

Competing Standards:

A Critical Look at Gender and Success in Debate and Extemporaneous Speaking

by Julia Lynn and Rich Kawolics

On a Friday afternoon at the beginning of last summer, the NSDA community watched as three women took the stage as finalists in Public Forum and Lincoln-Douglas Debate, the first time in recent memory that so many women had been represented at the highest level of debate in the National Tournament. The presence of three female competitors—and the subsequent victories by two of them—offered one of those watershed moments where the rest of us might be inclined to pat ourselves on our collective backs in celebration of the achievement. Look at the progress we've made!

On an entirely different level, however, why was the presence of three women in the finals of two debate events notable at all? It certainly shouldn't have been. After all, Public Forum Debate has been contested at Nationals since 2003 and Lincoln-Douglas for much longer; certainly women must have been well represented at the highest levels of debate competition during that time.

Unfortunately, though, this assumption would be dead wrong. In the first phase of a planned three-year research program directed

toward understanding the relationship between gender and societal perceptions of speech, we have found that female competitors are significantly disadvantaged in Public Forum Debate, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, and Extemporaneous Speaking. This finding adds an additional level of impact to the deeply troubling revelations on the experiences of women in debate presented by Shuntá Jordan at last summer's inaugural NSDA National Conference. Our result shows that over the past eight years—and perhaps longer—female competitors have been consistently and pervasively disadvantaged in Debate and Extemp competition.

A Little Background

Laurel School is a 120-year-old school for girls located in Shaker Heights, Ohio. In 2007, Laurel founded the Laurel Center for Research on Girls (LCRG) with the intention of examining and developing best practices in education for girls of all ages. In recent years, LCRG has expanded its research focus to include both the impact of societal variables on girls inside and outside the classroom, as well as conducting research programs that examine the

effect of gender both on behavior and impact in educational settings.

After years of anecdotal evidence from debate coaches and female debaters themselves about perceived gender bias in debate, and fueled by frequent commentary that unfolded during the 2016 presidential campaign, we approached LCRG about sponsoring a study of perceived differences and success of male and female speakers in argumentation and analytical speaking. Our study, which began in the summer of 2017, has three primary objectives:

- Determine if the gender of a speaker impacts that speaker's reception and success in argumentation and analytical speaking.
- Identify possible causes of any apparent differences correlated to gender.
- Determine strategies for audiences to mitigate the effects of any latent bias linked to the gender of a speaker.

Beginning the Program

Because of the ready availability of so many tournament records online through SpeechWire™, Joy of Tournaments.com, and Tabroom.com, we decided to focus first on determining if a statistically significant difference in success rate

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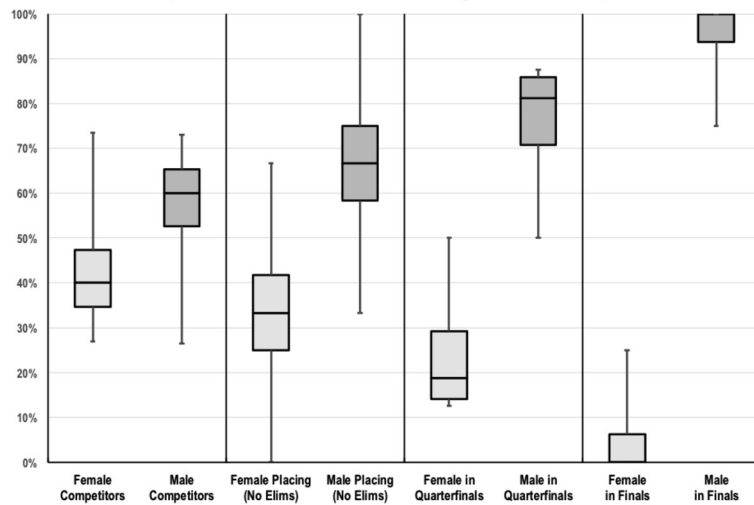
existed for female vs. male debaters and speakers. Our lead student researcher—co-author Julia Lynn—downloaded the entry and result data for Public Forum Debate from 50 tournaments nationwide, including both local fixed-round tournaments and national circuit elimination tournaments. Through this process, nearly 4,000 tournament participants were counted, and the gender distribution of all Public Forum competitors was determined for each tournament. For the fixed-round (non-elimination) tournaments, the gender distribution of the top six teams—the typical number who “make the stage”—was also recorded. For elimination tournaments, the data analysis included the gender distribution of the octafinal, quarterfinal, semifinal, and final rounds.

One particular challenge has been the precise determination of gender identity for all participants given the absence of that information in the tournament record. This issue was primarily addressed by making extensive use of school websites and social media profiles, both of which proved to be extraordinarily helpful in determining the gender identities of participants where a determination could not be made by name alone. We must admit, however, that we cannot claim perfect accuracy of gender identification for every subject, and that the implicit assumption that gender can be addressed as a binary is itself flawed. In addition, we must acknowledge that any intersectional impacts of race, national origin, physical ability, or gender presentation were impossible to determine.

