

## Research Documenting the Academic and Social Benefits of Urban Debate Leagues

Numerous studies conducted by education professionals including Linda Collier at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, Melinda Fine of Fine Consulting, and Carol Winkler of Emory, have shown that UDLs are helping urban youth across several indicators of success (notably reading, graduation, college matriculation, and risk-taking behavior).

This research has its limitations. At its best, evaluation is difficult, expensive, and long-term. UDLs have yet to be scientifically investigated through experimental research, so it's not clear if the findings in current studies reflect statistically significant differences in UDL participants versus people in a randomized control group. There is also no control for factors like self-selection bias.

Still, the following range of studies demonstrate or suggest that UDLs have a positive academic and social effect on urban students.

### **Studies that Demonstrate Effectiveness**

The following studies collected data comparing Urban Debate League participants with “similar” students who did not participate in debate.

#### ***Arguments for Success: A Study of Academic Debate in the Urban High Schools of Chicago, Kansas City, New York, St. Louis, and Seattle (2004).***

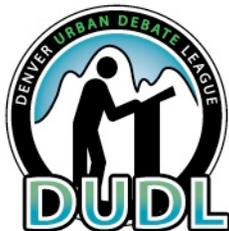
Linda Collier led study assessing debate's impact on reading, self-esteem, and risk-taking behaviors within a treatment group of 209 debaters and a comparison group of 212 urban high school students. Data analysis was conducted by Elaine Maag of the Urban Institute and Edward Harris of the Congressional Budget Office. Notable findings were that:

- Debaters had a 25% greater improvement in reading than non-debaters when taking the Scholastic Reading Inventory in a pre-test/post-test format. They increased test scores 18% than honors students who did not debate.
- Debaters significantly increased their GPA over non-debaters
- Debaters engaged in fewer at-risk behaviors, based on a self-reporting survey
- The study concludes that “academic debate improves performance at statistically significant levels on reading test scores, diminishes high-risk behaviors, and improves academic success and student attitudes towards higher education.”

#### ***The Effect of the Minnesota Urban Debate League on the Academic and Social Development Outcomes of Students, First Year Report. (2005).***

This study compared debaters and non-debaters using the Scholastic Reading Inventory; a survey on students' background, attitudes, and behaviors. Data was also gathered from school records. The findings include:

- Debaters improved 61% more than non-debaters on the reading tests
- 80% of debaters reported no attendance problems compared to 49.02% of the comparison group.
- Debaters average 15% higher self-esteem than the comparison group
- 100% of the debaters tested reported an increased interest in their classes
- 87% of debaters were better able to analyze information than non-debaters
- Debaters had higher GPAs and improved their grades over time, while non-debaters' grades decreased over time
- 100% of Minneapolis UDL debaters are unlikely to engage in negative risk behavior (drugs, early pregnancy, and alcohol).



**Chicago Public Schools/ Chicago Debate League.** The Director of the Chicago Debate League two sets of data over two years on debaters and non-debaters. In each case, debaters were found to increase their GPA over the time span, while non-debaters' grades decreased.

**Evidence Suggesting Apparent Effectiveness**

The data below, based largely on self-reports from UDLs, suggest that urban debate is benefiting youth as intended. Though these were not experimentally collected data, they do show positive effects for large groups of students in debate.

***Atlanta Urban Debate League (2005).***

Data of the middle school urban debate program shows a statistically significant increase in GPA and a 50% reduction in disciplinary referrals (detentions, suspensions) among UDL participants.

***Baltimore Urban Debate League (2006).***

The Baltimore UDL conducts extensive college-access programming with College Summit. They report a 100% graduation rate and a 91% college matriculation rate.

***Center for Applied Research, or Learning What You Can, Building from What You Learn: Assessing the Role of the Baltimore Urban Debate League on Academic and Social Outcomes of Students, a two year quantitative analysis (2003).*** This study by researchers from the Center for Applied Research analyzed 235 students and 25 coaches in the Baltimore UDL using observation, school data, and focus group discussions. Findings include:

- 44.2% of debaters reported increased reading comprehension
- Debate can “shift the locus of control of students. . . . a higher debating level increases the odds of empowerment among students four-fold; a high level of participation in tournaments increases the odds of an internal locus of control three-fold.”

***Kansas City Urban Debate League.***

Self report data suggests that in Kansas City, urban debaters have a 99% high school graduation rate (2002, 2003).