

Chicago Debate League Top Ten Recruiting Tips

Top Ten ideas for recruiting that teams should look at implementing to recruit new students.

First, talk to colleagues and department heads about identifying promising students (based on class placement or testing) who should be on your team. Once you have those names, create an envelope with a printed-out invitation - this can be fancy or relatively inexpensive, just make sure it conveys the idea – saying they've been selected to join or try out for an elite group of students in the school and listing the next meeting time/place. Have this envelope delivered to them by a teacher who knows them well and can help sell their involvement in debate.

Second, have some of your more experienced debaters join you in addressing classes. Take 5 minutes to pitch not only the academic benefits of debate, but also how much fun it is, how competitive the tournaments are, how students from all over the city make new friends and compete for awards using their ideas and their point of view.

Third, have recruiting fliers that target students coming off of other activities. Yes, I hear from coaches all the time that they lost a student to football or some other fall sport. What I've found successful as a coach is having fliers that target athletes and students looking for an activity that balances out their activities - have them say something like "Join Debate's Winter Season Now - Keep Your Mind Warm" or "Fall Sports Over? Join Our Championship Team for Debate's Winter Season - Compete With YOUR IDEAS" or something less corny but similar. I'd do the same thing again for the "Spring Season" - students don't know that debate is a year-long activity and they can certainly do well joining after the second tournament and get caught up pretty quickly in JV. Some of my best debaters, including a starter on a Varsity baseball IHSA state runner-up team, were athletes who joined halfway through the year - I found that what they had to catch up on in terms of debate content was more than balanced out by their competitiveness and ability to work within a team and stick to a regular schedule of practice and preparation.

Fourth, if you haven't already done so, borrow great ideas from coaches like Dave Hayes from King and have a parent info night where you invite students and their parents (this could mean mailing a nice packet of materials home and requesting they RSVP). Order some pizza, have some food related to the countries in the topic, or have a screening of "The Great Debaters" with popcorn – the specific idea of what would appeal to your students and their families is yours, but make sure it's engaging and appealing. I've never coached at a school with a budget of more than \$4,000, so I've learned you can be creative here about resources, involving parents - some restaurants will donate food or will donate a portion of their proceeds and throw in meals for your group if you help pass out advertisements or get people to come out for one weekday evening when business is typically slow, a fun potential fundraiser. Getting parents on-board as volunteers is critical not only to getting students committed, but also to helping get support for the team within the school. Have a sign-up sheet and available positions such as Parent Judge, Debate Parent Volunteer Organizer, School Support Leader, Community Visibility Leader – these aren't just decorative titles, having active parents can be a great asset to any team.

Fifth, though this may work at some schools more than others, make sure debate has a presence at any activity fairs or meetings open to a large number of students. One year, we had students deliver short debates in the hallway using a PA setup on controversial, but entertaining topics, with a sign-in sheet. That got a lot of buzz going and got us some new debaters. Another year, we had two students walk around with a sign reading "Think You Can Out-Debate Me? Pick a Topic" and they'd have a brief discussion with any student who stopped them, as well as a hat with some slips of paper listing fun topics if students couldn't think of an issue to debate about. These debate jousts would graciously concede after some give-and-take if the challenger had a good point, with a reward for anyone who out-debated them (and magically, most did) – we gave them pencils we had engraved with our debate team's slogan on it and meeting time/location and also a candy bar with a note inviting them to a pizza party; a large prize isn't needed to be memorable.

Sixth, for your students who are committed and show leadership skills, give them each responsibility for bringing more people into the team. I would typically assign my Varsity and committed JV to bring in 2 friends and 1 student from their classes they're not friends with but whom they respect as being smart and think would be good at debate. Not all students will succeed at this (although some will bring in more than three) and not all the students they bring in are keepers, but you'll find that the best recruiters are often your own debaters, particularly if they're well-regarded and outgoing. The most dedicated groups of debaters often come in as friends, and they're more likely to stick with it if they like the company. Reward dedicated, hard-working, consistent Varsity debaters with titles and positions of responsibility within the team, like Sophomore/Junior/Senior Recruiting Leader or JV Captain or JV Mentor -- they'll take the task more seriously and it'll help them feel more connected to the team, increasing their commitment. Most kids who love debate are dying to help teach it to others and they can earn the right to help you reach younger debaters through their own hard work and contributions to the team. If you're a first-year school or have almost all JV debaters, reward the ones who show initial success and dedication with titles like JV Captain or JV Recruiting Leader so they are invested in helping the team to grow and succeed the rest of the year.

