Debating Women

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I nstitutional tolerance of women’s participation in intercollegiate and
coeeducational debate competitions vacillated throughout the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, intercollegiate
debating underwent a “veritable explosion” of popularity in the 1920s
and 1930s, and by 1927, U.S. debating women had gained enough mo-
mentum for Mildred Freburg Berry to declare that “women have invaded
the forensic field to stay.” That there were simply more women on college
campuses across the United States at this time undoubtedly intensified
this dynamic. Despite the Depression, the number of college women in-
creased between 1930 and 1940 (from 10.5 to 12.2 percent of total student
enrollment). This cohort of women students also included representa-
tion from more diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. “Equality with a
difference” was the reigning mantra for women in higher education in the
1930s, signaling a demand for equal opportunities coupled with the belief
that femininity set them apart. Yet as economic worries ran high and
budgets ran tight, arguments in support of university women’s debating societies had to be carefully crafted.

The greater presence and legitimacy of women in academia gave rise to new considerations regarding their extracurricular activities. Between 1928 and 1945, debating women were offered unprecedented opportunities at universities, but their argument cultures were also subject to different kinds of institutional oversight. While intramural women’s societies had allowed the members to generate their own topics for debate, participation in competitive intercollegiate debating meant that leagues or national forensics organizations like Pi Kappa Delta determined their debate topics. Moreover, the addition of faculty advisors to specifically oversee women’s debating teams meant that they gained advocates with university administration, but had to give up control compared to student-run debating societies. Women’s debating teams were, at times, in direct competition with their men counterparts for funding and access to campus resources.

In this chapter, I trace some of the tensions that arose when men’s and women’s debate teams shared academic spaces, locating strategies used to justify women’s debate amid anxieties about the gendered politics of higher education between the Depression and World War II. How did debaters and their faculty advisors articulate reasons for sustaining women’s teams during this critical period in U.S. history? Specifically, how did they construct a notion of the woman debater as citizen through particular articulations of gender, class, and race? The chapter begins by setting the scene to better understand some of the historical developments related to women, debate, and higher education during this period. I then analyze public arguments for ideological and material investment in women’s debate at two coeducational Pennsylvania state institutions of higher learning: the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) and the Pennsylvania State College (Penn State). Under the purview of university administrations and the academic norms of the period, women students at Pitt and Penn State primarily debated in mainstream academic spaces, including classrooms, auditoriums, and lecture halls. However, as women constituted themselves as citizens through debate, the activity also took them traveling to contests at other schools, community organizations, and—in the case of Penn State—even to a nearby prison.
The 1930s were an uncertain time for college women. While the New Deal propelled some women into positions of nationally prominent leadership, rising unemployment meant that professional opportunities were scant. The economic concerns that dominated the historical landscape had many wondering whether higher education would simply prepare women to steal men’s jobs. In part to alleviate strains on the labor market, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Federal Emergency Relief Administration began to provide aid to students in 1934. As many of the student debaters at Pitt and Penn State came from working-class backgrounds as the children of European immigrants, the decision to attend college was not one that was taken lightly.

On campus and in the community, women sought education about public speaking and argumentation as one way to gain steadier ground in shaky times. This demand yielded some interesting textual artifacts. Two public speaking textbooks published in the second half of the decade were specifically targeted at women, underlining the urgency in their need to acquire such skills. Eudora Ramsey Richardson’s 1936 book, *The Woman Speaker*, sought to educate women’s club members about public speaking basics. She argued that without rhetorical leadership, “women in our own country stand the chance of losing all that has been gained. Between 1920 and 1930 there was a distinct relaxing of our efforts, for it seemed that the woman movement had a sufficient start to be carried forward by its own momentum.” The Depression required an awakening to the “realization that the ground that seemed solid was about to slip from under our feet.” In contrast, Jasper Vanderbilt Garland’s 1938 textbook, *Public Speaking for Women*, took a decidedly less political approach in explaining the need for gender-specific instruction. As his preface asserts, women’s desire to speak well is akin to their desire to dress beautifully: “their speeches, like their dress, must conform to accepted standards of manner and materials and yet bear the unmistakable flavor of individuality.” Though different in tone, both texts coupled exemplary speeches by women with specific, practical advice aimed at helping novice speakers organize their thoughts, overcome lack of confidence, and hone skills in verbal and nonverbal communication.”
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A second textual juxtaposition contextualizes the dynamics of gender, debate, and the still relatively new discipline of speech communication during this period. The October 1937 issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech provided back-to-back articles that excite the contemporary feminist rhetorical historian. The first is Doris G. Yoakam’s article, “Pioneer Women Orators of America,” which has been heralded as one of the earliest published works in the discipline to focus on women and women’s issues. In it, Yoakam analyzes nineteenth-century women speakers. After perusing that article, the QJS reader of 1937 would turn the page to find the final installment of Egbert Ray Nichols’s three-part opus, “A Historical Sketch of Intercollegiate Debating.” In it, he charts pivot points in the history of U.S. debating, including the international debate program, the rise of tournament debating, and changes in debate adjudication. Women are mentioned, but only fleetingly. Thus, those of us concerned with women debaters within this history have these two ships, rubbing up against each other in the pages of the discipline’s flagship journal, but ultimately passing in the night.

The economic precarity of the 1930s required the invention of strong rationales to support women’s debating. Such rationales often developed the idea that debate helped extend citizenship practices to women. This is keeping with Margaret Nash and Lisa Romero’s insight that expanded notions of citizenship undergirded prominent strategies to justify women’s continued presence in the academy in the 1930s. As women were relatively new to the franchise, the jury, and other expanded rights, advocates argued that they needed higher education to learn about the responsibilities of citizenship. This angle seemed to fulfill a civic need without threatening scarce professional opportunities and “carried more weight in the face of the international rise of fascism.” Although the discursive frame of “racial uplift” was used when discussing women students of color, Nash and Romero find that most proponents of expanded opportunities for citizenship education had white, middle-class women in mind and “were framed within a discourse that preserved existing racial and gender boundaries.” Questions about women’s intellectual capacities for higher education were largely settled, with advocates refocusing their efforts on how women could contribute to the common good by learning the broad and abstract norms of citizenship. Many graduates of
the 1930s went on to become wives and/or mothers, yet they also sought employment outside of the home or active involvement in voluntary associations. While educated women of the past had often felt pressure to choose between marriage and career, some in the interwar generation perceived the possibility (and the economic necessity) of a third choice that would allow both. Thus, lessons learned in college were tentatively embraced for the potential to benefit both family and workforce.

The need for citizenship training took on a more focused, specific purpose in the 1940s. Large numbers of men and women students took military and civilian jobs to aid the war effort, at home and abroad. Those students who remained on U.S. campuses found university life transformed by the arrival of active duty personnel in training, the enlistment of students and faculty members, and the need for wartime rationing. Women students at coeducational institutions outnumbered men, and they participated in a number of community volunteer efforts to support the war.

University debating was continually reframed in light of the historically specific demands of citizenship education in the 1930s and 1940s. Arguments for women’s debate at Pitt and Penn State roughly map onto these evolving discourses of citizenship. I acknowledge that on its face, this is an unsurprising claim, as debate is often listed among the main expressions of citizenship in a democratic society. What is unique is that proponents of women debaters in the 1930s and 1940s were tasked with parting the waters during a time when the tides of gendered citizenship had not yet fully turned. Those seeking to limit women’s participation in debate had a plethora of arguments to choose from, as enumerated in a 1945 article: “only a man has the stentorian voice to carry to remote recesses of an auditorium; woman’s voice is squeaky, ineffective. Man’s physique contributes to his persuasiveness; woman has to trade on her looks. Man’s place is at the rostrum; women’s is in the audience. And so on.” To be clear, this commentary showcased past attitudes toward women debaters in order to celebrate their successes, as women’s squads experienced considerable growth.

How did these teams articulate their purpose and justify the ongoing inclusion of women debaters amid these historical developments? They framed debate as a cultural practice aimed at instilling citizenship
through a distinctly feminine brand of conviction and poise. These were skills learned by individual debating women, but reconfigured as a way to contribute collectively to the community and the nation, especially during the war. As a strategy, it maintained the need for women’s debate, but was sure not to rattle dominant gendered expectations too much. Debate was positioned as an activity that could help hone femininity, and femininity was positioned as an attribute that helped hone debating skill.

While elements of this strategy could likely be observed at many institutions across the United States during this period, Pitt and Penn State provide exemplary case studies. First, the universities were in close geographic proximity during a time of transition between public debate events featuring just two schools, triangular leagues, and the rise of tournament debating. Pittsburgh and State College, where Penn State is located, are approximately one hundred and fifty miles apart. As such, Pitt and Penn State debaters were regional competitors, reacting to similar evolutions in the activity and larger cultural trends. There were a number of debates between the two schools, such as a debate in 1928, in which Penn State’s Helen S. Faust and Marie C. Snyder defended the proposition “that women’s suffrage has been of practical benefit,” against Pitt’s Margaret Webb and Alice McAfee.

