



Guide to the Debate Team Records, 1903 - 1981 (bulk 1948-1976)

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Summary

Collection Title:

Debate Team records, 1903-1981, bulk 1948-1976

Creator:

Duke University. University Archives

Abstract:

The Duke University Debate Team was formed around 1897 at Trinity College (now Duke University). The Debate Team records include a constitution, minutes, correspondence, season summaries, debate topic announcements, debate match announcements, fliers, member lists, petition to join Tau Kappa Alpha (now Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha), a research paper, certificates, photographs, memorabilia, newsletters, clippings, and scrapbooks. Major subjects include Trinity College history, Duke University students, political activity, student groups, debate, opinions about the Cold War, freedom of speech, the Speech Association of American (now the Speech Communication Association), the 1954-1955 Debate Team conflict, and Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha. Materials range in date from 1903 to 1981 (bulk 1948-1976). English.

Extent:

2 Linear Feet

Physical Location:

For current information on the location of these materials, please consult University Archives, Duke University.

Language:

English.

Collection ID:

UA.31.12.0003

Permalink:

<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/uadebate/>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Debate Team Records, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

Contains materials pertaining to the Duke University Debate Team, founded around 1897 at Trinity College (now Duke University). Includes extensive coverage and correspondence relating to the 1954-1955 Debate Team Controversy on the topic of the United States extending diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China. Scrapbooks include photographs, clippings, correspondence, and memorabilia. Materials range in date from 1903 to 1981 (bulk 1948-1976).

Biographical/Historical

The Duke University Debate Team was formed around 1897 at Trinity College (now Duke University). The team hosted many tournaments against regional colleges and universities, and traveled to compete in regional and national events. English Professor Joseph C. Wetherby was the longtime coach of the team, from about 1947 until 1976. Wetherby was also an officer in the Speech Association of America (now the Speech Communication Association). Under Professor Wetherby's direction, the Duke University Debate Team won state, regional, and national honors.

In 1954, the Speech Association of America announced a national topic that would test Duke University's tradition of academic freedom: "Resolved: That the United States should extend diplomatic recognition to the Communist government of China." In preparation for competition, Edwin Chapman, Jr., a Duke University freshman from Newport News, Va., wrote his congressman, Representative Edward J. Robeson, Jr., requesting information on the topic. Robeson promptly replied, expressing amazement "that such a topic ... was even seriously considered by any group of persons who are normally intelligent and responsibly informed." He advised Chapman not to debate the positive position "as quotations from your statements may embarrass you for the rest of your life." Additionally, the congressman requested the names of the Debate Club faculty advisor at Duke and the members of the National Debating Council.

Shortly following that correspondence, Professor Wetherby warned his fellow coaches of possible trouble with the debate topic in the regional newsletter of Tau Kappa Alpha, the national forensic honor society. Before long, the Associated Press had reported the Duke incident along with a growing nationwide controversy. The biggest story concerned President Eisenhower being questioned about directives from the Secretaries of the Army and Navy forbidding the teams at West Point and Annapolis from debating the topic.

In support of uncensored discussion, Professor Wetherby appeared on a "See It Now" television show with Wayne C. Eubank of the University of New Mexico, President of Tau Kappa Alpha. Immediately after the program, Wetherby began receiving mostly favorable letters and telegrams from throughout the country. The president of Duke University, A. Hollis Edens, understood the significance of the issue, and did not interfere with either the student group or its faculty advisor. The Speech Association of American ultimately retained the debate topic and students participated in the national competition with no major conflicts.

Other events in team history during the 1960s include a May 1960 appearance on the nationally-televised "College Bowl." A subset of the Debate Team competed on the show, winning against Antioch College and Michigan State University. In 1964, two Duke University Debate Team members went to the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, Ga. to debate with prisoners on the topics of "Resolved: that the federal government should guarantee an opportunity for higher education to all qualified high school graduates." In 1966, the team won the national collegiate championship, after sixteen rounds of debates against Butler University and Vanderbilt University. Duke University also had an all-women debate team for a brief time.

The Duke University chapter of Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, the intercollegiate forensics honor society, was established around 1916. The honor society is devoted to the ideals of public speaking and forensics excellence. Membership in the honor society allows Duke University to participate in elite competitions.

As of 2003, the Debate Team (now Duke Debate) is active at Duke University.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

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Acquisition Information

Gift; 1976-1982.

Processing Information

Processed by Emily Glenn

Completed February 2003

Encoded by Jill Katte, August 2003

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Related Materials

Related Material

Joseph C. Wetherby papers. University Archives, Duke University. Speaker and Gavel [serial publication of Tau Kappa Alpha]. Periodicals, Duke University.

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Names and Subjects

- Freedom of speech -- United States
- Forensics (Public speaking) -- Societies, etc.
- Debates and debating -- United States
- Cold War -- Public Opinion
- Duke University. Debate Team
- Duke University -- Students -- Political activity
- Duke University -- Students -- Societies, etc.
- Delta Sigma Rho --Tau Kappa Alpha -- History
- Speech Communication Association
- Tau Kappa Alpha -- History

Collection Inventory

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Results and scores, 1952, undated	Box 1 > Folder 4
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Correspondence, general, 1955-1980	Box 1 > Folder 6
Correspondence, with alumni, 1960-1969	Box 1 > Folder 7
Correspondence, with alumni, 1970-1979	Box 1 > Folder 8
Debate topics, 1953-1973	Box 1 > Folder 9
Debate Team Controversy, 1954-1955	Box 1 > Folder 10
Petition to Tau Kappa Alpha, ca. 1915	Box 2 > Folder 11
Tau Kappa Alpha, Duke chapter records, 1948-1976	Box 2 > Folder 12
Member lists, 1948-1950	Box 2 > Folder 13

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General publicity, 1975	Box 2 > Folder 16
Photographs, ca. 1957, ca. 1961	Box 2 > Folder 17
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Duke Debate Team newsletter, 1968-1976	Box 2 > Folder 19
Clippings, 1927, 1948-1950, 1961-1976	Box 2 > Folder 20
Clippings, 1954-1955	Box 2 > Folder 21
Clippings, undated	Box 2 > Folder 22
Debate Team Controversy, research paper by student Elizabeth Molsen, 1981	Box 2 > Folder 23
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