



DEBATING FOR DEMOCRACY 2013-14 LETTERS TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL COMPETITION GUIDELINES

OVERVIEW: Debating for Democracy (D4D)TM is a distinctive campus-based co-curricular program that represents the mission of Project Pericles (www.projectpericles.org) in action. On each campus, Periclean students research, develop, and advocate their opinions and positions on current public policy issues. The primary goal of D4D is to inspire and encourage all participants to become successful and resourceful advocates in their community.

ELIGIBILITY: In order to be eligible to participate in the Letters to an Elected Official Competition, a student must a) be a full-time undergraduate at one of the Periclean campuses; b) be a freshman, sophomore, or junior as defined by their college or university; and c) write and mail a letter to an elected official. **Students selected to participate in the competition must be a freshman, sophomore, or junior during the Spring 2014 semester and be returning to their campus for the 2014-15 year.**

SELECTION PROCESS: Students must submit their letter to their Project Pericles Program Director by Wednesday, February 12, 2014. The Program Director will review each letter and select the four strongest letters to forward to Project Pericles. Each college must email their package (in Word) of up to four letters to Jan Liss jan.liss@projectpericles.org by 5 PM EST on Wednesday, February 19. Please note you are welcome to set internal deadlines that are earlier if you have scheduling conflicts. The names of all of the students who worked on each letter must be sent to Project Pericles with the **two students** who played the leading roles in preparing each letter clearly identified. All letters should be mailed by the students to the appropriate elected official by February 19.

A committee consisting of people with significant experience in public policy will review the submitted letters using the criteria below. Based on this review, Project Pericles staff will select the five winning teams. We will announce the five winning teams by mid-March.

JUDGING CRITERIA: The evaluation of each letter will rest on the students' success at conducting high quality policy analysis and research; clarity of presentation; and adherence to the rules detailed on pages 3-4. The five letters that do the best job of meeting the following criteria will be selected as finalists and win awards:

1) Policy Analysis and Research: The most important aspect of the letter is the quality of the analysis and research, which determines 65% of the evaluation. The evaluation will rest on each team's success at identifying a federal or state policy problem in their letter, proposing a solution to the problem they identified, and conducting and interpreting research to bolster their letter.

- Does the letter identify one federal or state public policy issue and explain how this issue impacts the students and their community?
- Does the letter recommend one legislative solution? Is the legislative solution feasible economically and politically?
- Does the letter contain logical judgment and analysis?
- Does the proposal demonstrate the use of primary and/or secondary resources to bolster their argument?

- Does the letter demonstrate an understanding of the historical context of the problem and solution being discussed?

2) Clarity of Presentation: Although the ability of the students to prepare a letter that meets all of the criteria discussed in the previous section is important, the ability to write a clear and compelling letter will also be considered. In addition to a logical argument, persuasive letters frequently include a compelling narrative about how the issue impacts the authors or other constituents. This section is worth 35% of the total evaluation.

- Is the letter effective in communicating the significance of the problem and the solution?
- Do the authors offer a compelling narrative? Please keep in mind that legislative staff members are reviewing hundreds of pieces of mail each day. Explaining the personal significance of an issue for the authors or other constituents and making an emotional or values based appeal can be part of writing a persuasive letter.
- Do the authors make a compelling case as constituents? Is there a tie-in to either the authors or other constituents from the congresspersons district?
- Is the written material clear and grammatically correct?

AWARD:

- Project Pericles will provide a \$500 award to each of the top five student teams. Each college or university is eligible to receive only one award. In consultation with Project Pericles, the students can use this money to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and workshops. Teams that have won this award in the past have travelled to Washington, D.C. or to their state capitol to meet with members of Congress or their legislators and their staffs to discuss the issues raised in their letters.
- Project Pericles staff will work with the winning teams to develop their advocacy and education activities. Student should be aware that they are expected to carry out significant activities to advance their issue during the academic year following the competition. Only students who are committed to carrying out significant advocacy and educational activities in the 2014-15 academic year should participate in the competition.

IMPORTANT DATES:

February 12, 2014 — All letters to an elected official are due to the Project Pericles Program Director. Program Directors may set an earlier deadline. Students should consult with their Program Director to confirm this deadline.

February 19, 2014 — Each college or university may submit up to four letters to an elected official to Project Pericles by 5:00 PM EST. A copy of the letter must also be mailed to the appropriate U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Senator or State Representative.

Mid-March 2014 — A panel of experts will review the letters and Project Pericles will announce the five winning teams.