Seventh, make sure that debaters are recognized by the school and the administration. Any accomplishments at recent tournaments should be announced widely, not just over the PA in the morning when everyone's half asleep. Have students wear speaker award medals to school the Monday after a tournament - display any plaques you win in the main office. Have the Principal or AP recognize the students in public during an assembly or even during lunch periods to let other students know the school takes debate seriously and is behind having new students join a winning effort. Even if your team is new and hasn't won much, recognize the students who have competed anyway - they deserve the reinforcement and it will help build the sort of healthy, thriving team that will lead to success.

Eighth, keep recruiting. Recruiting isn't a once-a-year thing where you give up if your first push doesn't succeed - even the best debate teams keep less than half of the students who show up at the first informational meeting, I can tell you this is probably more like 1/3 that actually become reliable competitors from my personal experience. But the difference is that successful teams keep casting the net out there and don't give up and conclude that "students don't want to debate at this school," which is ultimately a cop-out, regardless of whatever sociology is used to explain

this claim. Winter season, spring season, recruit for next year before the end of the school year. Bob Edwards from Phoenix Military Academy is an example of a very successful coach who is recruiting year-round. Football coaches always keep an eye out for athletic talent - debate coaches have a wider pool to choose from (we're lucky we don't have to recruit genetic giants or kids who run the 40-yard dash in under 4.6) and should look for students who might have something to say, a desire to compete, and some ideas they could express effectively with your help. Put your colleagues on notice too.

Ninth, don't be afraid to challenge students from the start. There are many activities which are minor commitments or casual trifles - debate isn't one of them, as you already know, and to quote the late Scott Deatherage of the NAUDL and Northwestern University's dynastic debate team, "nothing in life worth having comes easy." Give students a vision of what you're looking for and be upfront. My first informational meetings would tell students what kind of team we would be - for a while, our motto was something about 3 I's (Integrity, Intelligence, Innovation), one year it was "Believe - We Change the Game," but yours might be Competitive, Cooperative, Critical or whatever your motto is ("Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose!" might be a bit much), just make sure you have some message for what the team believes in. I would then say that not all the students in the room are going to be debaters or fit this approach, that anyone who wants to compete and has something to say that means something to someone is welcome to be a part of the team but that the goal is to be one of the best TEAMS (with all that implies) anywhere and that requires a special kind of student and teamwork where students are responsible not only to you as their coach but to each other.

Debate stands out because colleges know you're going somewhere and can read, write, speak and are aware of important issues - but reinforce that a merely practical resume choice isn't going to be enough, that they have to want to compete and prove themselves against students from all over the city to succeed on your team. Not all good students are meant to be good debaters, and not all good debaters start as good students, but debate will undoubtedly make students better and challenge them to improve like no other activity can. If you can sell this, students will know they're expected to commit from the outset and will have the right expected attitude and some guiding philosophy they can potentially adopt as their own, a rare and valuable thing in the academic life of any high school student.

Tenth: your enthusiasm is what gets students interested at the start and gets them out to that first tournament where they can get hooked on the activity, there's no other way to explain it. Students want to be a part of something that's energizing and challenging, they don't want to be a part of an activity where the impression they get is ambivalence or indifference. Not everyone's a Vince Lombardi or Scott Deatherage, but your leadership is the most important driver to whether kids benefit and grow from debate. One additional reason to recruit beyond any talk of numbers or incentives is that the best debate teams have a vibrant energy, a spirit of intellectual discovery and open dialogue that pushes students to improve. That's sorely lacking at some of our schools, and it may seem overly optimistic to some of you, but that same spark exists in any school - there are students who could be great debaters in just about every group of students I've ever met. If your debate team is a place where several students are eager to come and test ideas and work off each other and find intellectual sparring enjoyable, you're likely to see both competitive success and

student commitment and participation. Get the sort of students you'd be excited about working with and who other bright students potentially headed somewhere beyond high school would want to be around. Not only will you find meeting the participation standard and getting attendance at tournaments much easier, you'll enjoy leading a community of young critical thinkers and your leadership will be recognized for creating something different within the school, even if not

everyone fully understands what debate is and offers to our students. The greatest enjoyment I got out of coaching and the reason I'm still in debate is because it's rewarding to guide young people who are undoubtedly going to be smarter than you are and witness their growth as they discover new ideas and find a voice. We're literally asking them to learn about and engage the world and its ideas. I hope that's seen as an opportunity that stands out among the narrow, provincial interests and concerns of most teenagers in our city. Our coaches do amazing work and touch the lives of amazing students -- we hope that impact grows this year and every year.