

Bergen Community College
Spring 2009 Speech Competition on Contemporary Global Issues

Project Report

Summary of the Activity

On Tuesday, April 14, 2009, 50 students participated in the Spring 2009 Speech Competition, held during the club hour. Speakers' themes were drawn from the United Nations Millennial Development Goals and other contemporary global issues. Speakers were judged by thirty-two faculty members, administrators and staff representing 7 college departments, the Department of Student Life, the Budget Office and the College Bookstore. Two Directors of the Bergen Community College Foundation also judged. An awards ceremony, held on April 23rd, was attended by 65 students and their guests, President Ryan, Student Life Vice President Raymond Smith, the Chair of the Department of Communication, Elin Schikler, and members of the faculty. Bob Dill, the Chairman of the Bergen Community College Foundation Board of Directors, and Lou Weiss, a Foundation Director, presented \$1000 in awards to the outstanding speakers. All participants received certificates of recognition. The College Bookstore donated two \$25 gift certificates. The competition was funded by grants from the Center for the Study of Intercultural Understanding and the Center for Instructional Research and Development.

Organization and Publicity

The competition was advertised to students on posters in the Student Center and on bulletin boards throughout the campus. Personal email invitations were sent to all student government officers, student ambassadors, and club presidents. The competition was advertised to all full-time and part-time faculty members in emails and fliers. The email asked that they nominate candidates as well as announce the competition to students. Emails were sent to the Honors Faculty and club advisors, requesting that they nominate candidates. All students who were nominated were interviewed by the competition director prior to the competition. Judges were recruited from the Department of Communication faculty, Honors Faculty, and the invited Foundation directors, faculty and administrators.

Results

Students were asked to fill out a confidential survey after the competition; 75% returned them. Many were also interviewed at some point. They all were enthusiastic about the experience, and were pleased and proud that they had participated:

84% reported that they had more confidence in their ability to communicate in formal situations after speaking in the competition;

100% reported they thought the competition was a very (76%) or somewhat (24%) worthwhile experience

91% said they would do this again; 9% said they would do this again for extra credit

75% participated for the recognition or reward; 25% for extra credit

The judges were asked to fill out a confidential survey immediately after the competition; 94% returned them using pre-addressed envelopes. All rated this as a positive learning experience for the students; most rated it as "excellent." Most judges thought the competition should be open to all students; 2 thought participation should be limited. All thought this was a desirable extracurricular activity for faculty to be involved in. Several judges wrote or told me that they appreciated seeing the students in this setting. There were 4 or 5 speakers and 2 judges in most of the 12 competition rooms. In one room, only one student showed up. An analysis of the raw scores showed there was a high degree of inter-judge reliability.

Student Participation

Participation in the event has been higher than anticipated: 50 students participated in the Spring 2009 competition, and 49 participated in the Fall 2008. This is high for an event of this kind. The initial forecast for the first competition was that 20 would be a good number; the competition would have run with as few as 10 students.

Attrition at events like this can run as high as 40%. The attrition in 2008 was lower than anticipated, just 5%. The attrition rate in 2009 was 27% (69 students had signed up). In an effort to find out the reasons for the no-shows, students who had signed up but did not participate were surveyed. The main reasons were:

Conflict with work schedule

Too much other schoolwork

Didn't feel prepared

Just didn't feel like it the morning of the competition. (Several students told me they later regretted not making the effort.)

The best avenue for student recruitment, other than students currently enrolled in speech communication, was through nominations by Honors Faculty. Students felt honored to be invited to speak.

Recommendations

1. The competition was held in 10 classrooms in 2 different buildings during a 1-hour time frame. Over 80 people had to get to their assigned rooms, get settled and ready to speak or judge. This spring, two student aides helped direct participants to their rooms, and handed out materials. Additional support is needed on the day of the competition to guide people to rooms, answer questions, and register students. The competition requires additional support in the rooms located in the main building.
2. Each room had 4 or 5 speakers and 2 judges. For many first-time judges, this is the first time they are seeing the ballots. The logistics require more administrative support. Additional help from student aides or other administrative staff is recommended to prepare and hand out judges' information packets, direct judges and students to the right place, act as timekeepers and collect ballots. The department's secretary provided the only administrative support. She did an outstanding job in helping when she could, and worked several late nights and the days of the competition and awards ceremony. However, this help was at the expense of some of her other responsibilities.
3. The goal is to pair experienced and new judges when possible. This was not always possible in the past two competitions. But the more times we hold the competition, the more experienced judges will be available.
4. The awards ceremony was attended by over 60 students and guests in addition to President Ryan and other senior administrators. Public Relations could help plan and publicize the event, and design the program, for a more professional look. Student aides could be hired to sign in students and hand out name tags. The ceremony would run more smoothly if the presenters knew which students were in attendance and the awards were put in that order.
5. There should be more advertising to faculty. This could be additional letters and fliers emailed to them, as well as fliers distributed during faculty conferences. The coordinator of the competition could give brief announcements and updates at division or department meetings, or could visit individual classrooms. Faculty members, especially Honors faculty, should be encouraged more directly to nominate students.
6. There should be more publicity directed to students. The student newspaper could assign a reporter and photographer to cover the competition, writing articles before and after. There could be a series of posters during the semester.
7. There should be more publicity outside the college. There was a strong suggestion to follow a student from preparation to finish, possibly as part of a recruitment video. That is still good idea.

8. There should be a photographer at the competition and the awards ceremony, so professional photographs can accompany the press releases.
9. There should be a systematic survey of student participants, ascertaining reactions to the competition.
10. There should be at least 3 judges in each competition room, primarily to show faculty and administrative support and to raise the appearance of a more professional setting. Faculty members should be encouraged to volunteer to judge.
11. Media classes could be involved in recording the competition. Broadcasting classes could arrange to interview the winners, and the coordinator, for a tape on the competition. Media Technologies could arrange for streaming video on the College's web site.
12. The college's web site should be employed to publicize the competition. The home page can include information about the competition, soliciting speakers and judges. The faculty home page can ask faculty to nominate students and volunteer to judge. There should be a web site banner about the competition. The college's electronic sign could publicize the event.
13. We should consider having the competition in two rounds. Winners of the first round would speak 2 days later, in a larger forum. Overall winners would be selected from this group. The main disadvantage is the difficulty of finding judges who are free for the 2 hours needed to hear the top 10 speakers.

Some of these recommendations can be easily implemented by the coordinator, while others would require support from Public Relations and other administrative offices. For the Spring 2010 Competition, I will be requesting early help from the Department of Student Life, to hire student aides, and Public Relations, to coordinate the many activities they can help with.

Submitted by:

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Date

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