March 13, 2020

To the 2020 National Debate Tournament qualifiers, coaches, and judges:

On March 11, 2020, the National Debate Tournament (NDT) Committee voted unanimously against pursuing an online NDT this year.  The Committee took this action following the unanimous vote by the Board of Trustees (Trustees) to cancel the 2020 NDT scheduled to take place at James Madison University (JMU) on March 26-30. Hosting the tournament as planned presented health concerns to our community due to the potential spread of COVID-19 and was becoming logistically untenable. In the aftermath of the Trustees’ vote, JMU has since canceled campus events. We would like to thank Dr. Mike Davis and all of the debaters, staff and administration at JMU for their hard work in planning this year’s NDT.

It is not lost on the Committee that this is the first time in the tournament’s 74-year history that the National Tournament will not be held. For the students who have spent years preparing, as well as the coaches who have worked tirelessly to shepherd their debaters to an NDT berth, our thoughts are with you.  Your disappointment and frustration are as agonizing as are powerful and compelling. This situation forces us to reconsider our approach. While the Committee has faced travel bans for other reasons, we have yet to find a sufficient solution.  This letter explains the reasoning behind this difficult decision and outlines, in brief, a potential solution should the community be faced with such an event in the future.

The Committee believed it prudent to consider all options – including virtual ones – given the stakes of cancellation. The rationale for the Committee’s unanimous decision was motivated by a number of factors. First, the speed and fluidity of the unfolding institutional responses to COVID-19 make planning incredibly difficult, even for an online version of the NDT. In the hour between the deadline for the Director’s survey and the NDT Committee conference call, several additional colleges and universities restricted access to campus and transitioned to online instruction. Given the number of administrative policy changes implemented since our March 10 conference call to discuss COVID-19, the Committee felt it was impossible to guarantee a stable pool of teams and judges over the next two weeks for an online NDT on the original dates.

Second, changing institutional environments led the Committee to believe that we could not adequately plan for contingencies that would likely emerge. With campus access uncertain, we could envision students unable to access the technology required to participate; partners might not be able to debate from the same room; judges might not be able to find childcare to allow them to judge; etc. Most importantly, the possibility of unforeseen complications as the virus continues to spread led us to believe we could not maintain control of enough of the variables involved to host those debates at the high standard for which the NDT is known.

Third, based on the surveys of the NDT-qualified students and directors, the NDT Committee felt it was the will of the community to not host the NDT online. Of the students who completed the survey, more than 70% indicated that they did not want to participate in an online NDT. In the face of such an emphatic response from the qualifiers, the Committee felt hosting an online tournament under the auspices of the National Debate Tournament would be inappropriate.

Further, at the time of the Committee’s phone call, survey data confirmed that only 28 teams were committed to participating in an online version of the NDT. Several of those teams were already impacted by closures after responding the survey, and the Committee anticipates many more teams would be forced to bow out between now and the tournament. The total number of rounds, power matching, and elimination rounds would all be altered significantly from the Standing Rules of the National Debate Tournament and its typical format. Moreover, the pronounced trepidation on the part of students, regarding competing online, is palpable.  The Committee came to a consensus that even were we to overcome the logistical challenges of such a tournament, the end result would, in truth, bear little resemblance to the NDT.

For these reasons, we concluded that we should not offer an online tournament to replace this year’s National Debate Tournament under the NDT banner. In light of these unprecedented events, the Committee believes we need to better prepare for future unforeseen emergencies. The Committee unanimously approved going forward with research and testing of alternatives to in-person debates. This will include testing through a series of online practice debates. To be clear, the NDT plans to be a fully in-person event going forward. In-person NDTs have already been approved for 2021 and 2022. The Committee does not believe that future NDTs should shift to an online format. The Committee is in agreement that the NDT is insufficiently prepared for other prospective unforeseen events. Tested, proven online debate capabilities may provide us with a “Plan B” in cases where barriers such as travel bans and pandemics make impossible for some, or all, teams to participate in the tournament.

In the wake of the first restrictions precipitated by COVID-19, Will Repko was charged with heading the Tech Platform Task Force designed to practice test possible online alternatives to in-person debate. That task force will continue its narrow efforts to prepare for exigent circumstances. Our survey results indicated positive interest in the community in testing online debate. Any potential contingency plan should have input from those who will be impacted by it the greatest -- the debate community. Please contact Will Repko at repkowil@msu.edu if you would like to learn more or participate. The tests will be free of cost for participants.

The NDT Committee pursued an online tournament to replace this year's National Debate Tournament in an attempt to preserve something of the competition for all the students and coaches that worked so hard to qualify. In the end, we found it unworkable and undesirable in light of circumstances surrounding COVID-19. We ask that teams strongly consider participating in the online practice debate tests to help us establish viable contingencies to ensure that future access to the National Debate Tournament will not be disrupted.

To the many of you who are disappointed by the 2020 NDT’s cancellation, especially the seniors whose careers came to an abrupt end, please know that the NDT Committee understands how unique and important the in-person NDT experience is to debaters and programs. While the reality of this crisis is new, our mission is not -- the Committee is committed to providing the best quality national debate tournament experience possible. You may rest assured in the knowledge that the Committee is taking action to celebrate your seasons and careers. We will have more information available on our plans to honor the tournament qualifiers in the coming days.

Sincerely,

The Members of the National Debate Tournament Committee

Adrienne F. Brovero, Chair, District 7

David Cram Helwich, District 4

Glen Frappier, District 2

Ryan Galloway, District 6

Matt Gerber, AFA-South

John Katsulas, AFA-East

Joel Lemuel, District 1

Will Repko, District 5

LaTonya K. Starks, AFA-Central

Adam Symonds, AFA-West

John Turner, District 8

Matt Vega, District 3