

Urban debate contests sharpen learning, skills for college-bound students

By Colleen O'Connor

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Members of Manual High School's debate team huddle before the Baker Hostetler Debate Classic on Friday at Thomas Jefferson High School. A study indicates that Urban Debate Leagues help raise student performance in low-performing schools. (Matt McClain, Special to The Denver Post)

The Baker Hostetler Debate Classic is a razor-sharp competition featuring students from Denver Public Schools who thrive on uncertainty and go for the kill.

On the afternoon before the debate, students from Martin Luther King Jr. Early College gathered for their last practice in the school library.

"I've never had a debate that was easy, where I knew I would win," said Danny Nguyen, a junior. "They're all pretty much intense."

Marilyn Calderon, who last year, with her partner, won the "Debate Team of the Year" award that yielded a \$250 scholarship, believes debate will help her become the first in her family to go to college.

"I'm very competitive," she said. "I want to show people I'm not just a girl, not

Extras

* View a slide show of photos from the Baker Hostetler Debate Classic.

just a pretty little face. I can be so much more than what everyone expects me to be."

These Denver Urban Debate League competitions are in their second year. The league includes six Denver Public Schools high schools: MLK, Montbello, Manual, West, Thomas Jefferson and the Academy of Urban Learning.

A study published in the Journal of Negro Education concluded that urban debate helps students in low-performing schools, raising their chances of high school graduation, their literacy scores and their readiness to attend college.

Benefits beyond debate

The study analyzed 10 years of the Chicago Urban Debate League and reported that among African-American male students, debaters were 70 percent more likely to graduate from high school, three times less likely to drop out, and 50 percent more likely to reach the ACT college-readiness benchmark than non-debaters.

"The only reason we're doing this is to get kids into college," said Rico Munn, a co-founder of the Denver Urban Debate League and executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education.

"We have the traditional forensics league, and some kids do independent events, but over the past 20 years those activities tend

Marilyn Calderon debates Byron Moore on Friday at the Baker Hostetler Debate Classic, at Thomas Jefferson High School. Calderon and Wendy Hoang, left, are from Martin Luther King Jr. Early College. Moore attends Jefferson High. (Matt McClain, Special to The Denver Post)

to be more suburban," Munn said. "In the DPS schools, there were only two or three leagues before we showed up. We wanted to bring debate back to the urban-school core."

Roberto Corrada is the other co-founder. He's a professor at the Sturm College of Law at the University of Denver and a former debater whose skill won him a scholarship that paid for his education.

"Not only are kids interested in this, but they've got persistence, going from tournament to tournament," he said. "I saw the first tournament, and by the third one, they'd grown immeasurably in the arguments they were making. I wouldn't have predicted they'd learn so quickly."

Being heard, motivated

Mostly, the students say they do it because it's fun. They like to argue, and to win. But there are fringe benefits.

"It gives motivation to keep your grades up, because in debate you have to have a C average," said Wendy Hoang.

Debater Alejandro Martinez likes his voice to be heard.

"When a tournament comes, you're like, 'Hey, I got all this evidence, and I got a way to change the world.' It feels good knowing someone is listening to you, and thinking there may be a possibility that this one kid might change something."

No learning is wasted

For Nguyen, it's about passion.

"I'm addicted," he said. "I like walking around and doing the whole lawyer thing, where I project my voice in an energetic tone. It's fun and I get absorbed into it, and I love the feeling of that."

He admits that sometimes it's "a bit weird."

He'll be researching evidence at the computer, "and most kids are like, 'What are you looking at that for? It's boring!' But I'll start freaking out, like, 'I can use this!' "

And then there are those handy classroom advantages.

"The teacher will be talking about certain things we wouldn't normally know, but because of debating, we know a whole bunch of words, and a bunch of stuff about government," Nguyen said. "We just understand it. And the teacher is like, 'How did YOU know?' "

Colleen O'Connor: 303-954-1083 or coconnor@denverpost.com