

Considerations and Tips for Implementing an Equity Office

Why have an Equity Office?	2
What is an Equity Office?	2
Questions to discuss with administrators	3
Who is in your Equity Office?	4
What should you discuss with your Equity Office before your tournament?	5
How should you let attendees know about the existence of the Equity Office?	6
Where is your Equity Office?	8
Equity Office Process	8
Common situations in the Equity Office	10

Why have an Equity Office?

Speech and debate tournaments can be a powerful experience for students, giving young people the opportunity to unleash their true potential. In order to reach their potential, students need to feel that tournaments are as safe and as equitable as possible. An equity office is one powerful step you can take to provide this kind of experience. This document was created to make it easier to take this step to make your tournament better for students.

The purpose of an Equity Office is to help you address violations of your tournament's harassment and discrimination policies. While there are many laws that protect student rights, there are many situations that fall in the "gray" area that can hurt the speech and debate experience. The Equity Office is a tool to address inappropriate behavior. It can also provide a safer space for individuals when illegal behavior is reported. Your administration and local authorities will guide you on which behavior is illegal and would need to be escalated to other authorities. This document offers guidance on selecting Equity Officers, questions to go over with your administrators, and lessons learned on the Equity Office process.

The Equity Office is also a great option for students to speak with an adult regarding questions of equity. This personnel could offer impartial and new perspectives.

As you plan for your tournament to be a superior experience for schools and competitors, you likely plan ahead for hospitality, for reasonable fees, for high quality judging, and for a humane schedule. Providing an Equity Office, and considering the questions in this document related to that, is a way to show your community your belief in the value of Equity. To that end, your Equity Office can be a tool to help you plan various aspects of your tournament. The Equity Office can help you have additional perspectives on accessibility and equity issues, in addition of helping to protect participants from harassment and discrimination. Even if you believe that you have never had an equity issue previously, it is possible that individuals did not feel they had an avenue to share their concerns. If it has happened at one tournament, it could have happened at any of our tournaments. Having an Equity Office can be both a proactive and a reactive way to provide a safer and more equitable experience for participants.

What is an Equity Office?

A tournament Equity Office is a separate space that individuals attending at the tournament can come to bring concerns about violations of your tournament's harassment and discrimination policy.

Although the Equity Office may answer some other questions, it is not intended as a general information desk. Some tournaments create separate information desks, sometimes called "Ombudspeople", or other areas to answer questions about schedules, rules for events, ballots, etc. The Equity Office should also be separate from rules questions. Equity complaints specifically center around violations of discrimination or harassment; rules protests are about the violation of competitive event rules, like the falsification of evidence, plagiarism, etc. These two areas and questions should be treated distinctly in terms of personnel and space. For in-person competition, these spaces could be located near each other,

but be mindful of privacy concerns. For online competition, these spaces are often two different Zoom rooms. Should you need to combine these spaces, please be sure to plan ahead with Zoom break out rooms or other online spaces that would allow a sensitive conversation to occur in private.

Examples of issues that may be discussed in the Equity Office:

- A student was frequently misgendered by a competitor
- An individual used offensive language about another individual
- A student’s performance included derogatory racial stereotypes and slurs

Examples of issues that would go to an Ombudsperson:

- An individual judge has not filled out a judge paradigm
- One style of debate has more elimination rounds than another style of debate
- There was a loud noise during a student’s performance, disrupting their performance.

Of course, it may be occasionally unclear whether an issue is a rule or an equity office consideration. In those instances, advise the individual of the two spaces and ask which space they feel is correct for the issue at hand. Minimize sending individuals back and forth between spaces as much as possible, but be sure to involve personnel from both spaces as needed.

Questions to discuss with administrators

As soon as possible in your planning prior to the tournament, you will want to discuss a few key legal and ethical considerations with your school administrations. Below is not an exhaustive list, but a place to start.

Which harassment and discrimination policy should you use?

The National Speech & Debate Association’s [harassment and discrimination policy](#) is:

The National Speech & Debate Association is committed to providing its participants, judges, coaches, and staff the opportunity to pursue excellence in their endeavors. This opportunity can exist only when each member of our community is assured an atmosphere of mutual respect. The NSDA prohibits all forms of harassment and discrimination. Accordingly, all forms of harassment and discrimination, whether written or oral, based on race, color, religion, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, citizenship, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected by any applicable federal, state, or local law are prohibited, whether committed by participants, judges, coaches, or observers. Individuals who are found to have violated this policy will be subject to the full range of sanctions, up to and including removal from the tournament premises.

— Approved by the NSDA Board of Directors on December 13, 2018

Disclaimer: Individual school district policies may vary. This policy is not intended to replace established school district procedures. If you adopt this policy, please replace our name with your tournament or school name.

