



Executive Director Opportunity Guide

www.chicagodebates.org





About Chicago Debates

Chicago Debates seeks to empower Chicago youth with the transformative power of academic debate to find their voice, succeed in college and career, and become leaders in their community. Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the organization was established by a group of business and civic leaders passionate about finding a way to broaden access to debate to students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Since its inception, in partnership with CPS, Chicago Debates has reached as many as 90 Chicago middle and high schools. And at the same time, Chicago Debates has become one of the most competitive policy urban debate leagues in the country and a national model for other urban debate leagues and educational organizations.

Students in Chicago Debates compete in five to six tournaments a year around a nationally selected topic. Tournament participation requires students to conduct research, use evidence, think critically, and synthesize complex ideas to make their arguments. During a normal school year, debate tournaments are held in person, although currently they are being conducted in a hybrid schedule of virtual and in-person events.

Chicago Debates is the largest of the 22 urban policy debate leagues in the country. There are currently 1,100 CPS students participating, across 75 schools. The organization's current strategic plan calls for significant increase in student and school participation in its programs by 2027.

The data is clear. Students who participate in debate are 300% more likely than their peers to graduate high school and 80% more likely to graduate college. Recent peer-reviewed, published studies demonstrate that participation in competitive debate leads to higher GPAs, higher graduation rates, and better college-readiness (based on ACT benchmarks). Debate provides practical preparation for college and career success by building students' critical thinking, research, and communications skills. Debate also uniquely fosters and values creativity, teamwork, compassion, and advocating based on facts and data. Students also learn to understand both sides of—and prepare cogent arguments about—the major social issues of the day. Finally, and possibly most importantly, debate provides a forum through which students may find their voice and inspires students to become leaders.



The Opportunity: Executive Director

The Executive Director is responsible for providing strategic oversight to and overall executive leadership for Chicago Debates. Reporting to an engaged Board of Directors, the selected candidate will provide direction for all organizational affairs in accordance with Chicago Debates's mission as defined by its by-laws, mission statement, guiding principles and policies established and approved by the Board.

Additionally, the Executive Director will be charged with building and nurturing strong relationships with complex key stakeholders, tracking relevant initiatives and trends related to education, mentorship, and youth achievement, and implementing best practices in realizing mission priorities. A key component of the new Executive Director's success will be to grow the organization's budget by working with the new Director of Development to identify new revenue streams, both earned and contributed. The dynamic leader will maintain and strengthen relationships with Chicago Debates's primary partners, including the CPS system it serves, and other community partners, funders, and stakeholders.

Chicago Debates is a strong and stable program that has set the standard for urban debate leagues across the country. It has weathered the last two years remarkably well and now, as it celebrates its 25th anniversary, is at a key point in its lifecycle. The new Executive Director will be stepping in at this key moment when educators, students, volunteers, and the rest of the world seeks to find a "new normal." As Chicago Debates transitions back to in-person debates, there is a unique opportunity to reignite passion around Chicago Debates's mission, vision, and values. The Board expects the Executive Director to navigate Chicago Debates through its next phase by strengthening the program, continuing to expand an overall presence in the educational sector, and increasing funding so that more underrepresented students at more schools may debate.

The Executive Director leads the team from an office in the Chicago Loop. The staff currently includes a Senior Director of Programs, four Program Officers, a Volunteer and Outreach Manager, an Associate Manager, a Director of Development and a Development Associate. Currently the staff works in a hybrid model, both in the office and some from home offices with a large amount of time out of office, engaging with students and coaches, strategic partners, and organizational stakeholders.



Performance Objectives

Under the leadership of a dedicated and passionate Board of Directors, Chicago Debates has pioneered high quality programming and scalable models leading to student success. Developing innovative partnerships and collaborations with individuals and organizations to leverage the impact of Chicago Debates's programs is a priority for the new Executive Director. Through creative leadership and strategic decision-making, the Executive Director will further elevate Chicago Debates's reputation as a community leader and champion for debate, youth, achievement, and education.

