

Teaching Soft Skills: Helping Youth Transition with Strength

by J. Scott Baker, Ph.D.

Coaches, encourage your graduating seniors to emphasize this unique skill set when applying for college, grad school, or future job positions.

Transitions are difficult. Whether it be on a macro level, transitioning from President Obama to President Trump with their respective administrations, or a micro level, transitioning from high school to college or from college to the business world, transitions are tough, emotional, nerve-racking, and often frightening. As educators, part of our responsibility of teaching the next generation is preparing students for these transitions. One way we, as speech and debate educators, do this is through cultivating and engaging soft skills.

During a 2015 national survey of speech and debate alumni, the concept of skill acquisition through speech and debate participation was discussed repetitively by former competitors. While previous articles highlight this data (Baker, 2016; Baker, 2017), it is important speech and debate educators consider with their students, parents/guardians, supporters, and administration an emphasis on soft skill acquisition as a key benefit to program

perseverance during budget cuts across the country.

Moreover, while we as educators know academic benefits within the activity, we should always reinforce the benefit narrative to others, regarding what we teach in our programs. As soft skills dialogue among collegiate and business communities continues, speech and debate educators must bolster the connections between competition, college, and corporate worlds.

The phrase 'soft skills' is a term of art regaining recognition in the business

world to describe "character traits, attitudes, and behaviors—rather than technical aptitude or knowledge"; likewise, they "are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (Robles, 2012, p.457). These non-technical skills are crucial to almost any occupation and run the gamut of careers, including: business (Watson, 2015), medicine (Lazarus, 2013), management (Stein, 2015; Rangnekar, 2011), military, (Moore & Frank, 2013), and teacher education (Shawer, 2017) to name a few.

So, what exactly are these skills? While many think good communication skills are synonymous with soft skills, "no formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills exists" (Matteson, Anderson, & Boyden, 2016, p. 75); yet, building off that notion, Rao (2012) stresses: "There are other skills—such as interpersonal skills, team building skills, negotiation skills, etiquette, motivation, time management, and critical thinking—that constitute soft skills" (p. 50). Simply put: soft skills are epitomized in well-behaved, articulate, cooperative, team players who are motivated and know how to negotiate effectively with others one-on-one. Sound familiar? If that's not a description of what coaches are looking for in a successful speech and debate contestant, I'm not sure what one is.

In essence, participation in interscholastic speech and debate competitions inherently reinforces soft skills colleges consider when reviewing applications and businesses search for in prospective employees. Our curriculum, unlike others, offers the soft skills training needed to easily transition from high school to college and from school into the business world.



"The narratives of alumni from across the country bolster the argument that speech and debate provides a basis in soft skills vital to success in the business world."

From High School to College

Gore (2013) explains, “For long, languages, arts, history, geography, civics, mathematics, sciences, etc., have been the core subjects, and the entire education system all over the world has been busy in offering courses in these disciplines” (p. 8). This single-mindedness harms students who need practical skills when they leave the safety of their parents/guardians. Skills taught in speech and debate focus students on “themes like global awareness, business, economics, civic literacy, health literacy, etc., [and] these themes have come to the forefront in the contemporary world” (Gore, 2013, p. 8).

Results from alumni survey narratives illuminate how acquiring soft skills in speech and debate activities helps smooth the transition into post high school academia.

First, presentation skills are heightened for those who compete. An alum offers, “I entered the university with sound communication skills, both oral and in writing”; whereas, another alum explains, “Speech prepared me for college much more than those who did not compete. I already had the skills to present in front of classes; whether that be speeches or presentations.” Furthering this understanding, an alum notes, “Having seen a few awkward, confusing presentations from my lab colleagues and fellow peers, the value of my training in writing and delivering effective, meaningful, and understandable presentations is readily apparent to me.”

However, these presentational skills extend beyond public speaking and rhetoric courses in college. Explains one alum, “Even in my science classes, having the ability to effectively state an argument and present information, particularly in front of a group, was a strength I directly attribute to debate.” Agreeing with this thought, another former competitor offers, “I consider myself fortunate to have debate experience as a science major. My ability to communicate scientific findings is



Portable Skills Learned Through Speech and Debate

Alumni report how their experiences learned in high school competition transferred to their success in college.

