flat. "Many students from low-income families receive an inadequate secondary education and simply aren't prepared to succeed in college," he wrote.

Along with their intensive debate training, SpeakFirst students take part in standardized test preparation, college visits and other educational field trips, as well as structured summer internships.

SpeakFirst is clearly a success. Its team members compete with the very best high school debaters, and now doors are opening for them at the college level. But the team includes only 20 students. Our challenge as a community is to find ways to give many more students the preparation they need for college.

Tom Scarritt is editor of The News. E-mail: tscarritt@bhamnews.com.