

Mendoza Debate Society off to a winning start on competition season

Four-time national champion debate team says the focus this year is on learning & growth

BAYTOWN, TX — The glass case that holds the awards earned by the four-time national champion Mendoza Debate Society at Lee College is stacked from top to bottom with gleaming trophies and plaques collected over four years of competition against some of the best college and university debate teams from around the country and across the globe.

“For a two-year college to stand toe-to-toe with universities including SMU, TCU, LSU, Tennessee and Southern Mississippi is a real testament to the quality of students we have on the team,” said Director of Forensics and 2016 International Public Debate Association (IPDA) Coach of the Year Joe Ganakos, praising the strong debaters coming from local school districts like Goose Creek, Barbers Hill and Dayton.

“These students have a work ethic that is nothing short of amazing, and I think they are proof positive of the talent we have in the Lee College service area.”

But for the debaters competing in the 2017-18 season, adding more shiny hardware to their shelves is not the primary motivation for continued success — though they already earned in October two Team Championship awards to kick off the year at the Weevil Wars tournament at the University of Arkansas at Monticello, and Top Community College honors at the Red River Swing tournament co-hosted by LSU in Shreveport and Bossier Parish Community College.

Instead, the team has set priorities they consider much more significant: to learn and mature as scholars and debaters, share the knowledge they gain to benefit others, have fun throughout the rigors of tournament preparation and participation, and cultivate the community they’ve found and built with each other through debate.

“Trophies stop mattering after a while,” said Joselyn Mendoza, who eagerly returned to the team after spending a year away. “We learn about everything from philosophy to sports and absorb so much information throughout the season, then we come home and have so much more knowledge to spread to those around us. That’s crucial to growth as a debater. So much change can stem from our education.”

Many Mendoza Debate Society members feel a strong responsibility to hone their craft and support their teammates beyond the debate suite on campus. They decided not to name captains this year, choosing instead to focus on identifying and sharpening each debater’s unique strengths. Practice sessions are centered on problem solving and analyzing global issues and current events, with each individual becoming a subject-matter expert contributing information and perspectives that make the entire team stronger and more versatile.

“Six months ago, I knew almost nothing about economics. Now I know so much that it’s something my team counts on from me. We contribute to each other’s success,” said Ty Young, an IMPACT Early College High School student recruited by his mentor and teammate Chrome Salazar.

"I've learned how to think critically and better assess ideas so I can better articulate my thoughts about a situation," Salazar said. "I have people celebrating with me in good times and comforting me in hard times. I can be myself. I can have a personality."

Despite the demands of multiple weekly practices and long weekends traveling as far away as Washington and Idaho to compete, Ganakos and Assistant Debate Coach Christine Courteau are always there to encourage the debaters, provide a listening ear or shoulder to cry on when they need it, and remind them that they're students before all else.

The family-like bond between the students and their coaches is part of why Alyssa Hooks, who competes individually and in a two-person team with Rigo Ruiz, believes the Mendoza Debate Society is well prepared to notch more victories for Lee College and make lasting memories together this season.

"Expectations are high and we're ready," Hooks said. "We've transformed into independent thinkers who understand what's happening in the world. We know our words matter."

For more information about the Mendoza Debate Society at Lee College, contact Ganakos at jganakos@lee.edu or 281.425.6502.