Second, as relatively large, coeducational institutions, Pitt and Penn State are intriguing cases of coeducational argument cultures where women and men had distinct experiences with the debate activity. On both campuses, gender-segregated teams were maintained with different competition schedules, yet at times, their faculty leadership, team identity, social activities, campus spaces, and funding overlapped. The teams were being constantly compared, creating an exigency for public discussion of gender dynamics in debate. Once access was secured, as shown in the ensuing analysis, the extent to which women debaters should be treated differently in the activity was a matter of dispute.

Finally, both universities have extensive, yet incomplete, archival materials about debate during this period. The holdings do not include detailed minutes or transcripts that give a sense of what precisely happened within the debates of this period. However, programs and flyers for debate events, yearbooks, coverage in university and local publications,
and personal correspondence are available. These documents are largely oriented toward presenting accounts of the Pitt and Penn State women’s debating societies to broader public audiences such as the student body, administrators, and members of the community. As such, these materials detail goals, values, and strategies in advocacy for women’s debate—discourses that both resist and map onto dominant gendered cultural currents.

Debating at the University of Pittsburgh

Debating at the University of Pittsburgh began with a men’s literary society, when the institution was still known as the Western University of Pennsylvania. It was re-organized as a debating society in 1907, just one year before the institution was renamed. 23 Although they were never formally barred from the institution’s charter, the first full-time women students were not admitted until 1895 and they did not enroll in large numbers until the School of Education was founded in 1910. 24 Faculty in public speaking, a division that separated from the English department in 1912, supervised the men’s debating team. 25 Women students sporadically participated in debate in the early part of the twentieth century. Men and women appear together in the photograph of the debating team in the university’s 1915 yearbook, for example, but there is no indication that they debated against each other, and the graduating women students list “girl’s debating team” in their individual yearbook entries. 26 A separate Women’s Debating Association (WDA) was officially formed at Pitt in 1921 “for the purpose of affording women students an opportunity to engage in debate and to enter into intelligent discussion of current problems.” 27 The new organization was likely prompted by the hiring of Dean of Women Thyrsa Wealtheow Amos, a strong proponent of the leadership opportunities provided by women-only student organizations. 28

Wayland Maxfield Parrish succeeded Frank Hardy Lane as Director of Debate in 1923. In the 1930s, Parrish oversaw all debate operations, while Richard Murphy and Theresa Kahn (later known as Theresa Murphy), both members of the public speaking staff, served as faculty advisors of the men’s and women’s societies. 29 Murphy and Kahn were former
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Pitt debaters who hailed from western Pennsylvania. Murphy was raised in an Irish-German–Pennsylvania Dutch Methodist family, while Kahn grew up in a Pittsburgh Jewish family that had ties to the Guggenheims in New York. According to their daughter, they attended Pitt because it was “the great working class University of the area and it provided an awful lot of opportunities, particularly in the Great Depression, after [their] families lost everything.” The men’s and women’s teams attended separate debate events, but coordinated for on-campus activities, including the end-of-the-year debate award banquets.

Parrish had strong opinions about how to organize debate activities, and he took measures to solidify the University of Pittsburgh’s team identity at a time when many questions about best debate practices were in flux. He created a document called “The Pittsburgh Policy” to make the team’s perspectives on intercollegiate debate clear to potential competitors at other universities. The Pittsburgh Policy is a list of aims, demands, and ethical expectations that the team wished to make public. It can also be read as a guiding document for the cultivation of conviction through debate—a policy that students would need to be aware of and consent to before representing the university.

The vision laid out in the Pittsburgh Policy was “to give students instruction and practice in Public Discussion,” in contrast to making the activity “a major sport, a gladiatorial combat, or an advertising agency.” Audience members for the events should not expect entertainment, but should be genuinely interested in the issues at hand, and see the forum as a space for “the molding of public opinion.” University of Pittsburgh-hosted events functioned as non-decision debates or used audience shift ballots in order to gauge how the audience was influenced by the debate. Audience members were asked to report their present opinion about the debate proposition before the debate by checking off yes, neutral, or no, and adding in any remarks they may have about the topic. After the debate, the audience members were asked to register their opinions by indicating whether their beliefs on the topic were affected by the arguments presented in the debate (as opposed to which team was better at debating). Rather than simply voting for the affirmative or negative team, the audience members were able to choose from a range of options. The audience shift ballots acknowledged that audience members had
nuanced opinions and that there were shades of gray in their reactions to debate performance—it did not suppose that they would be able to make a definitive choice.33

The Pittsburgh Policy voiced the view that debate should be seen as an exercise in truth-seeking and judgment rather than winning: “each debater speaks on one side of a question only, and his choice of side is dictated by his own honest conviction after study of both sides. Whatever enthusiasm he feels is generated from the heat of conviction, not from a desire to win decisions.”34 This privileging of conviction over competitive success was a trademark feature of the University of Pittsburgh’s debating societies at the time, instilling the idea that speech in public forums ought to reflect qualified opinions held by the speakers.

In her role as advisor to the women students, Theresa Kahn reinforced the message of the Pittsburgh Policy but was sure to underline that valuing conviction did not mean that debaters should be cloistered and rigid in their beliefs. Instead, debate was conceptualized as an exercise in critical thinking, cultivating belief, and making oneself open to potential criticisms. Kahn describes the process of analyzing a debate proposition from this perspective:

We will think about the question, prepare a bibliography, read widely, and talk to people who know something about the resolution. We will probably read the same articles, because I must know your arguments if I am to answer them, and you must know mine. We will take notes, preferably on small cards, so that when we organize our material later on we can sift and arrange them with like points together.35

As debaters imagined their competition and anticipated arguments, they were able to refine and add nuance to their positions. As Richard Murphy noted, they often met their toughest critics in their own team members: “A debater on tour may feel tempted to stretch a point or two; but if he is debating against students in his own school, students who will take him to the library after the debate and point out any distortion, he will develop a respect for accuracy.”36 In other words, the critical spirit within the debating society, especially at a local level and against teammates, meant that debaters developed rigor in their intellectual pursuits.
Pitt debaters could not expect to rest on their laurels. In order to join the debating teams, students had to demonstrate that their skills met the tradition of excellence that was expected of the team. First-year students were welcome to try out, and even the veteran debaters had to prove that they hadn’t become “dead timber” over the summer. Rather than shielding them from criticism, Kahn’s philosophy was to get as many students as possible interested so that the internal competition would be fierce. The tryout process for the women’s debate team required students to prepare five-minute speeches on the debate propositions for the year. Kahn selected up to fifteen students for the team. This approach allowed more students to have access to the benefits of debate education, and no one had the position of star varsity debater locked up at any given time. Moreover, Kahn contended that “discussions were more heated because more students take part, and competition is keen.” By creating opportunities for competition, and ensuring that no debater would take a position on the team for granted, the activity socialized students into a culture of criticism.

As her daughter later described, Kahn “believed that women should do what they wanted to do and that there was no reason why women couldn’t do the same things that men do.” She navigated gendered restrictions of the period by suggesting that exposure to competition and criticism would help to develop feminine poise necessary for women citizens. Pittsburgh debaters had to steel themselves for criticism from multiple audiences. High schools, churches, and various branches of the League of Women Voters throughout western Pennsylvania hosted extension debates, which were the most frequent events on the WDA’s schedule. They also participated in a number of intercollegiate debate events throughout the Midwest and East against schools such as the University of Cincinnati, Cornell University, Oberlin College, and New York University. In 1930, the final WDA event of the year was a radio debate about education, which aired on an evening broadcast of the local station, KDKA.

