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Debate Season Kicks off at JM

By Zoe Portnoff



Students prepare for debates at the Oct. 25 tournament held at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. Photo Zoe Portnoff

Would you be ready in 20 minutes to argue that texting does more harm than good? Or that the U.S. has a moral obligation to provide West Africa with aid during the current Ebola outbreak?

For the students of the East Bay Debate League who competed against other middle schools in the first of a series of county-level debate tournaments at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School Oct. 25, the answer was “yes” – and they were ready to argue the opposite side just as quickly.

Students have just four weeks on average to prepare for each tournament, utilizing resources ranging from the U.S. Constitution to recent news articles found on the Internet. Each tournament consists of numerous debates, taking place across the course of a day. The most recent tournament also focused on topics including whether prospective job applicants should be asked to reveal prior criminal convictions and whether California’s desalinization program will do more harm than good.

After receiving one of the four topics and which side it will be arguing for, each team of students had 20 minutes to prepare its points on a single sheet of paper before beginning its

debate against an opposing team. “It’s creative thinking and flexibility, and even adults have a problem with being able to see both sides of an argument, and these are 13- and 14-year-olds who are able to see both sides of an argument, and wrap their heads around that within a 20-minute time period and prepare for it,” Don Read, the head of the debate classes at JM, comments.

The speakers, however, showed no signs of nervousness during their debates, demonstrating their ability to think on the spot and remain calm even while under attack by their opposition.

Orinda Intermediate School and Joaquin Moraga both placed well in the tournament, with three person teams from JM claiming fourth and second, and a team from OIS winning third out of a total of 44 individual teams. OIS also claimed second place in “Tournament Sweepstakes,” a category awarding the highest placing overall schools.

The “Golden Gavel,” the trophy for the overall best speaker selected from approximately 132 students, was awarded to JM student Sharon Yuan. “I like how you actually have to think. In a lot of extracurriculars,

you don’t really have to use your mind as much, but in debate you have to think on the spot, prepare your point, and really work for it,” Yuan says.

The East Bay Debate League was started in 2007 by the Claremont McKenna College, where the National Tournaments are still held each year in April, but the Middle School Public Debate Program has been running for 15 years. JM began its program as a small club, with 10 students. Over the years it has grown into a program of two academic classes and a total of 58 students involved.

“Honestly, kids like to argue! The key thing is, here, they’re not just arguing, they’re arguing for a point – they’re not just idly saying ‘I’m right, you’re wrong,’ but then learning how to talk through their thoughts, give reasoning, and ultimately develop skills they’ll utilize later in life,” Kyle Chan, county tournament director and JM debate alumni states. “It helps them (the students) sharpen their public speaking skills, not just within our own league, but also for the future, when they need to give speeches in other environments. We’re training the leaders of the future.”

It’s Not Enough to Say You Are a Good Match for a College: Prove it!

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

Many colleges include a prompt that asks the question “Why do you want to attend our college?” You will see this item in different forms, such as “How did you first learn about our college and how did your interest develop?” or “What are the unique qualities about our college that make you want to attend?” These essays range from short answers (perhaps 100 words or so) to longer essays (usually 500 words or sometimes even longer).

Many admissions professionals say that they read the “Why our school?” essay first. They want to see if you truly know why you want to attend the school other than its excellent reputation, outstanding location, or world-renowned faculty. So how do you go about doing this?

Learn all you can about the college’s educational program. Is there a quarter or semester system? Why does that system appeal to you? Is there a highly structured core curriculum or greater flexibility to define your course of study? Why does that type of educational program attract you? What is the academic culture on campus? Does it lean more toward collaboration or competition? How does that work with your learning style and what you have achieved in high school?

After you have done complete research, describe how your academic interests developed and how you will

pursue your interests at that particular college. If are interested in mechanical engineering because you worked in a bike shop each summer and enjoyed rebuilding older bicycles and doing repairs, be sure to include this in your essay. Connect that experience to the college’s engineering curriculum. If you learned two programming languages using open courseware online to prepare for an AP computer science class offered at your high school, be sure to include this information, and link it to the programming languages required to take certain classes in your major. The more specific you are, the more convincing you will be.

If you have room after you discuss your academic goals, you can discuss the college’s social climate. For example, if you are looking for a closely knit college community, it helps to know what proportion of students remain on campus over the weekend. If you’ve visited the school or spoken to current students, admissions counselors, or professors, infuse those experiences into the essay. It’s great to include those encounters and explain why they helped you confirm the match.

Above all else, avoid restating the college’s mission or what is in the college brochure. They know that information backwards. Go well beyond the marketing of the college’s website to glean information. Check out spe-

cial seminars and guest speakers; read an issue of the school’s newspaper to get a feel for the student body’s political and social orientations. Find clubs on campus that give you the opportunity to continue passions you pursued in high school or try something new.

The key to responding well to the “Why Our College?” essay is specificity and sincerity. Do your homework and write a thoughtful, personalized essay that convinces the college that you have put effort into researching the school, understand what the college offers and how the school can meet your needs.



Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is an independent college advisor who draws upon 25 years of higher education experience to help guide and support the college admissions process for students and their families. Dr. LaScala is a member of NACAC, WACAC and HECA. She can be contacted at (925) 891-4491 or elizabeth@doingcollege.com. Visit www.doingcollege.com for more information about her services.

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