The First Finding: Reason for Concern

Data from weekly tournaments showed that male participants outnumber female participants in Public Forum Debate to a statistically significant extent. On average, initial female participation in Public Forum Debate is approximately 42 percent, a ratio that holds true for both elimination and non-elimination tournaments. However, in all cases the percent of females experiencing competitive

Figure 1: Participation and Success in Public Forum Debate by Gender
(Results from 3676 Entries in 50 Tournaments during the 2016-2017 Season)



success is lower than the percent of females participating. As illustrated in Figure 1 (above), the proportion of female debaters drops from an average 42 percent participating to an average 32 percent award winners in non-elimination tournaments ($p = 0.002$). In elimination tournaments, the result is more stark; the average 42 percent female participants drops to an average 24 percent female quarterfinalists ($p = 0.001$) and an average 6 percent female finalists ($p = 0.00001$).

Data in Figure 1 are presented in box-whisker format, where the “box” shows the range of data points from the 25th to the 75th percentile, and the median is represented by a horizontal line in the box. The upper and lower “whiskers” show the maximum and minimum data values, respectively. The most striking feature of Figure 1 is that the median value for female debaters in the final round of elimination tournaments was zero; that is, half of all elimination tournaments studied placed four male debaters in the final round. In no elimination tournament studied did we find more than a single female debater in the final round.

These data indicate that female debaters are competitively disadvantaged in some way in Public Forum Debate. Without some competitive disadvantage, it would be expected that the proportion of girls placing or reaching

high elimination rounds in weekly tournaments would be statistically the same as the proportion participating. So our data, which reflect a high degree of statistical significance, paints a very disheartening picture for female debaters.

Expanding the Study

In the beginning of the 2017 school year, we recruited 12 additional student researchers to conduct similar analyses of Lincoln-Douglas Debate, United States Extemporaneous Speaking, and International Extemporaneous Speaking. This work added three thousand participants to the total data set. The researchers also analyzed gender and success of participants in NSDA national tournaments from 2010 through 2017 for the same four events.

When we compared the percent of female participants in Lincoln-Douglas Debate to the percent placing, we found very little difference between the two groups. Similarly, we did not find a statistically significant difference between female participation and female success in either United States or International Extemporaneous Speaking on a weekly basis. The results changed dramatically, however, when we looked at qualification to the NSDA National Tournament.

Table 1 (next page) compares weekly participation rate in 2016-2017 for all four events to qualification rates to the

National Tournament for the period from 2010 through 2017. Over this eight-year period, we observed that qualification by gender in all four events was essentially constant; we found no indication of a decrease or increase in the number of females qualifying to Nationals other than random variation around the mean. What was clear, however, is that females are significantly outnumbered by males in all four events at Nationals.

The data summarized in Table 1 show a statistically significant drop from the weekly participation rates for females to the number qualifying for Nationals in both PF and LD. Although the drop from participation to qualification for Extemp is not as large, it is also apparent that fewer girls are participating in Extemporaneous Speaking in the first place. The net result of this analysis is that there seems to be a ceiling of sorts on female qualification to Nationals in these four events. In fact, for each of the four events studied, females qualifying to Nationals reached 40 percent only one time over an eight year period.

Once these female competitors reach Nationals, the outlook is even more bleak. Figures 2, 3, and 4 (*opposite page*) show the progress through the National Tournament for female competitors from 2010 through 2017. In all three categories (Extemp is shown on a single chart), female representation steadily declines from preliminary rounds through eliminations, top 14, and top 6.

The conclusion we reach from these data is twofold. First, we clearly find that female participants are underrepresented in PF and LD Debate and Extemporaneous Speaking. Second, it is clear that the rate of success for female competitors in all these events is below what would be expected based on participation and qualification rates. The success of three female debaters in the 2017 National Tournament, then,

	Percent Female Participants in Weekly Tournaments, 2016-2017	Percent Female Qualifiers to Nationals, 2010-2017
Public Forum Debate	42	34 p = 0.0001
Lincoln-Douglas Debate	42	37 p = 0.007
United States Extemp Speaking	39	35 p = 0.2 (not significant)
International Extemp Speaking	34	32 p = 0.5 (not significant)


must be viewed as an anomaly. The fact that one or two female debaters won a championship in a single year cannot detract from the story these data tell: female debaters and extemporaneous speakers are systematically disadvantaged year after year when compared to their male counterparts.

What Next?

The obvious question is “Why?” and we would certainly like to be able to answer that question. For now, though, we have only more questions and conjectures: Are women evaluated differently because of how they speak? What role do socially-constructed gender norms play in speech and debate? Are female and male participants taught differently by their coaches and at summer camps? Are female students being discouraged by their coaches from participating in debate or extemp because those coaches do not expect success from female competitors? What role does the background or gender of judges play? All these questions deserve some consideration.

For our part, our work continues. Our student research team has begun a carefully-controlled analysis of debate ballots to determine if judges give different types of feedback to male and female debaters. Beyond that, we are continuing to comb through tournament records, trying to determine, for example, if this gender disparity has always existed at these levels or if it has changed with time. A research project that began with a somewhat

limited scope has expanded almost weekly as our work has uncovered new findings—and new questions.