Kahn believed that this mix of debate formats provided women college students with a prime opportunity:

To stand before a critical audience and reason out a reply to a point that has been contested certainly develops poise. A debator [sic] learns to be
alert and accurate. To consider both sides of a question and weigh each thoroughly develops a keen reasoning ability.\textsuperscript{44}

Debate allowed students to gain poise in front of an audience, to approach a speaking situation with grace and precision. Poise need not be learned in charm school, for debate provided a different kind of education—a way to attain balance and ease with one’s public performance. Not only does the word \textit{poise} have a quotidian sense that invokes the equilibrium of bodily comportment, but it also has etymological roots in the process of weighing ideas, and the quality of being heavy, significant, and important. Throughout the 1930s, this word was used to justify women’s involvement in debate (and, it should be noted, was rarely used for men’s debate). As late as 1937, the WDA described their group’s general aim in the University of Pittsburgh yearbook as to “produce speakers of poise and ability.”\textsuperscript{45}

This express goal provided symbolic heft to the activity, counterbalancing “the opinion of several million men that women merely gossip” and allowing WDA members to “prove that they have something to say and say it in an interesting as well as entertaining fashion.”\textsuperscript{46}

The coupling of poise and conviction through debate training created a class of women citizen-intellectuals, curious about the world and prepared to contribute to their communities. Pitt’s women debaters met other women debaters who shared their common goals. As Kahn told the \textit{Pitt Weekly}, debate stoked an “intellectual curiosity” in its participants that prepared women well for the workforce and daily conversation. Intercollegiate debates were particularly useful in creating a sense of community among women engaged in ritual argumentation:

Here at Pitt, our policy of extension and collegiate debates offers the girl outside contacts with other girls whose interests are similar. Every girl who has debated with a team from another college has an experience worth remembering. If women are to take an active part in community life, then they should be able to talk intelligently on political and economic issues. Debating gives them this ability to think constructively.\textsuperscript{47}

The activity provided an outlet or inquisitive women students of the thirties by providing an imperative to study current events, politics, and
economics (rather than, say, an expectation that women’s collegiate study would be limited to home economics). Curiosity was aroused in the topics selected for debate, and ideas were honed within the structure of debate competition, which provided students with opportunities for interaction with interlocutors who had similar intellectual interests. They were able to network and create connections through debate, an activity that prepared them for civic life. This was necessary, because in Kahn’s view, the intellectual curiosity stimulated by debating was not meant to be limited to the activity; women would take their experience, training, and knowledge about current affairs, politics, and economics with them when they left college.

Student and faculty participants did not universally embrace the topics chosen for debate, but the topics are representative of Depression-era citizenship. There was an acute sense of the need to provide public debates that would serve the community in tough times. For example, the initial propositions for the 1930–1931 year were “Resolved, that the Eighteenth amendment should be repealed and the control of liquor traffic be placed in the hands of state legislatures” and “Resolved, that the emergence of married women into gainful occupations has been to the best interests of society.”48 However, these propositions were abandoned in favor of “Resolved, that the several states should enact legislation providing for compulsory unemployment insurance,” because of its importance given the mass unemployment that plagued the nation.49

The issue of unemployment was never far from the minds of the debaters. As Pitt debater Helen Smith Schlenke remembered:

During the depression years we had very little money. Most of the debaters were on scholarship—that’s the only way they could attend school. And so we had to work very hard at our studies to remain in school. We saw a world, you must remember, that was pretty grim—full of joblessness, poverty. In the early ’30s we went to college to get as much out of college as possible to start a career. Debate was an important part of our college education and student drive was in evidence among the debaters.50
“the turnouts for home debates [had] been discouraging in the past,” the debate team hoped “that since the question this year is of such current interest, there [would] be a greater response on the part of the students.”

In keeping with national developments in the activity, Pitt’s WDA made another change in 1930: it adopted the Oregon plan of debating. This style required three-person teams on both sides of the proposition. The first debater would present the constructive arguments of her team, the second debater would cross-examine her opponents, and the final team member would summarize their arguments.

Marie Hochmuth (later known as Marie Hochmuth Nichols) joined the Women’s Debating Association in 1928. Contemporary rhetoricians know Marie Hochmuth Nichols as a prominent twentieth-century public address scholar and rhetorical critic, president of the Speech Association of America (now the National Communication Association), and the first woman editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. In the 1930s, Hochmuth was better known as a Pitt debater who went on to coach, first at Pitt, and then at the all-women’s Mount Mercy College in Pittsburgh. She grew up in a large Catholic family in Dunbar, a small borough in Fayette County known as the “town of furnaces” for its contributions to the western Pennsylvania iron industry. In high school, she was a member of the student newspaper staff and the debate team. During her junior year, Hochmuth met Parrish when he served as a judge of a high school debate competition. Using a labor metaphor to describe her early relationship with Parrish, Hochmuth explained, “Professor Parrish had judged some high school debate colleagues of mine . . . and found their membership ‘not in good standing.’ It seemed to me at the time that qualifications for membership in his unions were pretty high. But in 1928 I applied, and I am still trying to qualify.”

Hochmuth was active on Pitt’s intercollegiate women’s debate team, graduating with bachelor of arts degrees in English and history in 1931. During her senior year, she was elected president of the WDA. Hochmuth’s experience and leadership position in the association meant that she often was a part of the three-person teams that represented the University of Pittsburgh during this time. She participated in five extension debates and traveled on both the “western trip” to Ohio Wesleyan University and Wittenberg College and the “eastern trip” to Cornell University,
Swarthmore College, New York University, Bucknell University, and Penn State. At Wittenberg, Hochmuth and her two teammates, Genevieve Blatt and Marjorie Hanson, debated against an all-men team for first time in the women’s team’s history. Blatt, Hochmuth’s frequent debate partner, eventually went on to a successful career in law and politics. She came to be known as the “First Lady of Pennsylvania Politics,” was the first woman to hold statewide office in Pennsylvania, ran for the United States Senate, and as a Commonwealth judge presided over a landmark opinion that made it illegal for the state’s high school sports teams to discriminate based on gender.

Debate trips were incredibly exciting for western Pennsylvanians of the time. As Jane Blankenship notes, “in addition to learning about argument, for many, particularly those who were daughters and sons of blue collar parents, debating allowed them to travel.” The WDA’s intercollegiate debate trips clearly made an impact, even though they were not as extensive as the ones undertaken by the Men’s Debating Association (MDA). After the eastern trip, an article ran in the Pitt Weekly proclaiming:

“Resolved, that we adopt a policy of more extensive debate trips in the future.” These are the sentiments of the members of the women’s debate team which has just returned from a long eastern trip, and it is a safe wager that it would not be easy to find an enthusiastic negative team to debate the question.

Travel was a theme at the 1931 annual banquet, which was coordinated by the men’s and women’s associations. A flyer promoting the event spoofed a booking agency, “Debate Booking Bureau,” and a travel agency, “Forensics Tours, Inc.” For the Debate Booking Bureau, the flyer offered its unique services (“Our motto: two teams in twenty minutes! Have you tried our Oregon debates?”), promising entertaining debates on demand, and advertising the skills that debate experience offered (“Do you have the magnetic personality that insures success in every walk of life? Consult the Pitt Public Speaking staff to-day, Specialists in Debate”). The debaters were prepared to think on their feet, to debate any topic, in front of any audience at a moment’s notice. Lampooning the more exaggerated claims of public speaking education, the debaters brought humor to their craft.
The Forensics Tours Inc. offered “a peripatetic course, giving personally conducted instruction in the art of travel.” Debate afforded students with opportunities to travel, but it also provided learning-in-motion, a chance to discuss rhetorical skills and topics of the day while en route to intercollegiate debate events. In addition to being able to “see the world from a Pullman,” this parody claimed to teach recruits the tongue-in-cheek practical skills learned from debate travel, such as how to “meet college presidents,” “pack evidence,” and “keep fresh on 2 hours sleep.”

The flyer, which was circulated to the banquet’s attendees, showcases some of the skills claimed by debaters of the time. It also implies that debate was an activity that was enjoyable despite all the hard work it involved. By refiguring debaters as travelers, the document suggests that the students were provided with new experiences, and there was a social element of debate training that men and women debaters shared, even though the two groups did not travel together. The 1931 banquet marked the end of Hochmuth’s career as a debater. She was awarded $15.00 as the top woman debater of the year, and was inducted into Delta Sigma...
Rho, the national honorary forensics society, alongside two men debaters, Jess Spirer and Edward T. Crowder.\textsuperscript{66}

In many ways, Hochmuth's experience as a debater, college student, and debate coach serves as a representative case for understanding tensions between traditional ideas about femininity and the popular image of debaters as smart, outspoken, and, indeed, masculine. Like many women students of the time, Hochmuth sought social work to aid the community during the tough Depression era years. After graduating from Pitt, she worked for the Allegheny County Emergency Relief Association as a field worker.\textsuperscript{67} The association provided assistance to the unemployed sick and poor. They concentrated on creating short-term jobs of practical benefit to the community, such as training unemployed men to create home gardens.\textsuperscript{68}

Later, Hochmuth returned to the University of Pittsburgh for a master's degree in speech. As she was finishing her degree program, she served as a faculty advisor for the WDA alongside her former coach, Kahn.\textsuperscript{69} Parrish directed her master's thesis, "Richard Whately's \textit{Elements of Rhetoric}, Part III, a Critical Edition."\textsuperscript{70} This project was a continuation of Parrish's own study on Parts I and II, which, as Hochmuth recalls, was a tough act to follow: "I shan't go into all the details of his making me trace 132 allusions for an appendix, after I thought I had finished the greatest study on Whately—since his own, that is."\textsuperscript{71} By the time she received her master's degree in 1936, she was well versed in Pitt's argument culture, as a debater and a debate coach. As a practitioner, she learned about the need for poise and conviction as she prepared for and took part in debates. As an instructor, she had to learn how to translate those elements into action for her students.