- ▶ *Interpersonal Relationships* – “My one-on-one communication skills are much better than they would be without my speech participation.”
- ▶ *Receptivity to Criticism* – “It gave me an ability to take feedback and examine ideas critically.”
- ▶ *Work Ethic* – “Debate gave me the work ethic I needed to be successful in college.”
- ▶ *Agility* – “I’m better prepared to study and handle the stress of short deadlines after case and speech prepping nights.”
- ▶ *Time Management* – “Participating in the activity itself, helped me learn to manage my time and prioritize tasks so that I can work more effectively.”
- ▶ *Integrity* – “I also feel that I developed a deeper sense of integrity in my high school speech program that I would not have developed otherwise—I hold myself to high standards, am proud of my work, and always strive to be as virtuous as possible in all that I do. Those were values that my debate coach worked hard to instill, and they stick with me to this day.”
- ▶ *Grace* – “During the course of my debate career, I learned that it was okay if something didn’t come easily initially, as long as I continued to work at it and asked for help when I needed it. I learned that if I failed or didn’t get something right away, it didn’t undermine my intelligence, it just meant that I needed more practice or support.”

vastly ahead of many of my classmates, because of debate.”

The concept of communication skills is clearly linked with speech and debate experiences, although other soft skills are articulated by alumni who saw their impact on their transition to college, too. An alum states, “It is all the intangible stuff that speech taught me that I carry with me to this day.” As another explains,

“Being on the debate and speech team in high school taught me first of all, patience; with others and with myself.”

These “intangible” skills taught in speech and debate participation (*also see sidebar*) are important to success in higher education. However, Dixon (2015) explains: “Extensive admissions processes mean children’s lives have to be engineered at a very young age to

prepare them for acceptance to a top college... which means getting straight A's and participating in a number of extracurricular activities. But that's not the same thing as learning how to think" (p. 37). Thus, the ability to learn how to think becomes a crucial element for educators to instill in their students, even at a young age. Experiences in speech and debate allow students to interact, discuss, and argue social, political, and theoretical concepts with peers, but they also teach empathy, work ethic, patience, and cognitive abilities often ignored in core curriculum focused on mandated testing.

Claxton, Costa, & Kallick (2016) explain: "There are no right answers to prove a student has developed one of these traits, no test scores to compare, no averages or standard deviations to yield. So 'soft' also implies that these outcomes are impossible to measure and fall outside any framework of accountability" (p. 62). Lacking an effective measurement instrument to determine accountability of soft skills, school systems evaluated only by test scores can suffer; therefore, skill acquisition is often overlooked, ignored, or simply forgotten. As soft skills "are often intangible and cannot be quantified or easily learned" (Perkins, 2011, p. 1), curriculum within some classrooms can focus too much on knowledge base needed for exams, not application of skills needed to be effective post high school. This disconnect between academic knowledge and ability can cause students to be unsuccessful in their transition to college.

Adding to the difficulty of teaching skills outside mandated accountability, Adams (2013) contends, "The work of promoting life skills is bigger than high school counselors can handle alone, especially since many have caseloads into the hundreds. College counselors try to help incoming freshmen, but resources are stretched and their priority is serving the most-troubled students. And many experts believe those soft

skills need to be taught before students get to campus" (p. 22). So, if colleges are expressing their need for incoming first-year students to have more than a knowledge base, why are high schools not focusing on programs, such as speech and debate, which teaches these skills needed for collegiate success?

"Many experts blame the changes that have taken place in education at all levels; that is, teaching to the test has become all too common. Unfortunately, it is rare that schools teach students to assemble and evaluate evidence, construct competing arguments, and understand multiple sides in a debate, let alone untangle seeming inconsistencies and wrestle with complexity" (Tulgan, 2016a, p. 28). However, in order for students to excel, they must learn more than core curriculum, and speech and debate provides those relational skills needed to be successful beyond the secondary classroom.

While academic discussions of learning and schooling continue during transition from one political party to another, it is important to remember, as one alum explains, "Without these foundational skills, I would not have had the skills to succeed in undergraduate or graduate school." Our alumni see "participation is clearly paying dividends. It has helped me obtain and succeed at an internship within government and better enables me to contribute in a college classroom where people are legitimately committed to discussions." Hence, we must encourage those outside the world of speech and debate to understand what competition provides students: a strong knowledge base in core curriculum, as well as opportunities to learn, explore, interact, and develop relational skills which benefit their growth as citizens.

From School to Work

Whether students transition directly from high school to the workforce, college to business, or some specific

training to a career, what proficiencies do employers want to see from prospective job candidates? And, as educators in secondary schools, how do we facilitate and reinforce what is needed in the business world?