Leadership and Management

- ◆ In collaboration with the Board, execute on the strategic plan that was intentionally put on hold during the two years of the pandemic, with a focus on responsibly working towards exclusively in-person debate competitions again, meeting or exceeding stated program and funding objectives, and adhering to budgets and timelines.
- ◆ Identify and implement opportunities for organizational growth that are collaborative. Foster partnership opportunities. Demonstrate "big picture" thinking and an understanding of how the pieces should best fit together to deliver on the organization's mission most effectively.
- ◆ Develop and implement measurable objectives, strategies, budgets, and timelines.
- ◆ Engage the Board, seeking to utilize its expertise and existing personal and professional networks to further the mission and vision of Chicago Debates.
- ◆ Lead, develop, motivate, supervise, and maintain a highly effective, productive, and cohesive staff with both professional/technical expertise and operational talent.
- ◆ Promote and foster an organizational culture that creates, challenges, and sustains a diverse, productive, motivated climate for students, staff, board members, volunteers, partners, and others who are invested in Chicago Debates's mission.

Program Oversight

- ◆ Ensure continued programmatic excellence and quality services that maintain high standards and best practices while supporting and growing program staff.
- ◆ Uphold the commitment to the Board to increase debate's presence within schools while maintaining quality programming.
- ◆ Explore and evaluate program replication, expansion and leveraging, as well as collaboration opportunities, to continually expand upon Chicago Debates's reach and impact.
- ◆ Ensure compliance with federal, state, local, school district and organizational regulations.
- ◆ Monitor program outcomes to make informed decisions on program offerings, direction and delivery.

Performance Objectives

External Relations

- ◆ Serve as an articulate, passionate, and visible spokesperson for Chicago Debates and a face for the program throughout the organization, among peer and collaborating organizations, in philanthropic and industry circles, and in professional organizations, community groups and other entities relevant to Chicago Debates's work and mission.
- ◆ Navigate a large, constantly shifting educational landscape by fostering strong relationships with educational partners, including individual school administrators, peer community groups and school district central leadership.
- ◆ Publicize a resounding case for the transformative impact of Chicago Debates on students and educators.
- ◆ Present compelling messaging about the work of Chicago Debates to ensure consistency and strong positioning in the debate community, with an intentional focus on raising the organization's profile to a broader and wider group of investors and partners.
- ◆ Advocate for debate and actively participate in Chicago Debates tournaments that bring together students, educators, and volunteers to build rapport, trust, and visibility.

Philanthropy

- ◆ Provide executive leadership for philanthropic efforts. Expand and diversify revenue streams. Cultivate a portfolio of personal relationships related to all revenue sources and lead stewardship activities on major fundable initiatives for the organization. Develop and implement fundraising plans that support strategies and priorities adopted by the Board of Directors.
- ◆ Create an overall culture of philanthropy including working in partnership and providing development training and support for the Board of Directors. Increase Board involvement in fundraising and friend-raising, including prospect/donor identification, peer-to-peer outreach, meeting with funders, knowledge exchange and/or donor stewardship.

- ◆ Serve as the Chief Relationship Officer, together with the Director of Programs, for Chicago Debates's most critical partner and funder, CPS.
- ◆ Identify and secure multiyear or long-term funding to grow sustainability, while maintaining current levels of support. The organization's current strategic plan calls for philanthropy to increase to an annual \$2.76 million by 2027 from the current \$1.5 million budget.
- ◆ Work with Board and staff to develop and market opportunities for philanthropic support.