ADDITIONAL TIPS, GUIDELINES, AND RESOURCES

“Letters are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.” American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Many federal and state policy issues are suitable for this letter. Possible issues include:

*Campaign Finance * Climate Change * Federal Budget Deficit * Funding for Higher Education (Grants and Loans) * Gun Control * Immigration * K-12 Education * Pension Reform * U.S. Involvement in the Middle East*

In the letter, students must identify one national or state public policy problem to be addressed and analyze how this problem impacts them personally, people in their community, people in their state, and, if a federal issue, people across the United States. In the letter, students must recommend at least one legislative solution. The students may recommend an original legislative solution (fund a NASA mission to Jupiter) or they can support or oppose a portion of a bill that is currently pending before Congress or their state legislature. In both cases, the students must support their solution with data and examples from at least two outside sources (books, journals, reliable internet sources) and discuss why their solution is better than other options. ***All outside research must be properly cited.***

Letter Writing Guidelines:

- The letter must be on a state or federal issue. Letters on local issues will not be eligible. The majority of local issues are also important federal and state issues.
- The body of the letter may not exceed **1200 words** (excluding footnotes).
- A copy of the letter must be mailed to each student’s elected official by February 19, 2014.
- Students should identify their elected official and their address. Since the authors will be urging their elected official to support or oppose a legislative solution, they will want to select the official who will be most responsive to their letter. The following website will help them identify their federal or state elected officials. <http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml>
- The letter must begin with the phrase "Dear Representative (last name)" or Dear Senator (last name)" and be addressed correctly.
- The letter should begin with a sentence that tells the elected official exactly what the student wants them to do. The first sentence in the letter on page 5 provides an example.
- The letter should contain the student’s mailing address so that the elected official can confirm them as a constituent and the elected official can write back.
- The students must sign and date their letter.
- All primary and secondary sources used in preparing the proposal must be cited.

Eligibility:

- Two or more students **must** work on the letter.

- Students who were finalists (meaning they received an award) in a previous year are not eligible to participate.
- No student can co-author more than one submitted letter.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

The following resources will assist the student in writing their letter:

- A letter written by students at Swarthmore College that was selected as the winner at the 2013 D4D Legislative Hearing appears on pages 5-7. **This letter is an excellent model.** The five letters that were selected for the 2012 legislative hearing can be viewed at <http://www.projectpericles.org>
- THOMAS was launched in January of 1995, at the inception of the 104th Congress. The website provides detailed federal legislative information to the public. <http://thomas.loc.gov/>
- C-SPAN is a private, non-profit company, created in 1979 by the cable television industry as a public service. Its mission is to provide public access to the political process. The C-SPAN website contains a wealth of information including video of Congressional hearings related to a number of federal policy issues. <http://www.c-span.org>
- National Journal Group is the leading source of nonpartisan reporting on the current political environment and emerging policy trends. <http://www.nationaljournal.com/njonline/>
- The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. The NCSL website provides research and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. <http://www.ncsl.org/>

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

A Letter Concerning the Parental Notification Section of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act to State Senator Edwin B. Erickson (R-PA)

Date: February 4, 2013

From: Amanda Epstein and Alexandra Willingham

The Honorable Edwin B. Erickson
Senate Box 203026
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3026

Dear Senator Erickson,

We write to urge you to advocate in the Pennsylvania General Assembly for the repeal of the parental notification section of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act, which unduly burdens minors seeking abortions. Parental notification is unreasonable for minors who live in unsafe conditions, such as with a violent or sexually-abusive parent. The judicial bypass provision, intended to protect minors in such situations, fails to accomplish its goal and many Pennsylvania courts are unready to support minors seeking to obtain a judicial bypass order. Access to abortions is essential for teenage women to attain their educational and life goals; a young pregnancy makes it more difficult for women to enhance their socioeconomic status and those of their children. Limiting access to contraception reinforces the poverty cycle. Teen pregnancy and its socioeconomic consequences are issues that have a significant presence in our local community; the city of Chester, where we both volunteer, has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the state.ⁱ

Approximately 7.5 percent of American women aged 15 to 19 become pregnant every year. The U.S., in fact, has the highest teenage pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world.ⁱⁱ However, teenage mothers are more likely to “have low levels of education, employment, and earnings, and high levels of dependence on public assistance” than their older counterparts.ⁱⁱⁱ For example, only forty-one percent of teen mothers obtain a high school degree, in comparison with sixty-one percent of their female peers who did not give birth as teenagers. Teenage parenthood is also detrimental for the child. Children born to adolescent mothers, who often receive inadequate prenatal care, are at greater risk for developmental disorders, neglect, aggressive behavior, poor cognitive ability and academic performance, to name a few consequences.^{iv} It is important that Pennsylvania avoid amplifying these effects by effectively forcing teenagers to complete their pregnancy when they do not wish to do so.

