



FY27 SFAC Questionnaire

Speech & Debate

10/20/2025

1. Executive Summary

Mission

The Speech & Debate program cultivates student success through competitive excellence, engaged scholarship, and student leadership in the community.

The program accomplishes this mission by:

- › Students compete in intercollegiate tournaments:
 - Policy Debate
 - Legal Debate
 - Models Debate
- › Expanding the recruitment process for the University in the Houston and National High School community
- › Expanding the reach of Speech & Debate as a resource for all students
- › Building on a tradition of success in Speech & Debate competition
- › Supporting engaged scholarship and public deliberation on issues that matter to the campus community
- › Equipping students with the necessary tools to advocate and engage in the world

Benefits to University of Houston Students

Speech and debate are cornerstones of American democracy, activities enshrined in the United States Constitution itself. The cultivation of free speech not only enriches campus life, it is a public trust vital to the city of Houston, the state of Texas, and beyond. This trust has educated Houston mayors, federal judges, and successful professionals in law, business, finance, education, and numerous other professions. Education in reason, rhetoric, and research is the crucial element that transforms individuals from passive consumers of election-year debates into active and engaged citizens who shape the terms of the national—and global—conversation.

Speech & Debate competition is remarkably effective at harnessing competitive drive in the service of co-curricular student success. The co-curricular nature of Speech & Debate competition creates incentives for academic engagement outside of the classroom that supports student success. Further, competition teaches resilience and drives students to think creatively and innovate in the face of real-world challenges.

The Speech & Debate program is open to any student, regardless of prior experience. Every year, a large number of our students are either new to debate or to the university. UH students of all majors can and do participate in the program and represent UH in intercollegiate competition. Access to the program's resources for all students is a priority and as such we are constantly seeking ways to increase capacity and expand participation.

Beyond the students directly involved in tournament competition, the program hosts public debates and participates in community events that seek to expand the impact of our student's engagement with issues that matter to the campus and the world. These public debates help to facilitate dialogue that enhances the campus and community for all students, regardless of their immediate participation in program activities.

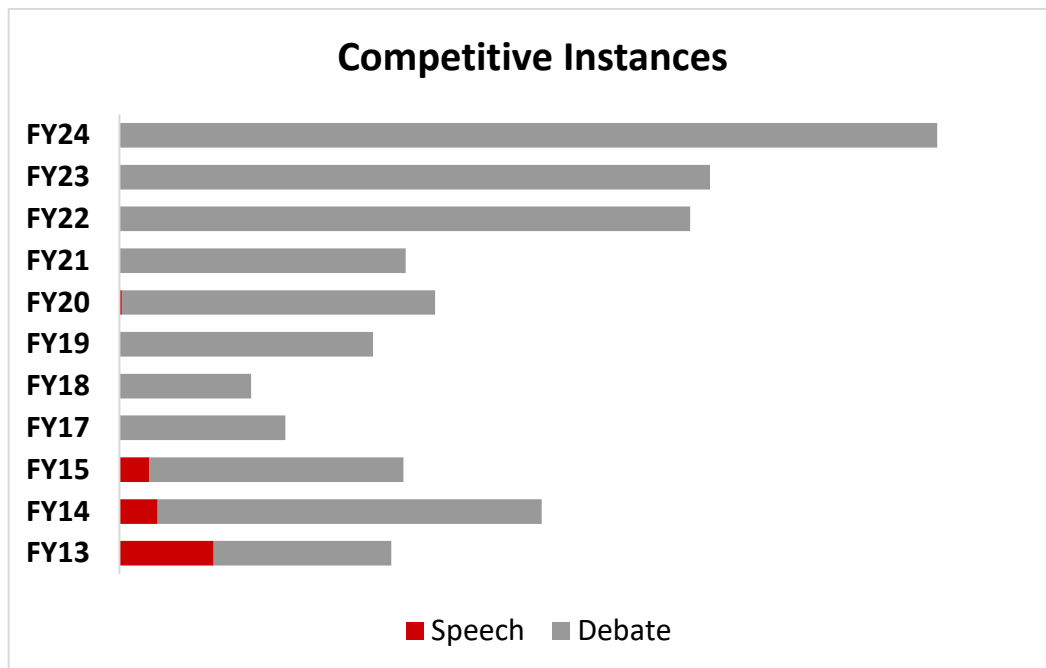
UH MAGAZINE:
How did your experiences at UH prepare you for civic leadership?

SYLVESTER TURNER:
I was on the debate team at UH ... I loved being in the Debate Program.