Management and Administration

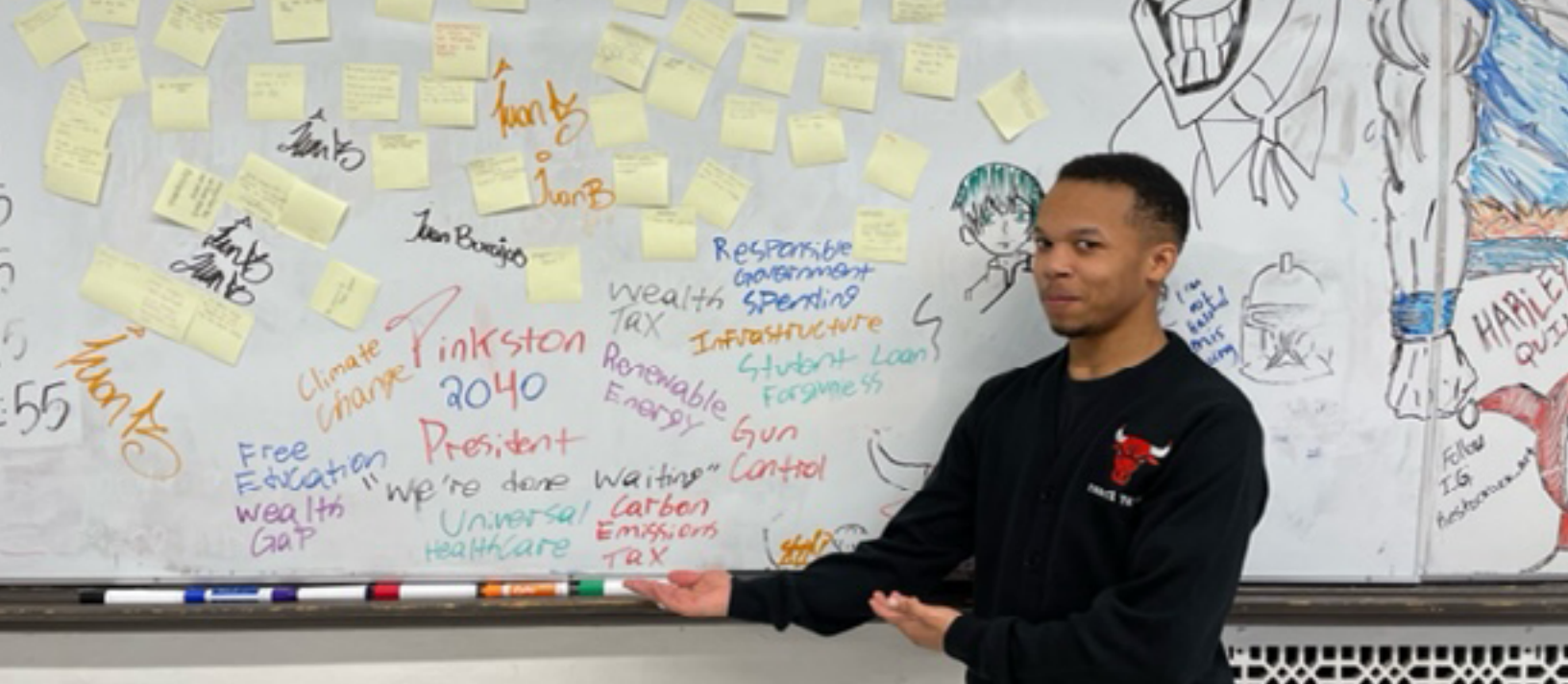
- ◆ Regularly advise the Board members regarding issues and general administration of the organization and alert Board members of any emergency or noteworthy developments as needed.
- ◆ Facilitate collaborative relationships between Chicago Debates team members.
- ◆ Guide the development, preparation, and administration of the budget and ensure that the organization operates within budget guidelines. Regularly monitor budgets, expenses, profit and loss, cash flow, A/R and balance sheet statements, and demonstrate fiscal responsibility and efficient use of all organizational resources.
- ◆ Provide executive-level strategy and accountability for all financial matters, including regular financial reports to the Board.
- ◆ Develop and implement strategic staff growth and succession plans.
- ◆ Guide and implement all operational policies of the organization.

The Qualified Candidate

Chicago Debates is searching for a leader with a strong appreciation and respect for policy debate who is driven to advance enrichment, educational, and growth opportunities for Chicago's young people as they grow into future leaders. The Executive Director must be able to attract and maintain the commitment of educational leaders in order for students and teachers to realize the full benefits of Chicago Debates's programs. The organization's success also depends upon the Executive Director's leadership in ensuring consistent financial support from institutional and individual donors, foundations, and public funds. Candidates who relish the opportunity to advance solid programmatic offerings and securing funding will find this role exciting and engaging. Candidates with a background in leading small organizations, balancing multiple priorities and creatively utilizing resources will be a good fit for this opportunity. The Executive Director must be adept with community partnerships, Board relations, staff leadership, fundraising and fiscal management. A flexible, optimistic, and proactive outlook is essential.