Some defend the parental notification requirement as protecting pregnant teenagers from the health effects of an abortion. However, recent scientific research shows that an abortion administered by a medical professional is one of the safest surgical procedures known to modern medicine.^v A teenager who carries her baby to term is much more likely to suffer complications during pregnancy and labor than if she obtains an abortion.^{vi} Pregnancy causes drastic physiological changes, putting heavy strain on all major organs; and pregnancy-related health risks are much higher for pregnant teenagers than for adult women.^{vii} Additionally, studies conducted over the past two decades have shown no difference in psychological health between teenagers who obtained abortions and their peers.^{viii}

Despite the benefits of making abortions accessible to pregnant teens, services are hard for young women to obtain in Pennsylvania, even though the procedure was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court.^{ix} The same court stated in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) that a judicial bypass provision was an essential component of any parental consent or notification law.^x However, judicial bypass in Pennsylvania is not providing the requisite aid to pregnant teens. Going to court to obtain permission for an abortion is threatening enough; a teenager may be intimidated or embarrassed about revealing intimate details about her sex life and family or she may have to miss school to make her appointment, thus risking losing confidentiality.

Even ignoring all these obstacles, the Pennsylvania courts are far from helpful. A 1999 study by the American Bar Foundation found that, of the sixty judicial districts in the state, only eight could provide complete and accurate information about the requirements of parental notification and judicial bypass under the Abortion Control Act.^{xi} Of the other fifty-two courts called by an anonymous researcher, many recommended contacting legal aid services for help, even though those federally-funded programs are prohibited from providing lawyers to help with abortion cases.^{xii} Only twenty-one county courts correctly recommended contacting abortion providers directly for help with judicial bypass (though they failed to give information about the actual law), the rest could only suggest looking in the Yellow Pages. Multiple court administrators even turned nasty, lecturing the caller (presuming they were a pregnant teen) about not contacting her parents or saying “[an abortion is] a very stupid thing to do and you’d have to live with it for the rest of your life.”^{xiii}

Even if a teenager has the courage and resources to navigate these obstacles to successfully apply for judicial bypass, there are still other complications. First, the teenager may be faced with a conservative judge, who does not support abortion, disguising that opinion (contradictory to law) with the judgment that the minor is not responsible enough to make the abortion decision on her own. Second, if the bypass is granted, the convoluted process leading up to the decision will have markedly delayed the performance of the abortion, a procedure which becomes both more expensive and more dangerous later into the pregnancy.^{xiv}

It is important to note that in no way do we wish to advocate for abortion as a primary form of contraception. We do argue, however, that access to abortions as a last and necessary resort must be available to the young women who will most suffer from the negative consequences of an unwanted pregnancy. We believe that as an esteemed senator, you are in a unique position to better the lives of the women in the state of Pennsylvania. We therefore urge you to consider our proposition to reverse the parental notification and judicial bypass law of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act.

Sincerely,

Amanda Epstein ‘15
Alexandra Willingham ‘15

Swarthmore College
500 College Avenue
Swarthmore, PA 19081

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- ⁱ Thurber, Emilia. “The Perfect Storm.” Global Health Forum. <http://www.globalhealthforum.org/the-perfect-storm.php>. Accessed January 10, 2013.
- ⁱⁱ Hoffman, Saul D. and Rebecca A. Maynard. Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2008. p. 1
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid 54.
- ^{iv} Teen Parent Child Care Quality Improvement Project, Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy. “The Children of Teen Parents: Fact Sheet.” Pub. April 15, 2005. http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourceFiles/resourceFile_78.pdf. Accessed January 20, 2013.
- ^v Bartlett, Linda, et al. “Risk Factors for Legal Induced Abortion-Related Mortality in the United States.” 103(4) Obstet. & Gynec. 729, 729 (2004). Print.
- ^{vi} Grimes, David A. “Estimation of Pregnancy-Related Mortality Risk by Pregnancy Outcome, United States, 1991 to 1999.” 194 Am. J. Obstet. & Gynec. 92, 93 (2006).
- ^{vii} Cowett, Allison, B. Adams, et al. “Brief of Plaintiffs-Appellees.” The Hope Clinic for Women LTD.; No. 112704. Supreme Court of Ill. 18 July 2012. Print.
- ^{viii} Schwab Zabin, Laurie, M. B. Hirsch and M. R. Emerson. “When urban adolescents choose abortion: effects on education, psychological status and subsequent pregnancy.” Family Planning Perspectives (1989): 248-255. Print.
- ^{ix} Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S.113 (1973).
- ^x Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833 (1992)
- ^{xi} Silverstein, Helena. “Road Closed: Evaluating the Judicial Bypass Provision of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act.” Law and Social Inquiry. Vol. 73. 1999. Accessed from HeinOnline Jan. 12, 2012. p. 81.
- ^{xii} Ibid 82.
- ^{xiii} Ibid 82, 85.
- ^{xiv} Cowett, Allison, B. Adams, et al. “Brief of Plaintiffs-Appellees.” The Hope Clinic for Women LTD.; No. 112704. Supreme Court of Ill. 18 July 2012. Print.