Successfully executing soft skills in a burgeoning career is critical for young employees, especially since "the world of work itself has changed. There no longer exists a job for life, and so the ability to adapt to different environments and cultures, the talent to manage change, and the mental resilience to deal with the stress of the modern workplace are all key ingredients of success" (Coleman, 2014, p. 44).

As secondary speech and debate educators, we cannot assume other core classes, or even college and/or technical schools for that matter, are providing essential soft skills for future personnel. Pierce (2016) explains, "While universities are good at imparting knowledge, they don't always help students learn the social etiquette required to function in the business world" (p. 12). As Mota (2015) further contends, "Core education requirements can cover a plethora of subjects, including accounting, economics, law, finance, and information management systems. Proficiency in these alone will not guarantee professional success, however" (p. 34).

Consequently, students are not being challenged to develop interpersonal skills, relationships, and effective character traits needed in the business world. As Dabke (2015) argues, "Academic institutions should take cognizance of the fact that soft skills are highly valued by practitioners and recruiters and invest appropriately in training and sharpening the students' soft skills" (p. 36); furthermore, educators should help students focus on "valuable outcomes—beyond literacy, numeracy, test scores, and grades—young people will need in life" (Claxton, Costa, & Kallick, 2016, p. 60).

As alumni discuss perceived influence of speech and debate participation on their lives, they reinforce how soft skills made it easier for them to transition

to the business world. Alumni explain how their experiences helped them to “think logically,” “understand what it means to struggle,” “become a leader,” “be a more effective negotiator and team collaborator,” and know “how to listen.”

One alum explains, “In my day-to-day job, I’m especially able to fine-tune what I say in real-time in order to persuade those in a more powerful position to adopt/believe in my ideas... I’ve impacted technology direction, concept adoption, and generally the nature of work in several organizations. I believe that forensics helped me discover that I had these skills and continued to improve and extend them over time. [Forensics] give me the confidence to know that whatever challenge came my way, I had a strong basis of quick thinking and speaking ability to be able to leverage throughout my life and career.”

Regardless of career choice (*see sidebar*), participants articulate similar responses: “It was the single biggest influence on my career path,” while another explains, “In business, I constantly need to think critically and creatively. The beginnings of those skill sets were developed on the debate team.” The narratives of alumni from across the country bolster the argument that speech and debate provides a basis in soft skills vital to success in the business world. Alumni explain they “use these skills every day,” “do great leading meetings,” “know how to be competitive while keeping a friendly attitude” “compete for a job,” “ask for help and guidance,” “accept and implement criticism,” and to “realize the end goal of certain things will outweigh the seeming burden of work.”

Stein (2015) argues many employers must train their staff to be effective; however, “development of soft skills is no overnight effort; it’s always time consuming and it’s often prickly and personally challenging for managers” (p. 26). This begs the question: what would it look like for employers who have staff already trained in those skills? For employers who hire former speech and

Occupational Applications for Speech and Debate

While many outside the field of speech and debate correlate the activity with the field of law, soft skills provided through participation benefit students who venture into numerous occupational fields.

- ▶ *Analyst* – “It gave me excellent research skills, honed my writing skills, improved my ability to speak in front of groups, sharpened my ability to think quickly, and honed my ability to find what’s wrong in the logic/argument being presented—which I have found so very important as a people manager and also as a Compliance Analyst for a pharmaceutical company. It gave me the skills to investigate and keep digging into more and more layers to uncover more facts and more truth, which is crucial in a Compliance role.”
- ▶ *Public Service* – “Post high school working in public service you must learn to speak to people. Not only must you be friendly but you must be easy to understand and you must flow with your words. Without speech and debate I would have never learned those skills on my own.”
- ▶ *Marketing* – “Forensics gave me the tools necessary to tackle life head-first. I’m a full time writer for a high-profile content creation and marketing agency for celebrities, athletes, and people of interest. Speech and debate allowed me to understand how to form arguments properly, how to interact with people on a human level, and how to look at social issues from every angle.”
- ▶ *Management* – “Speech and debate taught me how to think in a structured manner. I now work for a prestigious management consulting firm that uses a rigorous case interview process to select its employees. The case interview tests both the ability to apply a structured framework to a complex problem and the communication skills of the candidate who is solving the problem. The skills learned in high school debate certainly transferred to this post-undergrad interview process: framing and structuring problems, thinking quickly on your feet, articulating viewpoints in an easy-to-follow manner, etc. I’m convinced that without the skills that debate taught me, I would have not been able to make it through such a grueling interview process.”
- ▶ *Military* – “I still find my skills that I learned in debate being used every day as an active duty Marine. The judgement, decisiveness, knowledge, these are all cornerstones of a Marine leader, things instilled in me from the time I was in debate. I am required to speak in front of large audiences, brief people far above me in the chain of command, and ultimately serve my country better, in part, because of my background in debate.”