2. Assessment & Evaluation

Summary

Speech & Debate is one of the most prominent high-impact activities on campus. It offers training in reason, research, and rhetoric that is student driven, and it does so in a manner that increases the national visibility of the university nationally while also serving hundreds of local Houston students. Moreover, competitors are not just one-off participants. At each event they attend, it is not just an hour or afternoon's passive engagement, but multiple full days of active learning and teaching. It is notoriously difficult to develop accurate metrics for high impact, high engagement activities that do not severely underestimate the quantity and quality of student participation. We have previously used the **Competitive Impact** which tried to include the amount of time spent in preparation for tournament competition as well as competition itself. The recent inclusion of the Models Debate format, however, does lend itself to inclusion in this metric because of the nature of their competitions. However, this metric still shows over 8,000 hours of student attention given towards Speech & Debate activities, which is an underestimate given our current organization.



Like any nationally competitive team at any university, travel is and will remain relatively expensive. However, a raw cost-per-student to travel metric is in no way representative of the true impact on students. Measuring cost by student-per-tournament (i.e., 96) dramatically underestimates the total engagement time that each of those tournaments represent, namely, 6460 Competitive Impact Hours. Even the more accurate “competitive instances” metric the team previously used—which measures competition rounds per hour per debater—underestimates the number of hours a competitor spends on the activity per debate by almost a factor of six, even using conservative estimates (1540 vs. 6460). In other words, contrary to appearances, Speech & Debate has an extremely high tooth-to-tail ratio when it comes to cost. The total engagement of each debater over the course of the academic year goes far beyond the hours spent in rounds.

Championing **exceptional opportunities and services to support all UH students** (DSAES) requires a mix of different activities. While not every student activity should focus on providing a high-intensity competitive experience to students, a nationally competitive public research university should provide options for high-impact educational programs.¹ Indeed, the highly-qualified Tier 1 student is choosing between the University of Houston and more established programs at the University of Texas, Baylor, Oklahoma, or Kansas. With appropriate support, we have proven that we *can* compete with those institutions, and win. More importantly, university support actively engages us in competition with and garners recognition from our Tier 1 research university peers not just in the region, but nationally.

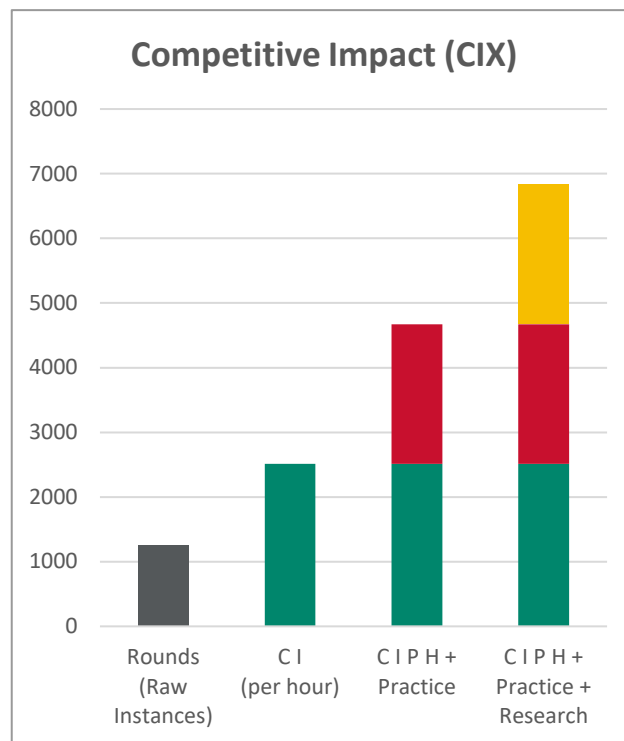
¹ On the importance of high-impact activities on higher education, see the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ position paper by George D. Kuh, “High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter,” AAC&U, 2008. <<https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>>

The COMPETITIVE IMPACT of Speech & Debate

Because speech and debate events can vary in number of rounds, length of rounds, and number of participants in each round, our program uses the *Competitive Instance* as our basic unit of accounting. Simply put, a competitive instance (CI) is the number of participants in an event per hour. So, if someone competes in a speech event that last 30 minutes, that would be half of a CI; for a policy debate round, with two competitors debating for two hours, that would be four competitive instances, one for each student for each hour.

While competitive instances allow us to more accurately measure competition across a number of different events, the beauty of debate is that its value is derived from participation itself. While competitive success remains a foundational goal of the program and the central motivator of student engagement, debate has an impact on students beyond the mere number of rounds and regardless of wins and losses. Our *Competitive Impact* metric goes beyond competitive instances to more closely reflect the time and energy that goes into each “instance.” Competitive Impact (CIX) begins to include the extensive participation that students put in months before they ever get to an intercollegiate tournament. In particular, Competitive Impact includes an estimate of two additional components: research and practice.

