

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan

Connecticut Debate Association

ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association

November 11, 2023

Bethel High School and Fitch High School

This House believes that college is overvalued.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the November 11, 2023, 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 Fitch 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.

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Value for Whom?

I saw the final round at Fitch and I believe the final at Bethel was similar. Gov presented the various problems with college such as the expense and lack of relevance to success in career and life. Opp explained the benefits of a college degree to employment and quality of life. Basically, college is a good choice for many, a poor choice for many others, useful and needed in some contexts, and unnecessary in others.

This does not get to the heart of the issue: what does it mean to say “college is overvalued”? and how do we decide? If you don’t answer those questions, you can’t really have a debate, much less win one.

At Fitch, Gov began by noting that a college degree was not necessary for success in life. They defined “This House” as “the average high school student”, and “overvalued” as measured by the skills acquired compared to their economic value. This just begs the questions: who is the average high school student? and how do we measure skills acquired against their economic value? and finally at what point can we conclude college is over, under, or fairly valued?”

The point is that we cannot decide the motion from an individual perspective. Most of us find our way eventually. I would venture that most—not all—who choose college benefit from it personally and financially. I would also venture that most—again not all—who choose not to go to college also benefit personally and financially. Some make the wrong choice, and some who make the right choice fail to benefit. But I know of no way to aggregate all these individuals to answer the question posed by the motion.

The Average Student

Debaters often use an “average somebody” standard without ever considering that most people are not average. Debate motions are chosen so that those falling to one side of the issue usually benefit while those who fall to the other side do not. When the “average” standard is used in a debate we hear about those who benefit from the motion from Gov and those who are harmed or benefit without the motion from Opp. The rebuttals usually fail to provide a proper comparison and weighing of the two groups, as adding all those individual impacts is difficult or impossible.

One possible solution is to look at someone “on the bubble,” that perfectly average individual who is not clearly favored by one choice or the other. You might argue that he motion should be decided by the best decision for that individual. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 60% of high school students enroll in college, so you might say that 60th percentile or so is person you want to consider.

There are two difficulties with this.

The first is describing that person precisely: we don’t really know who they are or what factors we should use to “line up” the population so the “60th percentile” has meaning. As noted above, most teams never do so explicitly. In practice their arguments rely on

biasing the individual’s characteristics so that the individual supports their side of the motion.

The second difficulty is that it ignores the aggregation problem. It doesn’t seem right to decide the motion on the basis of one individual or one percentile, even properly described. What about the other 99%? Even one percentile is around 30,000 individuals. Are they all similar enough that your arguments speak for all of them?

Even when the motion seems to call for evaluating an individual taking that approach may not work. Suppose the motion read, “This House, as a high school Senior, would not go to college.” You still have the same problem of how to frame the debate by describing “a high school Senior” in a way that provides for a fair contest.

Which College?

Focusing on “student”—a word not in the motion—ignores the word “college” which is in the motion. Which college? Harvard? UConn? Middlesex Community College? University of Phoenix (an online, for-profit college)? We could go through the same discussion about what the “average college” is, and how teams would favor the sort of colleges that lead to outcomes that benefit their side of the motion. It would not get us any further than our discussion of the average student.

In the final round at Fitch neither team defined “student” or “college”. “This House” was defined as a “rational individual” and the framework (voting criteria) was “net benefits.” The meaning of these had to be discerned from the arguments presented. From my flow:

Gov	Opp
G1: College is too expensive	O1: A college degree helps low income students
G2: Jobs are becoming less likely to require a college degree	O2: College fosters education exoration and opportunities
G3: Skills learned in college do not match those needed in the real world	O3: College builds useful skills

All of these statements are true for some students and some colleges! How can they be compared? How should a Judge decide the round?

Defining Value

While your first thought on reading the motion may be “is college worth the price for a student?” put that aside for a moment. Overvalued may have to do with price, but it could also have to do with emotional attachment. We all have things of sentimental value that have no monetary worth.

