



DEBATE TEAM MEMBERS Philip DiPiazza (left), Matt Reichle

REDEFINING THE ART OF THE ARGUMENT

By Lisa Chontos

Despite its small size, UTSA's debate team is helping to change the way debates are structured.

The UTSA debate team reached unprecedented success this year, winning sixth place in the national championship tournament of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA).

Throughout the year, members immersed themselves in research and traveled almost 23,000 miles, defeating teams from UT Austin, Arizona State University, the University of Iowa and the University of Kansas, to name a few. They also beat teams from Michigan State, which has a national championship program, and they almost defeated Oklahoma University, the champions of this year's CEDA tournament.

In addition, UTSA senior Matt Reichle, a 2006–2007 recipient of the Richard L. and Joanne P. Hathaway Debate Scholarship, was selected from hundreds of debaters nationwide to be part of the All-American Debate Team at the CEDA national championship.

But one thing is causing other teams in the country to take notice and even emulate UTSA's group, and that is originality.

Challenging the standard practice of debate, Reichle and his teammate Philip DiPiazza deliver their arguments using everything from hip-hop to costumed skits.

"We'll talk about why the way we discuss things is more important than the rules," Reichle explains. The rules of debate dictate how many minutes each person can speak, that each debater will have a partner, and that in the middle of the debate the teams must argue the opposite stance. Everything else, according to Reichle, is open.

Reichle got into debate in high school. All the art classes were

full he said, so he chose debate by default. At UTSA he met a member of the university debate team. That's when the father of two sons decided to return to debate after discussing it with his wife. This time, however, everything was different.

"They're expanding the concept of what an argument is," says UTSA professor and debate coach Skip Eno. "Theater, music and movies can all present arguments. They will sing, dance and use props. But they can also do a line-by-line analysis of an argument and present evidence."

Reichle adds, "We didn't just say, 'Let's do hip-hop. We found a bunch of literature that supported what we wanted to talk about. I'm an English major who writes poetry, and turning slam poetry into a debate argument was a natural thing to do."

"For four years in high school I did what everyone else does, which is just getting a big stack of source material and reading it as fast as you can. I could do that. But this is different. It's engaging and it makes me want to learn more."

A thirst for knowledge is essential to UTSA's debate team. Each member of the team does the amount of research required for a Ph.D.—in one year. At larger schools, debaters rely on graduate and doctoral students to supply all their research, says Reichle and Eno.

Reichle adds, "It's a question of how you can change the game a little bit. We do just as much work as everyone else, and whatever the research leads us to, we find a form that goes along with the concept."

A glimpse of the five team members in action defies all stereotypes. One team member has a half-sleeve tattoo, and another has hair past his shoulders. Dressed in T-shirts and jeans, they take their turn behind the podium, reading their material a-mile-a-minute and occasionally taking an audible deep breath. Most striking is the speed—which is "like the Micro Machine guy" as Reichle says, and renders their words nearly unintelligible to the untrained ear. They practice by reading a stack of source material aloud as fast as they can for 20 minutes, and they tape and critique all their speeches, just as athletes review game tapes.

UTSA's program is unique in that any student who's willing to work can be on the team and actively debate, according to Reichle and Eno. They say many colleges discourage people from being on the debate team unless they've gone to debate camps or have been superstars on a high school team. One UTSA debater who started a debating career early is sophomore Rene Naud, who went to an academy in high school for students interested in a law career.

Unlike Reichle, who does cross-examination debate, Naud prefers to do parliamentary debate, which she describes as a layman's debate. The topic is revealed just 15 minutes before the round begins. The four kinds of topics are policy resolution, value resolution, fact resolution and—the wild card—a metaphor topic.

The strangest topic she has argued was the metaphor, "This house would put the cart before the horse." She and her teammate ended up winning the round on the basis that it was an idiom, not a metaphor.

As much as Naud loves the act of debate, her favorite part of debating is the friends she has made across the country. She credits


debate with polishing her public speaking and says, "There are very few situations where I won't say what I think."

Interestingly, while many debaters go on to become lawyers, politicians or successful businesspeople, both Naud and Reichle have found their passion in the liberal arts.

Currently majoring in English, Naud is considering changing to either creative writing or philosophy. Reichle will pursue a master's in creative writing, after which he might teach writing at UTSA and help coach the debate team.

As Reichle wraps up three years of debating for UTSA, he takes with him the lifelong friendship of his teammates and the admiration of his competitors. "I had a kid come up to me and say, 'I've debated you twice, and I've lost to you twice, but each time I've learned something about life and I've learned something about debate. I want to be the type of debater that you are,'" he says.

"It was really humbling because there are a lot of people that I look up to, and I had to say, 'Go watch these people—these are the people that I want to be like.' To have someone say it changed the way they looked at the world—that was enough to justify the entire time that I've been here."

Says Eno, "We've always had good debaters, and a good thing is happening here at UTSA. The students here support the team, and it helps the community feel good about itself. I'm so glad that UTSA has the foresight to support programs like this—it reinforces their commitment to a larger ideal." 

BEYOND THE PODIUM Debate team showcases academic excellence

by Roy (Skip) Eno, Director of Debate

The debate team at UTSA has been a value-added program for the university and San Antonio communities for more than 25 years.

Since 1980, UTSA students have taken advantage of the opportunity to compete in intercollegiate debate. The program allows students to employ their academically acquired skills in research, critical thinking and public speaking.

Travel across the United States for competition enables the team to meet other successful students and competitively test their argumentation skills. In the process, our students positively represent UTSA and San Antonio in front of university administrators, faculty and professionals from all over the country.

The debate team also represents UTSA and San Antonio in its commitment to academic excellence. The team provides ongoing evidence of the kind of activity expected of a first-class institution of higher learning and its surrounding supportive community.

Our students, many of them from San Antonio, go on to successful careers in legal, educational and corporate pursuits.