Hochmuth put her speech and debate skills to work when she taught courses and coached the debate team at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University), an all-women's college in Pittsburgh, from 1935 to 1938. She taught a class on radio continuity and effectiveness, and was an active participant in groups such as the Pennsylvania Forensics Association, the Western Pennsylvania Speech Council, and the National Association of Teachers of Speech.\textsuperscript{72} As a faculty debate coach, she was dedicated to challenging students and rewarding hard work, but she worried that the activity was not living up to its potential. She worked to reform debate in
several areas, including the proposition subject areas, which she thought were “dull and adhere slavishly to newspaper headlines,” and the announcement of the debate topic, which she believed should occur in the spring rather than the fall to allow students to work on debate throughout the summer.73

Employment at an all-women's college made Hochmuth even more attuned to gendered stereotypes in debate. In this role, she often played the provocateur, making statements to the *Pittsburgh Press* about the quality of college debating and suggesting, “women make more careful debaters than men. And, to give a woman poise, there is nothing better than a few trys [sic] at organized argument.”74 Hochmuth took advocacy for women debaters one step further, arguing for their superiority by virtue of their attention to detail. Note, too, that she also invokes poise as a benefit of debate for women. These statements were, predictably, rather incendiary for debaters in the region. Pitt's men debaters “rose in righteous indignation and demanded a showdown” almost one year to the day later after Hochmuth’s claim. Their indignation must have been more “show” than “showdown,” however, because when the teams ultimately met to debate whether the United States should cease using public funds for the purpose of stimulating business, it was decided that the teams should be split, with Mount Mercy’s Veronica McGinley and Pitt’s Saul Dizenfeld on the affirmative, and Mount Mercy’s Anna Marie McConnell and Pitt’s Abe Wolovitz on the negative.75

Using perspective gained as participant and coach, Hochmuth took the seeds of argument about citizenship through conviction and poise, and grew them into a critical assessment of women’s debate in a time of transition. As the 1940s approached, she questioned how women were actually being treated in the activity, now that questions of access were largely settled. Central to Hochmuth’s agenda of debate reform was her mission to redress the status of women debaters, who she feared were not taken seriously and did not take themselves seriously enough. In other words, she questioned the idea of “equality with a difference” if it meant that damaging stereotypes about femininity were keeping women debaters from gaining the full array of benefits offered to men in the activity. In 1939, she published “Your Gown is Lovely, but. . . .” in the *Bulletin of the Debating Association of Pennsylvania Colleges.*76 Because she so rarely
spoke about gender issues in academia or the ways that she navigated masculine institutions as a woman academic in her later career, “Your Gown is Lovely, but . . .” is an exceptional text. It identifies a problem in a speech activity and prescribes a solution for women debaters and their coaches. Moreover, it uses the lens of women’s debate to test how far liberal feminism could go.

“Gentlemen, you may light your pipes and sit back smugly for the duration of this article, if you choose. Frankly, it is not intended for you.” Marie Hochmuth’s article begins with a jolt: debate coaches have put up with lackluster debaters for far too long, failing to provide intensive critique of their women students either because they do not consider them worthy of their time, or because they fear retribution. Whatever their reasons, Hochmuth asserts that the men debate coaches of Pennsylvania colleges share common feelings about having to judge mediocre women debaters: that “a strong man must have often felt like fleeing in desperation.”

Hochmuth is concerned with the gendering of citizenship education, which she fears had gone too far in the direction of catering to caricatures of femininity. She bemoans what she sees as harbingers of women’s special treatment in debate, especially the selection of a Pi Kappa Delta debate topic for women and the publication of a public speaking textbook for women (the book in question is Jasper Vanderbilt Garland’s Public Speaking for Women). The idea that women deserve special treatment, Hochmuth notes, is in sync with the view that women are inherently limited in what they can and cannot do (excepting, she says, “the very unusual women”). Not wanting to be seen as too radical, she acknowledges that women are essentially different from men, but questions how those differences manifest in rhetorical skill, insisting that “it remains to be proved that the best woman debater is not as good as the best man debater.” Hochmuth suggests that Dorothy Thompson, Time Magazine’s most influential woman of the year after Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939, would never have been told that she could not debate. “I shall grant that Dorothy Thompson is an exception, and grant that there are far fewer excellent women debaters than there are excellent men debaters,” she says, “but I insist that there are far fewer than there ought to be, or need to be.” Here, she is arguing against tokenism, wanting to expand the possibilities
of excellence in debate to a wider circle of women beyond the chosen few who have somehow managed to rise to the top of an activity seemingly more hospitable to men debaters. She seeks to democratize debate, not by lowering standards of excellence to accommodate difference, but by suggesting a regimen that women debaters and their allies can pursue.

Hochmuth isolates five causes contributing to women’s inferior debate performance. Echoing her dissatisfaction with a “women’s debate question,” the first cause is an unwillingness to study the tough subjects:

Women, especially in the women’s colleges, do not elect to study economics or political science, and only recently have they shown any interest in social studies. The announcement of a debate question involving a knowledge of economics or political science finds them wanting, and they throw up their hands in despair.79

For debate to provide proper citizenship training, students had to be willing to engage topics on equal footing. Moreover, students must learn about these topics in order to figure out their own convictions. She acknowledged that they may have weaknesses in their educational background because gender socialization tends to steer women away from such subjects, but she was also resolute in her conviction that time spent researching could make up for any weaknesses in prior exposure: “let her arm herself with a few good basic texts and make up for some of her weaknesses. The worst thing she can do, as far as her own morale is concerned, is put off coming to grips with difficult problems.”80 Consider this a point of personal philosophy that carries over to Hochmuth’s later scholarship: she saw it as absolutely necessary for rhetorical critics to harbor an intellectual curiosity and do the heavy lifting to read about history, politics, and economics as part of their craft. Debate provided her with the ability to talk about these issues in a public forum in college, and she saw herself as rising to meet this challenge in all phases of her own life.

As the title “Your Gown is Lovely, but . . .” suggests, Hochmuth identifies the second cause for mediocre debating by acknowledging that some women debaters have imported (or been coached to import) charm school–style social graces into the activity rather than learning poise through exposure to argumentative criticism. She notes that some
students have interpreted the function of the debating society as a social fraternity rather than an academic activity. For example, some women debaters expend extraordinary effort preparing the stage for a debate—more effort, she fears, than goes into the preparation of their arguments: “there are ferns and flowers; there is music which is a nuisance during intermission . . . ; and there are academic robes or formal gowns.” Hochmuth recognized the need for poise in debate, a lesson that Kahn had instilled in her as a debater. But poise represented a need for equilibrium in argumentation, not necessarily the selection of a formal gown. Debate should take precedence over adornment, and if one cannot balance the two, debate must be the thing that stays.

The third reason for mediocre debating also has to do with debate’s potential to cultivate poise and self-confidence. She believes that there is a common and misguided sense that in order to be true women, they must be weak in their rhetorical performances. Hochmuth demonstrates her passion for debate and the airing of perspectives, stating, “no strong assertion of an honest opinion ever detracted from the dignity or charm of a woman, and to translate dignity into terms of a weak-kneed approach to debate work is to rob debate of the fire that really makes for good debating.” Hochmuth’s alternative vision of what femininity can be offers debaters a way to transform any conflicted feelings they may have about being assertive speakers. Femininity is not incompatible with good argument. She does not, of course, give women debaters license to “rant and thunder on the debate platform,” perhaps recalling Kahn’s comparison of young debaters in rebuttal to Plato’s comment about young philosophers: “like puppy dogs who delight to tear and pull at all who come near them.”

A fourth cause is that “women often appear to be just about ready to take a dose of some foul tasting medicine when they appear on the debate platform.” Hochmuth believes that one cannot have perfection without passion; she considers “enthusiasm, or love for debate, to be of utmost importance to good debating.” She suspects that some women debaters may be in the activity for its prestige rather than for a genuine love of the activity.

Finally, Hochmuth shifts the blame for inferiority from the debaters to their faculty coaches. Debate educators are at fault for unsupportive practices, which fall into two categories: inadequate instruction and
treat women debaters with kid gloves. Hochmuth is more sympathetic to those coaches who, because of their lack of knowledge about debate, or lack of time, are unable to help their debaters. She is much less tolerant of coaches who insist on “nursing” their women debaters through a variety of practices, including writing their speeches, and not permitting them to debate “non-cultural” topics: “women would probably be very comfortable if they were never called upon to do anything for themselves after they leave college . . . But this is not the case, and why colleges should continue to treat women as if they were living in the eighteenth century is a mystery.”85 Coaches should do what they can to foster an intellectual curiosity in their debaters, and this includes disavowing a double standard that prevents women from debating non-cultural topics.