Value may also have to do with quantity or quality. Someone who continues to acquire more of something than they need or can use, or even if it is poorly made, can be said to overvalue it. Such a person is also likely to overpay, so money may be involved, but it may simply be an obsession.

We also talk about moral values. Certain actions are valued because we believe they are the right way to act, or make the world a better place, even though we place no monetary value on them.

A Collective Problem

Reading the packet carefully, the articles rarely talk about specific individuals or particular colleges. There is talk of certain groups, such as the poor, or first-generation college students, or students interested in particular careers. These are aggregates, and the impacts are collective.

Why not treat “college” as a social institution? Is college overvalued in the sense that overall, society spends too much on it? Or do we spend just the right amount or even too little? Do too many or too few go to college? Are the right individuals going to college? Do we put too much emphasis on college degrees, in the pressure on high school students to go on to college, or in the requirements employers set? These are not dissimilar to the arguments raised when “This House” as an average student, but they are phrased so they can be compared and weighed.

“College as a social institution” opens additional arguments. Does the government provide too much or too little support to higher education? Are the funds well spent: do they go to education, and the right sort of education? or is the money wasted on administrative salaries, fancy buildings, and sports programs?

Controlling the Narrative

The first question Gov should answer for the Judge and their opponents is, “What is this debate going to be about?” Debaters use various terms: top-of-case or framework or definitions or interpretation or plan. But these are just components. The purpose is to identify the central issue and suggest how it should be argued by either side and decided by the Judge. It should be clear that there are fair grounds to support both sides and clear burdens for each to win.

Setting the narrative in this way gives Gov the chance to control the debate. First, they make it clear to everyone how they intend to win the round. The Gov contentions should all lead to impacts that link to the central issue. Second, Gov sets a standard for Opp to meet if Opp wishes to win the round. Opp shouldn’t necessarily accept this standard, but if it is fair, Opp will need to work hard to explain why it should be disregarded, and Gov will have an easier time dismissing Opp’s attempts to avoid it. Third, it sets up the PMR to effectively compare and weigh the two sides.

If Gov doesn’t control the narrative, it often means their contentions aren’t clearly focused on winning the debate. Gov can also lose control of the debate if they don’t identify a central issue, get the issue wrong, or present an interpretation unfair to Opp. Opp can take advantage in several ways. First, clarifying the round may help weaken Gov’s case and strengthen that of Opp. Second, noting something Gov has failed to do,

done incorrectly, or done unfairly, shows Opp as the better team. These can influence the Judge's decision and help earn better ranks and speaker points.

Some motions may permit multiple interpretations. My recommendation to Opp is that if Gov offers a fair interpretation, Opp should accept it and contest the motion on that basis. Conflicting interpretations, unless they are argued through substantive motions, become a debate over definitions, which usually turns ugly.

If neither side presents a clear interpretation of the round, then we have conflicting arguments that may or may not be comparable. Often the teams are talking past each other. This leads to a muddy debate. It forces the Judge to decide what the debate was about, and possibly how to weigh the two sides. A good debater should never leave that task to the Judge.

A College Value Narrative

Let's apply all of this to the college motion. I will make the collective narrative suggested above more precise:

The Government side urges you to adopt the motion, This House believes that college is overvalued. We believe the central question in today's debate is whether the US has "too much college." Does society put too much emphasis on college education with respect to spending, esteem, and pressure on students to attend? First, some definitions...

There are still choices to be made. As just presented, the question only makes sense for a society with a well-developed educational system, a lot of college students, and a lot of college graduates. For a developing country with a weak educational system the more important question might be whether to emphasize college over improving primary and secondary education: a good debate but a different one. The packet for November is exclusively about the United States so the intent of the topic committee is clear, though examples from any developed economy with a strong educational system would be acceptable.