Specific Requirements Include:

- ◆ Passion for Chicago Debates's mission and the community it serves, augmented by demonstrated experience, achievement, and follow-through in similar programmatic and nonprofit service areas.
- ◆ At least 5 years of experience at an organizational leadership level, particularly in a nonprofit organization, educational or related field; at least 2 years managing a team of professionals.
- ◆ Experience with and commitment to the communities that Chicago Debates serves, including CPS and students who have experienced educational inequities.
- ◆ A strong drive to work with youth, specifically in supporting their personal growth, academic development, and future achievement.
- ◆ Proven ability to develop and build a highly productive, effective team by enhancing collegiality and professionalism within the organization and training, mentoring, and retaining staff.
- ◆ Ability and willingness to work closely with an engaged Board to achieve organizational goals.
- ◆ Track record in developing and executing strategies to successfully increase revenue and diversify funding sources. Demonstrated ability to identify, solicit and steward corporate, foundation and individual gifts.
- ◆ Successful history in financial management, stewardship, and developing strategies to increase revenue and control costs.
- ◆ Accomplished background in building strong external relationships with a variety of constituencies, including partner organizations, staff, volunteers, elected officials, business representatives and other stakeholders.
- ◆ Excellent interpersonal, oral, and written communication and presentation skills, with the ability to serve as an advocate and spokesperson for the organization. A confident yet genuine communication style is required.
- ◆ Impact and outcome driven approach to program development.
- ◆ Experience in the areas of youth achievement, youth development or education is preferred.
- ◆ Knowledge or experience in best practices working with large urban school systems is preferred.
- ◆ A Bachelor's degree is required, with relevant advanced training or degree preferred.
- ◆ Experience with middle school, high school, or college debate is preferred.



How To Apply

Compensation will be determined based on experience and skills within the range of \$160,000 - \$175,000. Full-time employees are eligible for health, dental, and vision insurance, PTO, professional development allowance, sick days, and holidays, including a holiday shut-down from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day.

Chicago Debates is an equal opportunity employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, national or ethnic origin, disability, marital status, veteran status, or any other occupationally irrelevant criteria.

To assure confidential tracking of all applicants, no applications will be accepted via email. ALL INQUIRIES WILL BE HELD IN STRICT CONFIDENCE. All candidate submitted materials and credentials will be reviewed for consistency and accuracy. Candidates can expect that KEES will verify employment/academic/background information both in the screening process and for the finalist(s) in a formal background check.

This search is being managed by Laura Weinman, Vice President and Stacy Harker, Consultant at KEES. Questions may be addressed to sharker@kees2success.com.

APPLY HERE

About KEES

KEES (formerly Alford Executive Search) is a nonprofit executive search firm that builds diverse teams and dynamic leaders in the nonprofit and public entity sectors. A woman owned and operated firm, KEES offers a full array of nonprofit consulting services including executive search, leadership development, interim staffing, and HR support. For more information, please visit www.kees2success.com.





More About Academic Debate

Debate teaches the skills of civic engagement and enhances knowledge of important social issues.

Debate engages students in a deliberative, structured process of learning, critical thinking, and dialogue on important and complex public policy issues.

Debate teaches research skills and improves learning. Key activities in academic debate are reading, research, close analysis of complex texts, critical thinking, and evidence-based argumentation. Notably, learning to make arguments supported by textual evidence is central to the Common Core State Standards and reflects the learning approach favored by most colleges.

Debate strengthens communication and critical thinking skills. When students prepare their cases, they must structure their oral arguments logically. To refute their opponent's arguments persuasively, students must listen closely and focus intently, critically analyze the case and respond quickly.

Debate supports anti-violence initiatives. The core values of debate and the skills debate builds are critical to anti-violence efforts. Debate teaches students to respect diverse viewpoints and address conflicting ideas with communication and cogent arguments. Debaters become skilled in seeing multiple points of view and using words in a structured environment to discuss conflicts. In addition, the sheer amount of time urban students spend outside of school hours on debate activities helps protect them from street violence.

Debate gives students a voice. Students report that debate gave them a voice and the skills to speak intelligently and persuasively, a vision of life outside their neighborhoods, and the confidence that they can make a difference in the world. Academic debate empowers future leaders like confirmed Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. "That was an experience that I can say without hesitation was the one activity that best prepared me for future success in law and in life," said Justice Jackson in an address at the University of Georgia School of Law.