As soft skills dialogue among collegiate and business communities continues, speech and debate educators must bolster the connections between competition, college, and corporate worlds.”

debate students, they reap the benefits of employees who enter the job with these interpersonal skills vital to career success. Deepa & Seth (2103) offer, “in the most progressive companies, managers are looking for people’s ability to communicate clearly and openly, and to listen and respond empathetically. They also want them to have equally well-honed written skills so that their correspondence (including emails) does not undo all the good work their face-to-face communication creates” (p. 12) because “how you treat and speak to customers and colleagues can go a long way to securing your company’s future and your own” (Mota, 2015, p. 35).

Interactive abilities are a cornerstone of speech and debate experience. One alum explains, “I can shake someone’s hand, look them square in the eye, and speak confidently to them. I am still a shy person at heart, but my experience with speech and debate helped me to tame my social fears and interact with people.” Furthering the idea, another alum explains, “sometimes, you have to explain your point of view to different people: your boss, your client, your peer, your employee.” Yet another extends, “The reason I was hired into my current job was because I am able to speak more eloquently than many of my peers. Plain and simple. Debate got me my job. I have no technical background but was hired for my ability to clearly communicate complex ideas to clients.”

Ryan (2016) expands, “Given the rapidity with which change is occurring in almost all areas, having a flexible nature implies a willingness to learn and grow to meet demands in new ways when necessary,” (p. 12); thus, success depends on an employee’s ability to adjust to their environment. Alumni argue this is part of what makes them successful. “Being able

to quickly and concisely communicate ideas has allowed me to promote quickly” offers one alum. Another states, “I have been the beneficiary of countless opportunities at work because I have made an impression as someone who can think on their feet, present any topic to any audience, who is never caught flat footed, and thoroughly prepares for their work. I owe ALL of that to debate.” Bodell (2014) offers, “Individuals who confidently handle unforeseen scenarios will become extraordinarily valuable in the Conceptual Age” (p. 37). One alum provides a specific example of their ability to be flexible: “I was once asked to teach a class on a subject I knew little about to a group of experts in the field—showing them how a product could work to improve their productivity at the office and give insight into their business. I had three days to prepare a five-day course, including software labs and instructions. If not for my Extemp training and experience, there’s no way I [could have] survived 40 hours of teaching that week.”

From Competition to Practice

There is much discussion about rethinking who is to blame for the lack of soft skills in business (Hurrell, 2016); yet, Kyllonen (2013) enlightens: “Arguments about the validity and fairness of standardized cognitive admissions tests such as the SAT, ACT, and GRE have dominated discussions” and “in the workplace, companies and the military have historically focused selection testing almost exclusively on cognitive abilities”; thus, “a generation was taught that other variables, such as personality, were unrelated to workforce outcomes or to just about anything else” (p. 17).

Hence, as educators, our job in the classroom is to develop and strengthen relationship skills vital to future achievement. Our alumni know participation helps shape who they are through their narratives, but we need to ensure we present those arguments to our community, our parents/guardians, and our administration. “The very nature of soft skills is such that these skills are hard to develop without the help of another person who can serve as an objective third-party observer and the source of candid feedback” (Tulgan, 2016b, p. 38).


In speech and debate, this objective third party, known as the judge, provides feedback on the ballot, imparting their thoughts, ideas, and recommendations for how students can progress as communicators. The act of performing for a judge is a practice embedded within the structure of our activity, where encouraging and developing soft skills is fulfilled. Yet, it is imperative that speech and debate educators continue during practices and rehearsals to guide students’ learning, use, and mastery of these skills.

As an alum comments, “Recently, I realized that most of the things that come ‘naturally’ to me (and which my colleagues have to learn) are those skills rehearsed and cultivated by my years competing in speech.” Another alum states, “I work as an engineer, and I can see how the skills I learned in debate made writing, presenting, and participating in meetings much easier for me compared to my engineering peers.” These “social skills and various soft skills would have taken me years to acquire otherwise,” adds another former competitor.

Speech and debate educators know what is learned through participation; we

are not surprised by the narratives of alumni in the survey. Nevertheless, are we advocating soft skills as important components in the education arena? Experts argue soft skills far surpass knowledge tested by core curriculum, while simultaneously, they become the bedrock for successful student transitions to college and/or the workforce.