There are a number of contentions that can be derived from the central issue. The obvious one is financial: do we spend too much on college overall, and is the spending properly allocated? A second is quantitative: are too many students going to college, or would they be better served by alternative career paths like apprenticeships or vocational programs? A third aspect is the amount of emphasis placed on college degrees: do we put too much pressure on high school students to go to college, and do employers put too much value on college degrees when hiring?

All of these are touched on in the packet and the Gov and Opp cases in the final round. What is new is they are set in a framework that ties them all together. Expressed this way by the PM, the Judge, the Opposition, and anyone in the audience, would have a clear idea what the debate was going to be about. Each dimension could be the basis for convincing arguments either for or against the motion. Neither Gov nor Opp has a clear

advantage on any of them. They can be weighed against each other, presenting good material for the rebuttal speeches. It's likely to be a good debate.

And that is why we are here.

Consider Your Arguments Carefully II

Last month I discussed a Gov argument that was poorly chosen: “compulsory voting dilutes the weight of informed voters.” It sounds harmless enough: every civics class emphasizes the importance of having informed voters choosing their candidates based on a careful reflection of what the candidate stands for.

Unfortunately, the logic behind the Gov argument has often been the basis for suppressing the votes of those who disagree with those in power or who won't “vote for me”. Who decides who is uninformed? A quick-thinking opponent can turn an argument like this into a powerful indictment, noting recent repressive voting measures in countries such as the US, Turkey, and Hungary.

This month a Coach brought a similar situation to me. A Judge had told the Coach's team that the Judge personally disagreed with one of the team's arguments, in fact, the Judge said the argument “made them cringe”. This disturbed the students (who won the round, by the way, but of course did not know it at the time of the comment) and perhaps was not the best phrasing on the part of the Judge.

However, the argument in question is worth considering in the same way as the “informed voters” above. The debaters said that college was a good choice for the typical high school graduate who didn't have a good idea of what they wanted to do with their life. The Judge's point: would your parents want to pay extra years of tuition just so you could “figure it out”?

Aristotle tells us we persuade others on three levels. Ethos, the personal quality of the speaker, doesn't come into play here. Logos, or rational argument, suggests the argument may be true but weak: college is an expensive route to self-discovery, compared to work, travel, self-study or some combination of these.

But the Judge's point hinges on pathos, or emotion, and Aristotle's further advice that we need to suit our arguments to our audience. At any CDA (and most high school) debate tournament, the majority of the judging is done by parents of the debaters volunteering their time. Those parents are probably concerned about college costs as their child approaches graduation. While “go to college and find figure out your future” may have logic behind it, emotionally it works against you, and possibly especially with parent judges.

In the final round, Opp made what I would consider the same argument: college, with a wide choice of majors, academic and career advisors, a variety of extracurriculars, and exposure to a diverse faculty and student body, provides an opportunity for young adults to explore and choose the best path forward. This is exactly what “finding yourself” or

“figuring it out” means but the language used is much more palatable to a parent Judge facing the costs.

The original form of the argument implies a slacker: “No idea what I want to do; college sure beats working, especially if Mom and Dad pay.” The revised form suggests that Mom and Dad are getting value for their money, and their child will diligently exploit this opportunity. How you say it matters!

The “informed voter” argument above can also be made more attractive. It was in reply to a counterplan that would require everyone to vote or face a fine. A voter compelled to go to the polls may simply select a candidate at random, or spoil their ballot, or vote perversely for the worst candidate in protest. The difference is that in the first instance the logic is voter suppression by keeping “uninformed” voters away from the polls. The logic in the revised version is that compulsion incentivizes resistance expressed by bad behavior.

Debate is about many skills. One is understanding the impact of language and using words precisely to convey the meaning we intend. We emphasize to judges that they should decide the round on the basis of argument, logos. But being human, pathos or emotion, and ethos or how we perceive the quality of person speaking to us, will always play a role. A good debater will combine all three to win.