Although she identified five obstacles to women debaters’ attainment of excellence in debate, Hochmuth is hopeful that they will rise above mediocrity. Her ultimate recommendation for women debaters, especially those at women’s colleges, is to recognize the value of public criticism. Similar to Hannah Arendt’s later articulation of excellence as the result of public activities that require the presence of one’s peers, Hochmuth’s notion of excellence requires publicity, and intercollegiate debate provides a formal venue for structured criticism:

women need audiences that will heckle instead of praise; they need to be taught to accept criticism without giving way to tears; they need to come in contact with really good debating more often they do . . . those who cannot bear the brunt should make way for those who can. Hard work is tiring; mental energy is painful; criticism is discouraging, but all of these things are essential to the woman debater who is to attain excellence.86

This little-known article should be viewed as an admonishment of women debaters who settle for anything less than excellence, but also as an attempt to pass on lessons on how to survive and excel in an activity dominated by men. Hochmuth’s attitudes toward the activity, other women in debate, and the vision she developed for herself as a woman in academia are evident. Although she did not continue to coach debate teams in her later academic career, the elements of excellence that she
expressed in “Your Gown is Lovely . . . but” would shape her approach to rhetorical criticism. In her view of women’s debate, Hochmuth extends some of the earlier themes about citizenship through instilling conviction and poise through criticism, but also questions whether discourses used to carve out a place for femininity in debate are giving students the short shrift. In doing so, her article provides a perspective that helps to round out this exploration of women debaters at the end of the interwar period.

Shortly after penning “Your Gown is Lovely, but . . . ,” Marie Hochmuth left Pittsburgh to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Wisconsin. She first met Henry Lee Ewbank, Director of Debate and her eventual dissertation advisor at Wisconsin, when she arranged for him to be a guest speaker at the Delta Sigma Rho Alumni dinner at the Pennsylvania Teacher’s Association in 1938. She recalled that she “was, at the time, dimly considering the alternatives of staying in my teaching position or striking out for work on a doctorate degree.” She elected to start graduate work at Wisconsin the next summer, and found in Ewbank an advocate and advisor for life.

In the time after Hochmuth’s departure from Pittsburgh, the Pitt women’s team underwent several transformations as the group’s purpose evolved with the country’s entrance into World War II. Wayland Parrish left the University of Pittsburgh for the University of Illinois in 1936. He had given his word about a contract for an instructor in the program at Pittsburgh, and when the university administration refused to renew it, he resigned. Soon thereafter, Richard Murphy and Theresa Kahn departed for the University of Colorado. Charlotte McMurray took over as coach for the WDA in the 1938–1939 school year. In 1940, the association changed its name to the Women’s Speech Association (WSA) to better encompass its broader range of activities. That year, it took part in intercollegiate debates and fifty extension debates. It hosted ten tri-state colleges at a debating conference on the theme of “training the college girl for the world of tomorrow.” In Pitt’s alumni magazine, Charles W. Lomas, the new Director of the Men’s Debating Association, wrote that Pitt’s debaters spoke in front of audiences totaling 20,000 people on topics ranging from “such intimate and personal problems as Should Married Women Work? to such highly technical questions as incorporation of labor unions and the desirability of the Anglo-American alliance.” During the
1941–1942 school year, Ruth R. Haun, an instructor of English and speech with a background in theatre, became the new faculty advisor for the WSA. That year, the members took part in the Intercollegiate Debate and Discussion Group at a symposium focused on the role of college students in the National Defense Program. They participated in intercollegiate debates with Penn State, Washington University, and Randolph Macon College. Their expanded range of activities included a poetry group that coordinated with a women’s choral and modern dance organization.94

In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the University of Pittsburgh quickly became involved in home-front war efforts. Many campus buildings were converted into spaces for cadet training. In 1942–1943, 11,961 cadets arrived on campus, sharing facilities with Pitt students: women, men who did not qualify for service, and recipients of draft deferments.95 As historian Robert C. Alberts notes, Pitt’s main academic building, the Cathedral of Learning, was “at the center of a large, important, and efficiently run military installation” by mid-1943.96 The Key Center of War Information and Training was established on campus, as one of 140 units throughout the country designed “to serve as libraries of information and as clearinghouses for the development of morale building programs for schools, clubs, and community groups.”97

Although their lives were undoubtedly transformed by war, those civilian students who remained on campus were encouraged to continue their studies and involvement in campus organizations as a way to perform the preservation of American life and the university ideal. As Helen Pool Rush, the newly appointed Dean of Women, explained in 1942, “being known and understood as an individual, . . . having a sense of belonging, of sharing in the planning the life of which the girl is a part in the University—all of these needs continue in wartimes because they are basic.”98 Her vision for women students included training in leadership, confidence, and social graces. University organizations provided women students with leadership opportunities that could easily adapt to wartime needs. In this context, the rhetorical talents of Pitt’s debating teams merged with a specific wartime purpose. While previous years had described the benefits of the WDA/WSA in broad, abstract terms, they were transformed into caretakers of democracy and fervent advocates of free speech by 1943.
Lomas was put in charge of developing community leadership programs in civilian morale. He coordinated with Pitt’s Department of Speech and university musical organizations, but the debating associations were at the center of these programs. Coverage of the WSA and MDA in the 1943 edition of Pitt’s yearbook showcases this new focus. A section heading titled “FREEDOM OF SPEECH” precedes pages on the speech and debating associations. The teams underlined the importance of reclaiming normalcy on campus as part of the war effort, declaring, “It is the little things, gossiping over a coke or cheering the team at a game, that constitute free speech. We must exercise this right to the best of our ability if we would preserve it.” Readers turn the page to witness a marked change in the WSA’s self-presentation:

Both in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States and President Roosevelt’s statement of the Four Freedoms, the freedom of speech is specifically mentioned. It is to the preservation of the Freedom of Speech and to the development of intelligent discussion, both of which are basic in the fight for freedom, that the Women’s Speech Association is dedicated.

The yearbook pages thus presented freedom of speech as a concept that must be exercised in ways great and small. College speech and debate activities could not be written off as frivolous in wartime, for they were performances of free speech in a democratic society. As they went on to explain, WSA activities had been redirected to “develop within the University and community alert and progressive thinking” as part of the Key Center programming. WSA members continued their visits to local high schools, civic, and religious groups, where their former extension debates were exchanged for talks such as “What We are Fighting For,” “Civil Liberties,” “Elements of the Good Neighbor Policy,” and “Problems of a Post-War World.” The WSA specifically couched its efforts within a wider web of efforts by women’s organizations on campus that aimed to “revalue [sic] their aims in a nation at war.” The next page of the yearbook features the Men’s Debating Association, under the direction of Lomas. This year, the text notes that “new significance” has been added to the MDA’s activities, which coordinate with the Key Center: “speeches were
planned, symposiums arranged, and debates prepared for the purpose of encouraging intelligent thought and discussion about our war effort and the post-war world." The accompanying photo shows Lomas and thirteen men debaters, including three in military uniform.

In the following years until the end of the war, the aims and activities of the WSA and the MDA are largely consistent with those listed in the 1943 yearbook. By 1944, all men on the speech faculty had left the University of Pittsburgh for wartime duties. All speech and drama activities, including men’s and women’s debate, were taken over by Ruth Haun. Tracing debate at Pitt from 1928 to 1945 reveals the transformation of gendered citizenship from the individual New Deal liberal citizen—rooted in a more abstract belief in poise and conviction—to a wartime citizen whose conviction centered on patriotism. In State College, just northeast of Pittsburgh, similar themes were manifesting in a geographically proximate argument culture.

**Debating at the Pennsylvania State College**

Penn State (known then as the Farmer’s High School) was founded in 1855 as an institution dedicated to agricultural science education. Due to financial hardship and declining enrollment numbers, it was also the first college in Pennsylvania to transition to coeducation. The history of intercollegiate debate for Penn State men originated with a debate against Dickinson College in 1898. As the story goes, this match was greeted with great enthusiasm by the student body and surrounding communities. A special train was chartered to bring more than 100 audience members to campus from the nearby borough of Bellefonte, and a local orchestra and mandolin club “furnished sweet interim music” for the event. Pennsylvania governor Daniel H. Hastings was originally chosen to moderate, but the Spanish–American War prevented his attendance. Eighteen years later, Penn State women participated in their first intercollegiate debate against Swarthmore College on the topic of international treaties. Between 1916 and 1919, Penn State’s women debaters participated in two more intercollegiate debates, both against Pitt women. In 1919, the women’s team was “allowed to decline,” until it was resurrected
by John Henry Frizzell in 1926. Frizzell, who also served as College Chaplain and would later become the chair of the Speech Department, was a steadfast and enthusiastic champion of debate. As he told Penn State College President Ralph Dorn Hetzel, “when anything forward-looking and progressive in the field of speech is contemplated or accomplished, Penn State speech and debate men and women are more than generally found to be pushing it forward.”Penn State debate developed a team identity rooted in a “high level of gentlemanliness, courtesy, and fair play.” Frizzell was particularly proud of the team’s reputation for honesty, hospitality, and innovation with new debate formats.

