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[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Student Affairs](#)

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Colleges Call Debate Contests Out of Order

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Postmodern strategies pose challenges to traditional forensics

The world of college debate is an insular one. So when a prominent coach mooned a judge during a tournament in March, officials in the national debate association planned to handle it themselves. Then a video of the incident hit YouTube this summer.

Suddenly, people throughout higher education were wondering: What was happening to one of the oldest forms of academic competition?

Soon after the video appeared, officials at Fort Hays State University fired William Shanahan III, the coach shown dropping his pants. The longtime assistant professor's behavior, they said, violated the university's code of conduct.

Many debate coaches say the incident was simply a case of poor anger management. But officials at Fort Hays were so troubled by what they saw in online recordings of numerous debate competitions around the country that they also suspended the university's team, which had consistently ranked as one of the best in the nation. "The interchanges lack civility and lack respect," says Edward H. Hammond, the university's president.

Competitive debate has traditionally served as a laboratory for the democratic process and an important training ground for future policy makers. But in recent years, a growing number of teams have played the game out of traditional bounds. They have turned events into commentaries on debate itself, in performances that bear little resemblance to the debating traditions that had a place on campuses for more than a hundred years. But the freewheeling aspect is what makes debate so exciting and challenging for students, according to many debate coaches, who say teams should be prepared to respond to any argument.

Now some college officials are asking whether debate is living up to its original educational mission.

Clashing Strategies

One of the Cross Examination Debate Association's first matches of this academic year took place last month in the second floor of the psychology building at Towson University.

The policy topic for this year's debates is agriculture tariffs, and typically the team that goes first chooses a specific position to argue. The opening arguments in one round at Towson sounded like a tape recorder playing with the fast-forward button held down.

Elaine Zhou, a senior at New York University, spewed arguments about why the United States should end tariffs on ethanol from Brazil. Doing so would improve U.S.-Brazilian relations, keep Brazil from becoming a failed state that would seek nuclear weapons, reduce U.S. reliance on fossil fuels, and thus help save the planet. The team had clearly done its homework, and Ms. Zhou gave citations for each argument.

But like many other participants, she fired those arguments so fast that the uninitiated might not recognize her sputtering as English. Ms. Zhou had nine minutes to make the first strike for her two-person team. The flood of words — and occasional gasps for breath — ended abruptly after a digital timer chimed that the first part of the round had ended.

Valarea Jones, a student at Towson University, sat at the other end of the table, scowling. She now had three minutes to cross-examine the NYU team. "Why did you make a conscious decision to read as fast as you did?" she asked. And later, "Do you think that debate is multicultural?"

"We're multicultural," Ms. Zhou replied, noting that none of the contestants in the room were white.

Most tournaments held by the debate association have very few rules. All a team has to do to win, other than meet some time limits, is to persuade three judges to vote for them in any given round.

Someone called time. Ms. Jones rolled up the sleeves of her gray hooded sweatshirt and stood at the front of the room for her six-minute rebuttal. She began with an account of the trading of African slaves in the early years of the United States.

She spoke at normal speed and with emotion.

Ms. Jones, who is African-American, then read from her own diary, focusing on an entry she had written while attending a debate tournament this summer. "We had our first full round today and I want to go the [expletive] home. You should have seen the looks I

got from these people. I even asked this one [expletive] what the [expletive] she was staring at," she said. "In the debate world, people look at me and what I have to say as if I'm less than [expletive] human, and this is some serious [expletive]."

She accused her opponents of furthering "white supremacy" by playing by the traditional norms of debate. She urged the judges to make a statement against such oppressive forces by ruling in her favor in the debate round.

Racially Charged

A similar line of argument led to the mooning incident. It began during the quarterfinal round of the association's national tournament last March, when a Fort Hays State team was facing off against a team from Towson.

One of the Towson debaters, Deven Cooper, began the round by criticizing a procedural matter that is not usually discussed during competitions. Each team was given the opportunity to remove one judge from the panel, and Mr. Cooper accused the Fort Hays team of turning down the only African-American judge, Shanara Rose Reid-Brinkley, because of her race. Mr. Cooper called the move "an act that is fully offensive and exclusionary."