The following chart (“Competitive Impact (CIX)”) reflects this measure for the FY23 data, namely, competitive instances for 36 students who participated in two types of policy debate last year. That total includes 628 competition rounds, which translates to **6,832 Competitive Impact Hours** for the 2021-2022 speech and debate season. For the policy debate calculation, practice time and research time for policy debate are *each* estimated at *[Debaters (36) per week (2) per academic year(30)]*. This represents an extremely *conservative* estimate. Many debaters perform that much research (60 hours) during our pre-season preparation, and have performed that much practice (60 hours) before going to our second tournament. Indeed, one scholar has estimated that “the level of rigor and intensity of debate research and preparation over the course of a year” is comparable “to the work involved in completion of a masters' thesis.”²



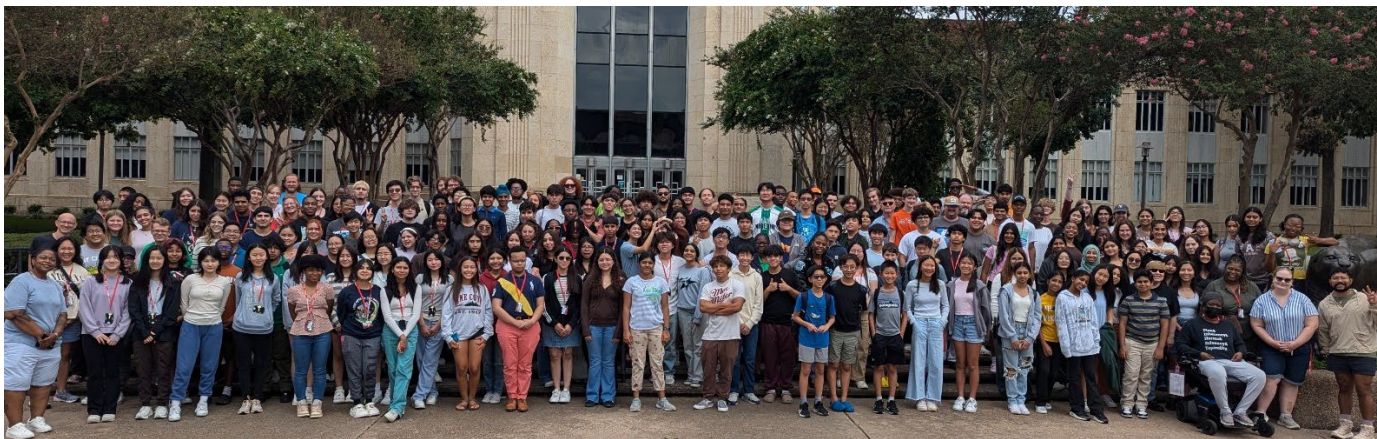
This also does not include public debates, mentorship/coaching activities, judging at local high school tournaments, team meetings, social gatherings, or travel time. In short, with more than four thousand hours, the competitive impact of speech and debate on UH students was enormous.

Campus Engagement & Community Building

A significant limitation of “cost per student” assessment of Speech & Debate is that it leaves out altogether the impact of the program on the surrounding community. Both the university and DSAES holds connections across campus and into the community to be one of its core values. The program serves that community on and off campus through two major initiatives, the Honors Debate Workshop and the Cougar Classic Speech & Debate tournament. Professor Garner also designed a new course series to take advantage of student interest in each year’s debate topic. This co-curricular course offered student an opportunity to take their classroom research and apply it in a competitive setting.

² Gordon R. Mitchell, “Pedagogical Possibilities for Argumentative Agency in Academic Debate,” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 35.2 (1998): 41-61. Mitchell is Associate Professor; Assistant Dean, University Honors College; and Associate Professor of Clinical and Translational Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Honors Debate Workshop



The largest expansion of the Speech & Debate program this year was the inaugural Honors Debate Workshop. This summer camp brought in 232 High School students from around the country, with a heavy emphasis on recruiting from the greater Houston area, to the UH campus to Speech & Debate from a nationally competitive faculty. Most students who participated in the program got to stay in a dorm for the first time in their lives, and every student was able to receive admissions guidance on college attendance from UH Admissions counselors. For the 2024 year this was two week camp done in conjunction with the local Houston Urban Debate League, offering local at-need students tuition free attendance. For 2026 we will be expanding similar partnerships along with expanding the timeline of the camp into a four week camp. This doesn't just massively increase the footprint and impact of Speech & Debate but also offers a *pathway to profitability*, as students pay tuition to attend the camp. The goal is to expand this year-over-year to enable the Honors Debate Workshop to supplement SFAC funding in the next two years and then enable a drawdown of SFAC money after this has become established.