Joseph O’Brien was hired to coach men’s debate in 1928, and Clayton H. Schug was hired to coach women’s debate in 1931. Frizzell continued to oversee the forensics program. Prior to his hire as debate coach and speech instructor at Penn State, Schug completed BA and MA degrees in speech at Ohio State University. He stayed at Penn State until his retirement at the rank of full professor in 1971, having coached a total of 1,072 women debaters over forty years. Under Schug’s direction, the women’s squad grew substantially in size and scope, in line with a general surge of women student enrollment at the college throughout the 1930s. Only five students came out for tryouts for the women’s debate team in 1931. They ultimately recruited three more students from speech classes, for a total of eight students during the 1931–1932 season. That year, the team participated in eight intercollegiate debates and traveled an estimated eighteen hundred miles. Compare these statistics to the 1936–1937 year, when seventy-eight students tried out and forty-nine were chosen to participate in thirty-five debates (twenty-one were extension debates). That year, it was estimated that they traveled over four thousand miles.

On May 5, 1932, the team participated in its first coeducational intercollegiate competition against Seth Low Junior College on the topic of capitalism versus socialism. A bright orange flyer advertising the event, which was held in the Mineral Industries building on the Penn State campus, proclaimed: “He-She Debate TONIGHT.” The team also started a program of well-attended extension debates, some of which were against men’s teams. Even though the teams were gender segregated, Penn State debaters occasionally occupied the same stage at debate competitions. For example, in March 1933, the Penn State women’s team debated the
Penn State men’s team at Renovo High School on the national intercollegiate topic: Resolved, that the United States should cancel intergovernmental European war debts. Marie Mahoney and Sarah Ferree, on the affirmative side, won the judge’s decision. The event also included performances by the high school orchestra and vocal solos by high school students during preparation time for the rebuttal speeches and during the time the judges took to deliberate. Penn State debaters Helen Chamberlain and Myra Cohn competed against Pitt men in March 1935 on a resolution about the international shipment of arms and munitions. A panel of thirteen judges voted for Pitt on the affirmative, based on a shift-of-opinion ballot. A thousand people attended the event, which was held in nearby Altoona, Pennsylvania. Gallitzen, a nearby coal-mining town, was a favorite community-based location for the debaters because locals would pack the auditorium and hang on every word when they debated labor topics. In such debates, “a lively open forum follow[ed] the debate proper, and autographs [were] demanded of the debaters by the younger set in the audience.”

Penn State debaters regularly participated in mixed-gender debates with other colleges. The Penn State men’s team preferred to line up women’s teams from other universities when they desired to deliberate on topics dealing with gender or social relationships. Pitt’s Marguerite Swank partnered with Penn State’s James W. Townsend to defend the affirmative side of the question, “should the male college graduate earning a minimum salary of $1,500 a year marry before he is twenty-five?” against Pitt’s Marcella Leyton and Penn State’s Roy J. Wilkinson. That debate, which was held in Penn State’s Home Economics auditorium on February 28, 1935, asked audience members to record their personal opinion on the ballot before and after the debate. Shifts in opinion could be registered with a range of responses, including “more strongly in favor of the proposition,” “in favor of the proposition,” “undecided,” “opposed,” or “more strongly opposed to the proposition.” Two hundred and thirty-four total ballots were collected after the debate, and the negative team won by a margin of twelve votes, with sixty-six audience members reporting that their opinions were unchanged. As wider public discourses questioned whether college-educated women would forego their roles as wives and mothers, Pitt and Penn State debaters hashed out whether
it was college educated men who were up to the task of fulfilling their family roles.\textsuperscript{120}

In addition to their intercollegiate travels and community performances, another tradition unique to Penn State’s women debate was inaugurated: Delta Alpha Delta (DAD). An honorary forensics society for women, the DAD chapter was founded in 1932 and remained active until 1972. Its membership was drawn from the top intercollegiate debaters on campus, who sought to “promote skill in public speaking and to develop a more general interest in these accomplishments among women students of the Pennsylvania State College.”\textsuperscript{121} In practice, this meant that DAD was responsible for providing hospitality to visiting women guests and organizing an intramural debate and discussion contest for sororities, dormitories, and other women’s groups on campus.\textsuperscript{122} In teaching their peers about the art of debate, DAD members took on an additional leadership role on campus. Intramural competitions focused on a range of subjects, from “frivolous” topics like “life: who gets more fun out of it—men or women?” to more serious topics like “can interfaith marriages succeed?”\textsuperscript{123}

While the duties of DAD membership were mostly lighthearted, “the secret ritual of Delta Alpha Delta,” an initiation ceremony for new members, was a rather serious affair. This was a private ritual, performed to create a sense of belonging within a small, cohesive group that sought to socialize members into a persuasive sensibility. Schug penned the script for a lively ceremony in which new inductees are referred to as “neophytes” and current members play the roles of Demegoria (representing public speech), Antilogios (representing debate), and Dikanikos (representing forensic speech). During the ceremony, the neophytes took an oath promising to improve their speaking skills, use their skills for good, and encourage speech and debate activities for Penn State women students. The seasoned members then presented a series of lessons that emphasized the importance of critical thinking, listening, and memory, while encouraging the inductees to be careful, be observant, and avoid jumping to conclusions. For example, a lesson on listening asks the neophytes to recite a line from the Bible, 1 Timothy 6:10. If the new students misquoted the line, stating “money is the root of all evil” instead of “the love of money is the root of all evil,” they were scolded and reminded that one must not just listen, one must listen with accuracy.\textsuperscript{124} On the whole,
the ritual performed the belief that effective speech is all about power, but speech is powerless if it is not used correctly. The DAD ceremony stuck with the inductees. One debater related that the ceremony sprang to her mind whenever she heard anything about evil and money in the thirty years following her graduation from Penn State. Through this ritual of rhetorical education, a distinct culture of debating was carved out specifically for women.

Men and women debaters shared in other gatherings on campus, and on the surface, relations between the gender-segregated teams were genial. Beginning in 1927, the women’s team manager was allowed to attend meetings of the men-dominated Forensic Council, which determined travel schedules and coordinated other team logistics. In 1936, the teams drew up a “Statement of Principles for the Coordination of Men’s and Women’s Debate at the Pennsylvania State College.” The document was a pragmatic agreement that divided up contacts with other university debate teams and community organizations among the two teams so that they would not run into scheduling problems or exhaust their audiences by double-booking events.

The two teams also held joint end-of-the-year celebrations, seemingly quite similar to Pitt’s, where they celebrated the year’s victories and performed humorous skits. The men debaters knew what happened on the women’s trips, and vice versa. Because inside jokes abound, any attempt to understand the context or parse the good-natured razzing from the cruel-hearted bullying would be futile. However, a brief look at the “Forensic Follies”—the documents produced for the 1935 festivities—illuminates Penn State’s argument culture, and its gendered dynamics. That year’s celebration was done in a vaudeville theme, which included a “Hall of Fame” that awarded a “bouquet of flowers to Helen Chamberlain, Elsie Douthett, Myra Cohn, and Bunny Heagney for winning first place in debate at the Delta Sigma Rho tournament in Pittsburgh (we always thought our girls were the best).” Under a section titled “Worst (?) of the Year Pulled by Our Girls” are some groan-worthy puns—“Lehigh to a grasshopper” (presumably said in a debate against Lehigh University) and “we come from Punn State.” The names of the debaters are then listed next to the names of famous actors, as if they were cast in one long melodrama over the debate season. Elsie Douthett would be played by
Mae West, Jean Kemp by Ruby Keeler, Bunny Heagney by the Bride of Frankenstein (men’s team member Donald Frey was listed next to Frankenstein)—the list goes on. The 1936 “Forensic Follies” included a program with two acts. The first was called “Skitsophrenia (concerning the split personalities of our debaters),” put on, it said, by the “Schug Stock Company.” Act II was “resolved that the female of the species makes as good a debater as the male of the same.” The specifics of this debate are lost to history, but that they would choose this topic for entertainment at their yearly celebration indicates that gendered assumptions about argumentation were a common topic of discussion.

The “Forensic Follies” might be used as evidence of a lighthearted and porous relationship between the women’s and men’s teams, yet other documents indicate that the women’s team struggled for meaningful recognition on campus. Marjorie Witsil Gemmill, who debated between 1935 and 1939, argued that representation in the Forensic Council did not translate to real decision-making power, stating, “how that Men’s Team did try to walk all over us!” There was little support for parity between the women’s and men’s team. Fluctuations in support for the women’s team persisted throughout Schug’s career, and the debaters remembered him as a “man who believed in equality for women when the idea was quite unpopular,” one who “demonstrated with his lifework the belief that women were worth teaching.” Schug sought opportunities to speak publicly about the team’s accomplishments, often reaching out to Penn State Dean of Women Charlotte E. Ray to note that “the constant struggle to gain and maintain for women’s debate the place that one who is directly responsible for it feels that it should hold on our campus has been most discouraging at times.” Ray, who believed that debate was “one of the very important courses that our women students have,” was a strong champion of the team within the institution. Her vision, that all Penn State women would have an opportunity to learn public speaking and debate before they graduated, was one likely inspiration for Delta Alpha Delta. She often showed up to help adjudicate women’s public speaking events on campus, and remained a steadfast supporter on campus until her retirement in 1946.