We hope that the speech and debate community will take our findings to heart and will ask their own questions. We welcome comments and questions on our work and look forward to sharing future findings in the months and years to come. 



Julia Lynn is an 11th Grade student at Laurel School in Shaker Heights, Ohio. She took on this research project as her objective for Laurel's

Capstone program. Although Julia did not participate in speech or debate prior to beginning this study, her involvement prompted her to join her school's team in United States Extemporaneous Speaking, and she recently qualified to the Ohio state finals in that category.



Rich Kawolics started the speech and debate program at Laurel School in 2004. Since that time the program has grown to be the

largest extracurricular activity at Laurel; between 20 and 25 percent of students participate in speech and debate during their Upper School careers. He is also a science teacher who teaches AP Chemistry and Honors Chemistry, and has recently completed a two-year term as the Board Chair of the Ohio Speech and Debate Association.

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Figure 2: Qualification and Success in PF Debate at the NSDA National Tournament
(Results from 2010 through 2017)

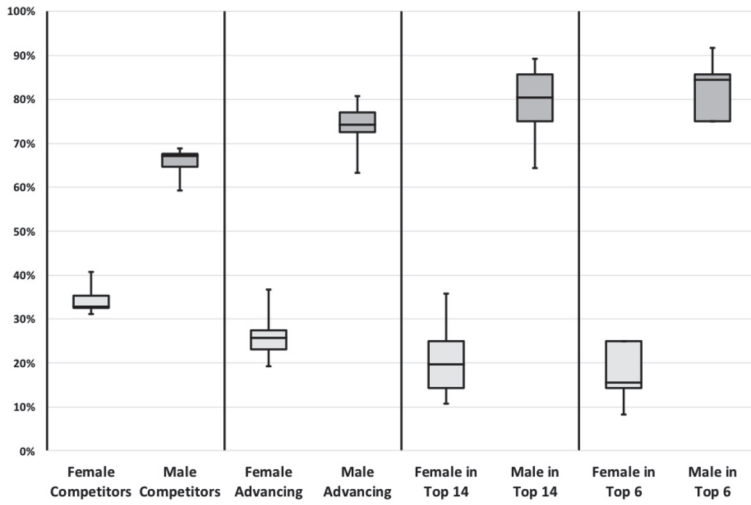


Figure 3: Qualification and Success in LD Debate at the NSDA National Tournament
(Results from 2010 through 2017)

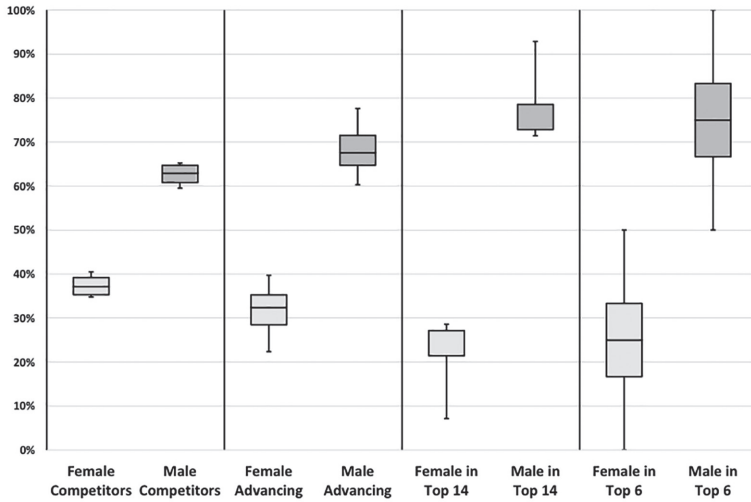
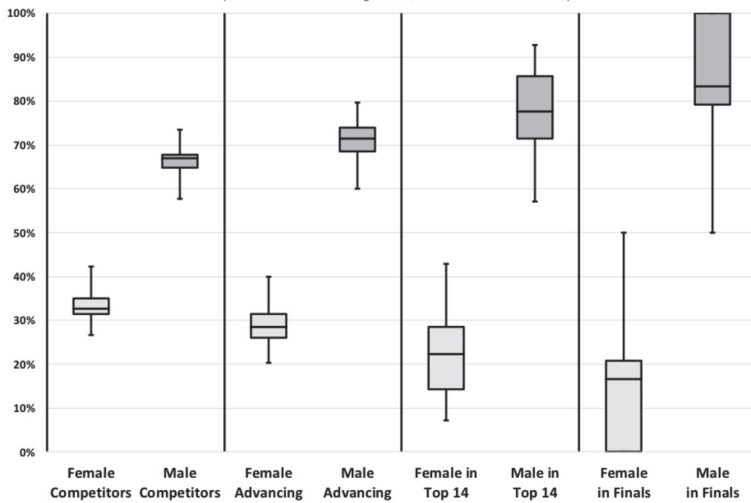


Figure 4: Qualification and Success in Extemp at the NSDA National Tournament
(Results from 2010 through 2017; Includes both USX and IX)



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