"We feel that we cannot address the policies within this round until we address the fundamental issues of white supremacy as well as whiteness in this activity," Mr. Cooper argued in his opening speech.

The debaters from Fort Hays countered that race had nothing to do with their decision, arguing that the request was made for competitive reasons because the judge had been tough on the team in the past. But the Towson team continued to pursue the issue, which dominated the entire round. Mr. Shanahan sat on the floor on the sidelines.

Towson's team won the round, with two judges finding for them and one for Fort Hays. After the judges explained their reasons, Mr. Shanahan and Ms. Reid-Brinkley, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Pittsburgh, got into a shouting match — trading obscenities and personal insults as a camera recorded the scene. At one point, Mr. Shanahan briefly dropped his shorts and exposed his underwear.

Mr. Shanahan has been a controversial and influential figure in college debate for decades. He helped introduce a style of debate that incorporates postmodern theory; in it, debaters question the position from which their opponents are arguing rather than

tackling the merits of individual points.

Richard E. Edwards, author of *Competitive Debate: The Official Guide* and incoming vice president of the American Forensic Association, says that Mr. Shanahan is known to have a temper, but that he also prides himself on promoting social justice and inclusion.

Mr. Edwards was not in the room when the mooning incident occurred, but he has seen the video. "He was accused of being racist there. Those are kind of fighting words — it's hard to hear that," he says. "For Bill, if there's any one thing that would light his fire that would be it." Still, Mr. Edwards says, the coach's actions were inexcusable.

The Chronicle reached Mr. Shanahan at his home soon after he was fired, and he said he regretted his actions that day. "To me it's a terrible shame — it's my shame," he said. "I've known Ms. Reid-Brinkley for 15 years." He said the argument was part of "a profoundly important conversation about race and white privilege that has been going on in debate."

Debate has long been an insular community, he said, and he expected that the aftermath of the argument would be handled quietly. In fact, leaders of the debate association started an investigation into both professors' behavior soon after the tournament with little fanfare.

But after someone posted video of the argument on YouTube five months later, alumni and others began calling for Fort Hays officials to dismiss Mr. Shanahan. Ms. Reid-Brinkley says she will not participate in debate tournaments this year, and Pittsburgh decided to withdraw its teams altogether from this year's tournaments. Some fear more fallout is yet to come.

As a pioneer of the strategy of turning debate rounds into questions about the very framework of debate, Mr. Shanahan says he helped bring in philosophy and the disciplines of critical legal studies and critical race studies to an environment that had been dominated by policy wonks.

And he's proud of that legacy. "It has literally changed the intellectual contours of the activity," he said, arguing that it lets students grapple with ideas that are more common in graduate school than in undergraduate study. "For many it's difficult to even recognize it as the activity of their youth."

Fighting a 'Cookie-Cutter Style'

It was another debate coach, Ede Warner Jr., who first focused on issues of race and identity during debate rounds about eight years ago. Mr. Warner is an associate professor of communication at the University of Louisville, and many call the approach "the Louisville project."

In the 1960s, debate began moving to a format in which participants talked fast and tried to lob as many arguments as they could at opponents, and in the 1990s, the pace got even faster, according to some longtime debate coaches. The result was a move away from oratory, as debaters focused on absorbing information and responding to it. Meanwhile, the demographics of debate had become more and more diverse in a competitive system that is unusually open. Teams from community colleges and small colleges often go head-to-head with those from Ivy League institutions and large state universities. But Mr. Warner felt that the "cookie-cutter style" of standard policy debates left little room to discuss matters of race.

"It was easy strategically to make those issues less relevant to the debate," he says, and he saw his approach as a way to force the issue of race to front and center.

But in 2005, after debaters at several other colleges had embraced "the Louisville project," Mr. Warner abandoned it, concluding that it had become unproductive. "I thought the community was becoming desensitized" to the strategy, he says.

When asked whether Mr. Hammond, the president of Fort Hays State, was correct in calling debate too uncivil, Mr. Warner conceded that "there's some merit in some of those charges." But he and others inside debate wonder whether it is possible to impose new rules on conduct without destroying the essence of the activity.

"You can't just magically snap your fingers and fix this problem," he says. "By now most do think there's a need to change, but there's not much agreement on what needs to be done."