UH – CASE Debates Partnership

The biggest change in the last year has been the partnership between the University of Houston Debate Team and Harris County's Department of Education's Center for After School Excellence (CASE). The two groups have agreed to a three-year contract where the debate program will run CASE's debate tournaments, provide in-school tutoring support for CASE affiliated programs, help integrate CASE students into the collegiate attendance pipeline, and engage in curriculum development for CASE, in return CASE will provide funds to cover costs including, but not limited to, those associated with running the tournaments, paying UH Undergraduate Debaters to teach debate at CASE schools, and a full-time manager position to oversee the partnership.

This partnership has the potential to improve multiple aspects of University life and programming. At its core it gives UH Undergraduates paid support to grow as student leaders and gives the UH system extra coaching support and resources it would not otherwise be able to access. It also helps to expand the broader UH admissions recruiting mission, getting hundreds of students who are a core part of the UH vision onto campus and in meetings with admissions counselors. Finally it provides a competitive pipeline for growth for UH Debate by enabling us to start training students from high school to be recruited by the debate program and become college debaters.

Cougar Classic

Our tournament is a cornerstone of the high school speech and debate community in greater Houston. It is the premier tournament in the city, attracts hundreds of students to our campus, and draws not only students from all over the state but from surrounding states as well. This provides both intrinsic benefits (the education and training of the competitors) and extrinsic ones (a major PR event for the university with a group of engaged, high-quality prospective students).

Student Participation

These numbers represent the number of students affiliated in some capacity with the program. Some of these students represent the competitive “traveling team,” while other are engaged in learning the basics of debate or involved in our campus engagement or community building programs. At the moment, the number one barrier to increasing participation is funding.

3. Budget & Organizational Changes

Leadership Changes

With the expansion of our partnership with CASE debates the UH Debate program now has 3 full-time staff members, along with a number of contract assistants. Rob Glass remains Director of Debate, while the two full-time assistant positions are currently in the midst of an HR job search.

Organizational Challenges

In FY 2024 Speech & Debate took over the Models Debate program. This represented four previously existing student groups, Model UN, Model Arab League, Model G20, and Model World Health Organization. Each group previously operated as an independent agency with a somewhat byzantine funding model that went outside the SFAC system. We have since synthesized them into one group and have started exploring synergies for development with them and other parts of speech & debate, and are working towards giving them the support they have always needed to be able to succeed.

Year	Students
FY17	50
FY18	29
FY 19	43
FY20	53
FY21	41
FY22	58
FY23	82
FY24	130

Budget Challenges

The expansion into Models Debate along with the creation of the Honors Debate Workshop has taxed the Speech & Debate budget. Models represents a dramatic increase in the number of UH students served and the 2024 year of the Honors Debate Workshop was a loss-leader, with a significant negative budget hit. This fiscal year will see a profitable HDW, but the Models Debate Program still represents a tremendous budgetary and logistical hurdle for the program.

4. Potential of Budget Cuts

As promised in the last two SFAC budget presentations, FY27 will represent the third year in a three year cycle where we continue our ambitious program of expansion and developing external lines of funding and support. A budget cut here would demonstrably harm our commitments to CASE and other external partners.

If we are able to maintain current levels of funding for one more year we will then be able to reduce budgetary requests from SFAC in a controlled manner that will allow us to maintain or even continue to expand student services.

5. Funding Sources

Funding from Student Fees, to the greatest extent possible, is directed towards student activities. For instance, student fees are used to fund student competition, campus programming, and student workers. Support for administration, faculty salaries, and operational expenses that do not directly support student activities are primarily funded through Academic Affairs and the Honors College.

Fundraising Initiatives

We are currently working with the Honors College and UH Advancement to develop a robust alumni engagement cycle, bringing UH alumni to campus at least twice a year for debate related events and focusing on both established and recent Alumni. Along with that we are developing aggressive strategies for fundraising going forward tapping into local and regional stakeholders.

The Honors Debate Workshop

The summer camp represents a major potential revenue source. Similar programs run by other universities are able to draw in mid-to-high six figures in terms of income, and smaller programs offer sustainable paths to profitability in the high five figures. However, this is the result of years of practice, which the HDW does not have the benefit of.

The Honors College

The Honors College helps support the Speech & Debate program by paying for the salaries of its three full-time employees.



****Dr. Bill English with debate alumni Sylvester Turner and Larry Doherty, August 2015***