“Soft skills are a critical set of skills set for professional success and advancement” (Dabke, 2015, p. 36), yet “there is an ever-widening ‘soft-skills gap’ in the workforce, especially among the newest young workforce” (Tulgan, 2016a, p. 26), and students who participate in speech and debate are poised to be successful in both college and business due to their understanding and implementation of soft skills in whatever context they find themselves.

The skills we teach in speech and debate provide easier transitions for our students throughout life. As one alum explains: “Competitive speech and debate definitely made me smarter and more of a go-getter in life. It boosted my confidence, and made me realize that there was more out of life than just being stuck in a small town. It made me have a desire to do bigger and better things in the world. I wanted to go to college—which I did. I moved to Los Angeles to work in the entertainment industry, and now, hold a high level entertainment job. I’m the only person in my family that ever had that kind of drive—and I think I owe much of this energy to the competitive experience of debate and forensics.” 



J. Scott Baker, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Prior to his work at UWL, Baker was a high school speech, debate, and English teacher outside of Houston, TX while working on his Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction from Texas A&M University. Baker is a three-diamond coach with the NSDA.

References

- Adams, C. J. (2013). ‘Soft skills’ seen as key element for higher ed. *Education Digest*, 78(6), 18-22.
- Baker, J. S. (2016). Why are our best advocates not fully advocating for us? *Rostrum*, 91(2), 48-51.
- Baker, J. S. (2017). Alphabet soup: Regardless of event preference, alumni make connections. *Rostrum*, 91(3), 75-79.
- Bodell, L. (2014). Soft skills for the future. *T & D*, 68(3), 34-38.
- Claxton, G., Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (2016). Hard thinking about soft skills: Habits like persisting and drawing on past knowledge are some of the most essential dispositions we can teach. *Educational Leadership*, 73(6), 60-64.
- Coleman, A. (2014). The post-recession leader. *Director*, 67(6), 44-48.
- Dabke, D. (2015). Soft skills as a predictor of perceived internship effectiveness and permanent placement opportunity. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 9(4), 26-42.
- Deepa, S., & Seth, M. (2013). Do soft skills matter? – Implications for educators based on recruiters’ perspective. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 7(1), 7-20.
- Dixon, L. (2015). Hard arguments for soft topics. *Chief Learning Officer*, 14(10), 34-49.
- Gore, V. (2013). 21st century skills and prospective job challenges. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 7(4), 7-14.
- Hurrell, S. (2016). Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps. *Human Relations*, 69(3), 605-628. doi:10.1177/0018726715591636
- Kyllonen, P. C. (2013). Soft skills for the workplace. *Change*, 45(6), 16-23.
- Lazarus, A. (2013). Soften up: the importance of soft skills for job success. *Physician Executive*, 39(5), 40-45.
- Matteson, M. L., Anderson, L., & Boyden, C. (2016). “Soft skills”: A phrase in search of meaning. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 16(1), 71-88. doi: 10.1353/pla.2016.0009
- Moore, R. R., & Frank, C. C. (2013). Blended learning solutions for military soft skills training. *Journal of Applied Learning Technology*, 3(3), 34-43.
- Mota, D. (2015). Developing soft skills helps businesses grow. *Business Credit*, 117(2), 34-36.
- Perkins, C. A. (2011). Recognizing leaders that excel at people skills – a perspective from global women executives. *Diversity Factor*, 19(2), 1.
- Pierce, E. (2016). Practically speaking. *San Diego Business Journal*, 37(5), 11-12.
- Rangnekar, S. S. (2011). Soft skills in management. *International Journal of Business Insights & Transformation*, 5(1), 108-109.
- Rao, M. (2012). Myths and truths about soft skills. *T & D*, 66(5), 48-51.
- Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today’s workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453-465. doi:10.1177/1080569912460400
- Ryan, B. (2016). Hard truths about soft skills. *New Hampshire Business Review*, 38(2), 12.
- Shawer, S. F. (2017). Teacher-driven curriculum development at the classroom level: Implications for curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 63, 296-313. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2016.12.017
- Stein, A. (2015). Supply chain talent: A practical approach to hardening soft skills. *Supply Chain Management Review*, 19(4), 20-26.
- Tulgan, B. (2016a). Bridging the soft-skills gap. *Employment Relations Today (Wiley)*, 42(4), 25-33. doi:10.1002/ert.21536
- Tulgan, B. (2016b). Taking the lead with soft skills. *School Business Affairs*, 82(2), 38-39.
- Watson, H. J. (2015). Soft skills for professional success. *Business Intelligence Journal*, 9-13.