The tensions between the men’s and women’s teams that began to surface during the 1930s intensified during the war. In the early 1940s,
Penn State was subject to many of the same wartime pressures and transformations as Pitt. The student body mobilized quickly to fulfill various patriotic duties after the Pearl Harbor bombing, and college officials created a series of informal non-credit defense courses for undergraduates. Men and women undergraduates were encouraged to enroll, but the subjects of their course offerings differed. As a sort of proto-military training, men could learn about bomb control and marksmanship, while women “were offered instruction in community food canning, rehabilitation through crafts, the duties of table waitresses.” Yet this was not the only defense curriculum for women on campus at the time. Beginning in 1942, Penn State was one of eight locations chosen by Curtiss-Wright, a corporation that manufactures aircraft parts, to host an educational program to teach engineering to women. The “Curtiss-Wright Cadettes” were a group of students recruited to help meet the demand for skilled workers as many technicians were funneled into other war efforts.

The composition of the campus community changed considerably as the cadettes and military personnel arrived and more students were drafted. Women were encouraged to take on campus leadership roles and move into academic fields previously dominated by men. By mid-1943, “women outnumbered men (1,764 to 1,150) for the first time in the College’s History, with coeds even present in significant numbers in the engineering and agricultural curriculums.” This became an important issue for the debate teams, because their travel budgets were funded through a fee levied on the entire student body. This policy was started in 1922, when the women’s debate team was defunct. When the women’s team was re-instituted in 1926, it was decided that the budgets of each team would depend on the sex ratio of the student body. Before the war, the ratios strongly benefited the men’s team, generating a budget large enough to send their top team to compete in Oxford, England. Travel for the women’s team was concentrated in Pennsylvania, with notable excursions into other Mid-Atlantic states and Ohio.

As the number of men students on campus declined significantly during the war years, the gender politics of the period were brought into sharp focus. During this period, the men’s debate team was approximately half of the size of the women’s team, which averaged fifty to sixty members. Class of 1945 debater Joan Huber recalls:
In the fall of 1944, the women’s debate squad received more travel money than the men’s, owing to the fact that travel funds were distributed on the basis of enrollment by sex, and the women temporarily outnumbered the men. The men’s coach was unhappy and called a meeting to see if the women could be persuaded that men, in equity, should have a larger share. . . . the women had decided that, if men would give us a fair share after the war, we would be delighted to share with them currently. But no such agreement could be made. I still remember the sense of shock that the men who wanted fair treatment in 1944 didn’t feel obliged to apply the same definition of fairness after the war.  

As this incident indicates, even though the war expanded opportunities and increased leadership roles for women on campus, a sense of masculine entitlement persisted. Nevertheless, the women’s team ultimately voted to award the men’s team with a larger budget than their portion of the student fees warranted. Of course, budgets for both teams were smaller than they had been pre-war, given the significantly smaller number of tuition-paying students on campus. Gas and tire rationing further reduced the radius of permitted travel for debate competition to nearby towns.

The idea that debating served a vital role in training women for citizenship was prevalent in the war years and beyond. Dean Ray envisioned the war as a historical moment akin to the Civil War in widening the horizons for women in industry and education if they would only take advantage of the opportunity. She was convinced of the connection between the activity, citizen education, and community betterment, arguing that “every girl who has any experience in college debating is thereby better prepared to take her place as a leader in community and educational affairs.” It was particularly important—“with the new demands upon educated women”—that young women graduates of Penn State know how to become leaders who could rise to the rhetorical demands of community public speaking and know how to manage a meeting.

The idea that debate provided citizen education through the cultivation of conviction and poise was further highlighted in the team’s public documents and media coverage. These documents dealt with the question of whether the assertive and direct speaking style demanded by
the activity would “detract from the dignity or charm of a woman,” as Hochmuth says in “Your Gown is Lovely, but . . .” At times, the argument for women’s debate was couched in the idea that, in addition to developing traditional debate skills, the activity would allow participants to enhance their femininity or their preparedness for typical women’s roles and occupations with additional conviction and poise. Other instantiations discursively positioned the students as having overcome the deficits of femininity (including but not limited to the lack of knowledge about current public and political topics, lack of bodily command, nerves, and vocal screeching).

An article in the April 1945 issue of Penn State Alumni News puts a spotlight on the supposed frictions between norms of traditional femininity and argumentation. The title of the article, “Varsity Debaters (Did They Ever Look Like This, Boys?),” paired with photos of debaters Rose Anne Wilson, Lois Fehr, Nancy Bartsch, Rosemary Halpin, and Jeanne Barinott, unambiguously registers the point that women—especially those whose gender expression is characterized by carefully curled hair, creamy white skin, and lipstick—are not what one would expect when picturing debaters. This presumed incongruity is both dispelled and maintained throughout the article, which sings the praises of the women debaters and their competitive successes while insisting on their unwavering feminine charm. Though their pictures frame the article, and the article is about their participation in the activity, the debaters were not interviewed. Instead, their competitive successes are narrated through an interview with Schug, who deploys the themes of conviction and poise to support his arguments for the value of women’s debate.

Words like “sincerity,” “belief,” “fairness,” and “honesty” and “earnestness” were peppered throughout the discussion of Schug’s coaching philosophy. He claims that there is no single secret to coaching debaters, but stresses the position that they should not just argue for argument’s sake. Debate is an activity that can help women locate and nurture their beliefs: “read, and study, and think about it until you know which side you sincerely believe in. Then you can do an earnest job.” Here, debate is less about freeing the expression of a pre-existing conviction. Liberal ideals are achieved not through switch-sides debate, but through the preparation that goes into a public debate performance.
Poise became a focus when Schug described the concrete skills and possible employment options available to women debaters. He maintains that “debating develops thinking on your feet, poise, personality, self-confidence, and underscores the importance of practice in almost any job or mode of life—gathering facts, organizing them effectively, and presenting them persuasively.”143 Ruth Zang Potts ’38 echoed this emphasis in her assessment of the value of debate in a later letter to Schug: “I consider the self-confidence, self-command, and self-assurance gained through my debating experience to be the most important single contribution to my four years of college.”144 In terms of what this might mean for the students beyond their time at Penn State, Schug proposed that in addition to the need for a knowledge of public affairs in a legal or political career, poise under pressure would translate well to a career dominated by women: “Women debaters have done particularly well at practice teaching—a job that scares the daylights out of most students. School kids can put you on the spot if you’re not used to talking to groups and meeting and answering questions and arguments.”145 Schug’s comment underlines the argument that poise cannot be taught without practice in this passage; it is the result of being able to maintain one’s cool time and time again in an activity that has exposure to public criticism and extemporaneous speech built into the format.

Yet even if they chose not to pursue careers outside of the home, Schug maintained that debate benefits women, making them “better and more enlightened citizens, and more interesting and intelligent companions and wives.”146 In isolation, it might seem bizarre—even insulting—that Schug would add “intelligent companions and wives” to the list of professions that debaters were prepared for. Yet this argument strategy is perfectly in line with women’s education advocates of the 1930s, who took the fear that college-educated women would not marry and procreate, and turned it on its head. They argued that women of the era were more feminine than their predecessors. They would use what they learned in college to help them become better wives and mothers—thought to be an unproblematic social good on the whole, and good for the white middle class.147 In 1945, this strategy made even more sense. As men and women deployed during the war began to return to the United States, marriage and birth rates surged.
Some, though certainly not all, college-educated women were encouraged to pursue domestic lives in the postwar employment landscape. Such was the case of Joan Huber, the Penn State debater who related the funding dispute of 1944. Huber graduated in 1945, and was admitted to Radcliffe for graduate work in history, but did not attend due to a marriage proposal. As she put it, “we slipped into an easy domesticity after the war, using our intellects on the problems outlined in Spock and Consumer Reports. But all of us who were in debate are deeply in debt to Professor Schug because he believed that we had brains and could use them.” In this context, Schug’s point about “interesting and intelligent companions and wives” resonated as a reason to continue to support women’s debate.

In May 1945, the Pittsburgh Press ran an article entitled “They Have the Last Word,” which reproduced similar themes and two of the photographs from the Penn State Alumni Magazine. The article brings the accomplishments of the Penn State women’s team to an even wider readership, making a concise argument about the extensive work that goes into preparation for debate, and underlining arguments about conviction and poise. The Pittsburgh Press does not include a comment on the translation of debate skills into domestic life, instead identifying the Penn State students as representative of women across the United States who were interested in increasing their involvement in political and community life as the war neared its end.