And some professors have criticized Fort Hays officials for suspending its team, saying that doing so is, as one blogger put it, "a blow to academic freedom."

Mr. Hammond says presidents of other universities, many of whom competed in debate while they were in college, have called him in recent weeks praising him for leading toward reform.

"There's a general feeling that this is the opportunity to get standards and a clear statement of professionalism," he says, noting

that he is not trying to set guidelines on what topics are debated or to censor speakers.

Robert M. Smith, president of Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, was one of those who contacted Mr. Hammond to cheer him on. Mr. Smith once coached debate himself, and he says he has been disturbed by what he has seen in recordings of recent debate tournaments.

"Other presidents are looking at some of what are considered 'the sane and normal debates' and they're going, 'You've got to be kidding?'" he says. "It's a complete aberration of what it started out to be."

Slippery Rock doesn't have a debate program, he says, "and we're not going to, given the way that competitive debate operates."

Leaders of the Cross Examination Debate Association are struggling to respond. They have drafted a new code of ethical conduct for the organization and formed a committee to set standards for teaching debate at colleges. But it is unclear whether the changes will be enough to persuade Mr. Hammond and officials at Pittsburgh to return to competitions.

Gordon W. Stables, a vice president at the association and the director of debate at the University of Southern California, says debate is an "academic sport," and it is natural for some contests to become heated. He says most of the changes in debate over the years, such as the introduction of fast talking during matches, have been positive, ensuring that the focus remains on the quality of arguments offered and countered, rather than style of delivery.

"We're deeply disappointed in the entire incident, and we really don't think it represents the pedagogical approach that we try to embody," Mr. Stables says.

Mr. Warner, like many other debate coaches, points out the positives of debate — even the one that preceded the mooning. "There was a pretty good discussion of race that went on for an hour and a half, and at the very end of it went out of control," he says. "That's not bad considering our inability as a country to talk about race."

Escalating Tactics

In last month's debate at Towson, Ms. Jones kept the discussion focused on charges of institutional racism, despite the NYU team's efforts to bring the conversation back to U.S. tariffs on Brazilian

ethanol.

At one point, she put a chair on top of a table and sat on it, reminding judges of the account she had read them about slaves placed in chairs on tops of tables to be auctioned off.

When the NYU team argued that they agreed with her that racism is wrong and should be addressed, but in a different, more appropriate forum, Ms. Jones attacked them for essentially dismissing her advocacy. After the debate ended, she made a personal comment to her opponents: "Please don't ever tell nobody that they can't make change. That's just advice."

"That was intense," one of the judges said aloud after the match. The three judges, all college debate coaches, looked over their notes individually for about 15 minutes before announcing the verdict.

The decision was unanimous: Ms. Jones from Towson won the argument.

The judges explained their reasons, which focused on the technical merits of the arguments made. "What you're missing the most is framework in the argument," said Samantha Godbey, one of the judges, of NYU's approach. And she said that the NYU team had not convinced her that a debate round was the wrong forum to discuss charges of racism in the activity. "It belittles her arguments a little bit by saying that her arguments aren't important enough," said Ms. Godbey, a graduate student in political science at West Virginia University.

Joe Keeton, an officer for NYU who was advising the team at the tournament, said in an interview after that match that teams try to prepare for everything, including the Louisville-project strategy.

"In debate we actually call it the clash of civilizations," he says. "When you walk into a round, you really don't know what you're going to get."

"It can be frustrating for people from a traditional world," he says. But traditional teams have developed strategies to diffuse the "identity stuff" during competition, he says. "It's a chess match to some extent — that's kind of what makes it fun."

Will Baker, head coach for NYU's team, agrees. "If debate is going to be a laboratory, by definition it has to go too far," he says. "There was a time when people said that debaters arguing that Communism was good were going to destroy the activity," he says. "I think you want to allow people to experiment."

And experimentation works. This year at the national tournament, a few hours after the mooning incident, the team from Towson won top honors and became the No. 1 team in the country for advancing a protest argument much like the one it ran against Fort Hays State.

<http://chronicle.com> Section: Students Volume 55, Issue 6, Page A1

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