

● **DebateWatch: Politics, communication without spin**

As in 1996 and 2000, NCA members are invited in 2004 to participate in DebateWatch, a national program sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates that relies on voter education partners such as NCA to inform its members about the program and to encourage their participation.

Through participation in DebateWatch, NCA members can provide students and community members in their own local areas with an opportunity to learn more about the presidential candidates and political issues through face-to-face discussion and dialogue.

Why DebateWatch?

Most studies of 18-25 year-old voters indicate that this age group volunteers more than other generations but votes less. They don't see government as a solution to problems but as the problem. And they fail to see politicians connecting issues to their lives.

While numerous programs are taking place during the 2004 election to reverse the declining numbers of 18-25 year-old voters, DebateWatch has a history of addressing the issue. Research conducted in 1996 and 2000 showed that 18-25 year-olds who participated in DebateWatch were more likely to vote, had increased confidence in their political knowledge, and sought out additional information about candidates and issues. When this

youngest age group of potential voters participates in DebateWatch activities with experienced voters of all ages, they learn even more.

How DebateWatch Works

DebateWatch is a simple program to organize. It involves inviting a group of people to watch one of the national debates and discuss it afterward rather than relying solely on media "spin" to form an opinion. The common practice on college campuses is to invite students, faculty, and community members to a ballroom or a large dining area to watch the debates on large screen televisions and then divide into groups of 8-10 for a discussion led by a trained facilitator—either a student or faculty member.

As soon as the debate ends, the television is turned off and a discussion starts using suggested questions to get the group started. Facilitators ask their own questions and group members are encouraged to raise questions of their own. At the conclusion of the discussion, groups have the option of completing a facilitator's report that is sent to the DebateWatch research center and immediately shared with the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) and the media. The group facilitator's report identifies topics in the debates that ranked as most important to viewers, those that were deemed unimportant or irrelevant, and those that viewers believe require

more discussion or elaboration by the candidates.

Getting Involved

All of the material needed to organize a discussion group is on the CPD website at www.debates.org. Individuals interested in organizing DebateWatch on a college campus also will find a selection of best practices from past years to guide their program. DebateWatch is a natural project for Campus Compact, Rock the Vote, or other youth-oriented get-out-the-vote projects.

Scholarly Opportunities

In addition to helping students understand the political process, DebateWatch provides a research laboratory for scholars either through independent research projects or as part of a research team. The project also provides an opportunity for communication scholars to interact with the media about the debates as well. Anyone interested in participating in a national research team or desirous of more information, may contact **Diana Carlin** at dbcaryl@ku.edu.

More details and updated information about DebateWatch 2004 will appear on the CPD and NCA websites this summer.

*Reported by
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Hope at Luther

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The 2004 Hope at Luther Conference, also known as the NCA Institute for Faculty Development is scheduled for July 19-24, 2004, at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. The 2004 seminars and five distinguished teacher-scholars leading them will be:

- ◆ "Should I or Shouldn't I?" *Moral Reasoning and Communication Ethics*, **Paula Tompkins**, St. Cloud State University.
- ◆ *Communication Theory: Conceptual Foundations of Practical Applications*, **Lynn Turner**, Marquette University.
- ◆ *Media, Culture and Critical Theory*, **James Carey** of Columbia University.
- ◆ *Frontiers in Interpersonal Communication*, **Julia Wood**, University of North Carolina.

- ◆ *Rhetoric: Bodies of Evidence*, **Davis Houck**, Florida State University.

Conference Registration

Registration for the Conference including room, board and amenities is \$675, the same rate as 2003. Registration for commuters, which includes opening and closing dinners, lunches and amenities, is \$425. A \$100 deposit is required to hold your place at the Conference. The easiest way to register is on-line at <http://incachope@luther.edu>. The registration deadline is June 1, 2004. Other questions should be directed to **Alan Lerstrom** at lerstral@luther.edu.

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