According to this representation, women debaters may appear traditionally feminine and delicate, but they can engage in the efforts necessary to overcome their deficiencies as thinkers and speakers. The photos in the spread depict the debaters preparing in four different contexts: researching in the library, practicing non-verbal communication, vocal training for radio debates, and speech transcription. In the article, Joan Huber and Ann Staltz are shown to challenge the idea that women do not possess developed convictions about public affairs by using their “time, brains, and perseverance” and posing with a book and a typewriter to depict the research process, as the caption proclaims “DEBATING IS HARD WORK.” In the next photo, readers are reminded that a feminine preoccupation with appearance is actually a benefit in debate. Women like to primp in front of the mirror, which is also a great way to perfect body
They Have the Last Word

All over America, young women are showing an increasing interest in politics. The result is a revival of a venerable extra-curricular activity in high schools and colleges—debating. And the girls have found this practice of "having the last word" much to their liking and suited to the needs of those pointing for political or public careers.

At Pennsylvania State College this year, women debaters entered the Pittsburgh forum tournament, competed against men and came off with tie for first place. In a dozen years, the Penn State co-eds have engaged in 385 debates, have batted .746 in decision debates.

Debating is hard work as Joan Huber of State College and Ann Staitz of Pittsburgh know. Researching for facts and figures takes time, brains, perseverance. A good debate, they know, is made in the library, not on the platform.

Appearance is important and mirror practice helps. Nancy Barth of Columbus, Pa., gets some help from Coach Clayton H. Schip — the girls call him Sugar. After the rudiments of gesturing and stance are mastered, girls learn how to speak with the whole body.

Voice training is extensive at Penn State. Lois Feuer of Sunbury, Pa., gets ready to record her voice while Roseanne Wilson of Pittsburgh does the monitoring. Microphone practice helps remove fear that seizes amateur speakers in radio debates.
language for a debate. Nancy Bartsch appears next to a mirror alongside Schug, who provides guidance about proper gesture and stance.151

The remaining images suggest that women debaters can overcome their vocal deficiencies by practicing with technology. Lois Peher speaks into a microphone, while Roseanne Wilson monitors the voice recording in an effort to counteract that idea that women are too anxious to be solid speakers in a radio debate. The image testifies to the idea that debaters could improve their poise, creating a steady and commanding voice, through practice. The final image shows Wilson, Stalz, and Esther Pebley playing and transcribing a voice recording in order to recognize “defects” that cannot be detected in a live oral performance. The caption claims, “Once, women debaters were taboo because they lacked force, were unimpressive, had squeaky voices. Proper training has overcome these obstacles.” As such, the Pittsburgh Press coverage acknowledges the
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weaknesses that have been attributed to women speakers, but presents evidence that the current generation is willing to put in the hard work necessary to transcend feminine flaws of knowledge, bodily command, and voice. In doing so, the document offers a potent challenge to some stereotypes of the day. However, it is one that is rooted in refiguring rather than revaluing femininity, thus deploying some troubling stereotypes of its own.

Whether one believes that such publicity was ultimately helpful or harmful for the participants, it is difficult to deny that the link between citizenship and debate afforded opportunities for women debaters to challenge the boundaries of expected feminine behavior. In this way, training in conviction and poise worked subversively to justify exposing the debaters to some decidedly “unladylike” situations. Debate enabled women’s presence in the community, on the public stage, on the microphone, and over the airwaves. It also meant that they got opportunities to debate in some other unexpected spaces.

Most unexpected for Penn State women was the State Correctional Institute at Rockview. The penitentiary was an active dairy farm that provided farm products to other prisons in the Pennsylvania state prison. It was also “wall-less” and averaged 12 escaped inmates per year in the 1930s. Rockview is a mere six miles away from State College, in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, making it an easy and affordable location to debate when travel opportunities were otherwise limited. According to Robert Branham, debate activities were often included in calls for prison reform in the 1920s and 1930s. Debate was a focus for prisoner education and rehabilitation at institutions like the Norfolk Prison Colony, where Malcolm X first learned to debate in the late 1940s. Under the auspices of community participation and providing entertainment for the inmates at Rockview’s medium-security facility, Penn State’s Lois Notovitz and Sara Bailey debated the visiting Princeton University men’s team on March 8, 1941, on the topic “Resolved, that the nations of the Western Hemisphere should form a permanent union.” The four debaters were rather nervous before the debate. However, a letter written two days after the debate by Chaplain C. F. Lauer, Rockview’s Director of Restoration indicates they did a good job of hiding their fear. Despite inhospitable weather, “close to seven hundred men listened with rapt attention for almost two hours.”
The only problem with the smashing success of the event, according to Lauer, was that the inmates were so completely captivated: “how do you stop a debate? Our gang is hitting on all six. They are debating in groups of twos, sixes, and mobs. Coming from breakfast this morning, two of the birds wanted to settle this Western Hemisphere business with their fists.” The prisoners reportedly organized a follow-on forum to raise questions and share their knowledge on the topic. They insisted on more debates, causing Lauer to declare that “something has been started and it will take more than an empty promise to finish it.”

This was not a typical reaction. The prison had undertaken an experimental adult education program since 1935, and when outside lecturers were brought in, the prisoners were “much more critical than the average adult audience [and] prone to show their displeasure by walking out or making noises of disapproval” if the speaker failed to adapt to the audience by talking above their heads, lacked pizazz, or failed to integrate some humor. Given the positive reception of this debate, a yearly tradition of prison debates at Rockview began.

In the years that followed, Penn State women competed at Rockview against each other and against visiting men’s teams from universities throughout the region. They were given the opportunity to move into a space that would be considered inappropriate for young college women were it not for their purpose as debaters performing an act that was framed as the epitome of citizenship. They tested the limits of poise by presenting their arguments in front of a large and tough extension audience. As Lauer put it in a later letter, “any time you want to put your young folks to the fire test, send them on to us.” They cultivated conviction by debating in front of the convicted.

An Uneasy Integration

By 1927, “women had invaded the forensic field to stay.” By 1947, a national survey of over one hundred college and universities in the United States revealed “women students are in the minority in most forensic programs.” Emogene Emery corroborated these findings in 1952, perceiving a “marked post-war decline in women’s debate activities” as programs
redirected resources to men student veterans. This chapter has focused on the period between these observations, a relative heyday for women debaters in terms of their sanctioned participation on university campuses.

This story of university debate illuminates some growing pains as coeducational institutions of higher learning welcomed larger numbers of women students into academic spaces. Women became increasingly present and integral to campus academics and activities, and universities had to rethink some policies while continuing to operate within social norms of the period. The Great Depression and World War II presented constraints on women's participation, but they also generated ingenuity in the name of expanded participation in an extracurricular activity closely tied to national identity and values. Women debaters and their advocates were able to use citizenship as a justification to support their wider scale participation in intercollegiate and community-based debates without too radically challenging expectations for gendered decorum.

We gain a better sense of the challenges of coeducational argument cultures in exploring the experiences of women debaters from 1928 to 1945. Previous chapters discussed women debaters within the rise of university coeducation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though their argument cultures operated more or less on their own terms. Though certainly not free from institutional oversight, formal exclusions from particular educational venues meant that the Oberlin societies and Ladies' Edinburgh Debating Society held their intramural debates based on their own rules and on topics of their own choosing. While I do not wish to entirely romanticize those more enclaved interactions, there was a particular sense of freedom when women debated with and were judged by other women. The members of the 1928 British tour were tied to official organizations and U.S. university teams for tour logistics, but still largely shaped their own mobile argument culture.

As an extracurricular activity, debate allowed Pitt and Penn State women to take the stage at various campus and community events, occupying more prominent positions in more public spaces on a wider scale than ever before. They experienced the thrill of finding their voices through argument, of traveling to other campus and community spaces, and of representing their universities in a prestigious academic activity.
They gained confidence by exposing themselves to criticism, and they contributed to the war effort by using their rhetorical skills to perform and educate others about citizenship.

Examination of these gender-segregated societies at coeducational public institutions reveals how women’s inclusion in the activity did not translate to equality or equity. It exposes how women debaters were held to different, and at times absurd, standards. As Marie Hochmuth’s critique detailed, women debaters were expected to debate different topics and pursue those topics less rigorously than their men counterparts. They were expected to travel less and operate with less funding than the men’s team. They were assumed to be in the activity for different reasons, with different career aspirations. Media outlets deployed a gendered frame that positioned the debaters as amusing anomalies. The fuller entry of women students into the academy in the twentieth century entailed new clashes over resources and rights to institutional space.

Faculty coaches and administrators—men and women—played pivotal roles in waging numerous public campaigns to maintain the continued presence of debating women on campus. They regularly advocated for parity and, in some cases, even argued for the superiority of women debaters. In addition to the traditional skill set of public speaking and argumentation, debate was justifiable because it offered women the ability to learn citizenship by cultivating conviction and poise. These arguments tended to be rooted in essentialist claims about feminine inclinations, but they also suggested that the real feminist move was in believing in the potential of debating women.