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Rikers Inmates Best Columbia Students in Debate

Proponents say debate teaches skills that help inmates prepare for life beyond bars



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Jack Moussignac, left, and Kori Jackson before their debate against two Columbia University students. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By
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At the Rikers Island jail complex Monday evening, two pairs of young men, all in suits and ties, sat facing each other in front of an audience of about 50 inmates.

The men—two jail inmates and two Columbia University undergraduates—were participating in what has become an increasingly common event: inmates debating against college students.

Proponents say debate benefits inmates because it provides structure to academic programming and teaches skills that help them prepare for life beyond bars.

Last October, a prison debate team out of Eastern New York Correctional Facility in Ulster County, N.Y., [bested the debate team of Harvard University](#). Last month, they [won against the U.S. Military Academy](#) at West Point.

At Rikers, Columbia students Adrian Ivashkiv and Arnold Lee, both 20 years old, debated inmates Kori Jackson, 22, and Jack Moussignac, 35. Both teams were told the topic in advance, but didn't know which side they were arguing until a coin toss immediately before the event began.

The Columbia students, who won the coin toss, chose to argue for the elimination of plea bargains, which they called fundamentally unjust. Prosecutors threaten the harshest sentences possible, which makes defendants choose to plead guilty to a crime they may not have committed, they reasoned.

"Plea bargaining operates with a fundamental asymmetry of information," said Mr. Ivashkiv, citing a study that says prosecutors offer plea bargains when a case is weak.

Messrs. Jackson and Moussignac argued that pleas were necessary, and defendants deserved the right to choose.

"You eliminate plea bargaining, you're essentially forcing the defendant to risk his life with a jury of 12," Mr. Moussignac said.

Monday evening's event, at the jail complex's 850-bed George R. Vierno Center, was the championship round of a several-week tournament that initially pitted teams of Rikers inmates against each other.

The event was also the latest partnership between higher-education institutions and prisons or jails that centered around debate. Advocates of the work say debate gives inmates and college students—often young people of similar ages, but of vastly different backgrounds—a forum in which they can interact with each other on somewhat equal footing.

In a program in Washington state, teams combine inmates and college students instead of pitting them against each other, said Denise Kammers, a corrections education coordinator.

Through the Prison Debate Initiative of Speak Inc., a nonprofit in Vermont, students from Vermont Law School and the University of Vermont teach debate and public speaking to inmates at two facilities, said Jessica Bullock, Speak's founder.

The Rikers debate was inspired by news reports, led by The Wall Street Journal's account, of the matchup between Harvard and Eastern.



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Jack Moussignac makes his argument. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Initially, 16 Rikers teams competed against each other. Debate topics in these rounds included raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 and banning all personal firearms except hunting rifles.

For the New York City Department of Correction, Monday's debate was a small part of increased educational programming on Rikers, to which city officials have devoted \$12 million this fiscal year. Such programming is meant to help with re-entry and reduce violence at the jail complex, which has struggled with what some have called a culture of violence and is currently under the [supervision of a federal court-appointed monitor](#).

“The worst thing in the jail are inmates with nothing productive to do,” said James Walsh, the Department of Correction’s deputy commissioner for adult programming and community partnerships.

The format of Monday’s debate, a style called American parliamentary, emphasizes broader philosophy and logic over exact sources and studies, said Mr. Ivashkiv, who is studying economics and philosophy at Columbia.

The students prepared for the debate as they typically would, with one exception.

“[The inmates] don’t have access to the Internet, so my partner and I have tried to be fair by not going and researching different studies,” said Mr. Ivashkiv.

Messrs. Jackson and Moussignac are awaiting trial at Rikers. City records show Mr. Jackson, charged with assault, has been at Rikers since September, and Mr. Moussignac, charged with criminal possession of a weapon, since August. Neither man has been convicted of that crime.

At the end of the contest, judge Mark Andriola collected slips of paper from the seven judges, who were Rikers staffers and former collegiate debaters.

“On a 4-3 decision, the winner of the first ever GRVC debate tournament is GRVC,” said Mr. Andriola, a former college debater who had coached the Rikers men.

An audience of about 50 inmates in khaki uniforms, who had previously sat with rapt attention, hooted and hollered.

After the debate, the two inmates reflected on their strategy.

“Instead of using facts, we used our experience,” said Mr. Moussignac. The men had prepared for the debates seriously, and asked staff to look things up on the Internet for them. “There are a lot of gems in here,” he added.

Mr. Jackson nodded, looking around the room. “A lot of gems.”