Prior to your tournament, if applicable, speak with your school administration to know if they have a harassment and discrimination policy that your tournament should follow instead. You may wish to bring the NSDA policy with you as an example. You could also work with your Equity Officers to adapt this harassment and discrimination policy to your tournament.

Once you have an approved harassment and discrimination policy, be sure to include it in your tournament invitation. You may also want to consider effective means of ensuring that potential and current participants (teachers, students, judges, observers, volunteers, etc) are well aware of your harassment and discrimination policy and the existence of your Equity Office.

Who do you elevate equity office actions to within the administration?

Are there certain situations for which you would need to call a school administrator before proceeding? In what circumstances do you elevate a situation and to whom? If the Equity Officers are not mandatory reporters, would your administration consider them to act as mandatory reporters? If so, what is the local number to call for those situations? Please review your local and state guidelines and policies. You may also find this [2019 report on State Statutes about Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect](#) helpful.

As you gain clarity on these situations, consider making as much of this information as transparent as possible on your intake forms, Equity Office signage, and communication to coaches and students. Please also review with your administration what elements of privacy you and your Equity Office should respect. Generally speaking, the Equity Office should strive for maintaining as much confidentiality as is reasonable while balancing the privacy of the participants and the legal requirements for reporting.

Who is in your Equity Office?

A tournament Equity Office is a distinct set of people that will be your partner in issues addressing equity, which can include violations of your harassment and discrimination policy. Often called Equity Officers, these individuals should be distinct from individuals with other roles at your tournament. In other words, to the highest degree possible, these individuals should not also be judges, tournament directors, tabroom staff, etc.

Depending on the size and complexity of your tournament, you may want several Equity Officers. In general, we recommend at least two dedicated individuals and then scaling up as appropriate and possible.

At the National Speech & Debate Tournament, Equity Officers are chosen based on previous experience with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in relation to Human Resources or education settings. They are also chosen to reflect the diversity of our student population. You may wish to speak with your school district about the availability of school counselors, human resource professionals, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals. We pair individuals with complementary skill sets and, whenever possible, try to have Equity Officers work together as a team to ensure multiple perspectives are heeded.

In hiring your Equity Officers, you are trying to create a team of individuals well suited to address concerns brought to your office. Your Equity Office team should include individuals with several of the below qualifications or characteristics:

- Prior speech and debate experience
- Ability to gain the trust of the speech and debate community
- Committed to a safe and equitable environment
- Skilled at deescalation
- Trained on diversity and sensitivity
- Trained on harassment and discrimination, especially in the context of adolescent school environments
- Prior experience working with K-12 students and educators
- Experience with counseling or trauma-informed teaching practices
- Understanding and experience with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Experience as a [Title 9 investigator](#)
- Experience in Human Resources
- Empathy, Empathy, and More Empathy

You may want to consider inviting a building or central office administrator to serve as one of your Equity Officers, both to help with legal/policy coordination and to help them learn more about the activity first-hand.

If possible, select your core Equity Officers as soon as possible, ideally no later than one month before your competition. Please equip your Equity Officers with the appropriate legal and process expectations required by your administration and applicable laws. Even if you are not a mandatory reporter, you may want to consider yourself and your Equity Officers mandatory reporters, which requires knowledge of the applicable expectations.

What should you discuss with your Equity Office before your tournament?

Equity Officers are your partner in providing a safer and more equitable tournament experience. Although they are experts in their fields, as the Tournament Director the final decision and process come to you.

A complete list of questions and considerations for providing a more inclusive and equitable speech and debate tournament can be found in the [NSDA's Inclusive Tournament checklist](#), updated annually and as needed.

Prior to the tournament, and if at all possible prior to posting your invitation, you may wish to speak to your Equity Office about the following items:

- Your tournament's harassment and discrimination policy and where to publish this to allow competitors, judges, and coaches to know of its existence.
- Publishing your full Equity Office team, including their pictures and short biographies.
- The exact process you want the Equity Officers to follow, including how reports are made, how to handle various types of incidents, when and to whom they should inform the end result, your expectation of confidentiality, etc.

It is very important that you discuss with administrators in advance and understand whether you are a mandatory reporter and if so, your and your Equity Office's obligations as such.

How should you let attendees know about the existence of the Equity Office?

It is important for all attendees to know about the existence of the Equity Office. Often with tournament communications our expectation is that the coach shares all details with students, judges, other coaches, and any observers. Although coaches are great at communicating a lot of details to these wide audiences, details can get lost in translation. Please consider ways that you can help the coach by also communicating about the Equity Office in a way that is easy for a coach to forward and/or for other audiences to see the information directly.

Tournament Invitation:

Your tournament invitation is the first sign of your commitment to equity at your tournament. It is also often seen by more than just a coach. Some possible language you could modify for your invitation is below

*The **xx** Tournament is committed to providing a safer and more equitable speech and debate competition. In order to do so, we ask that all attendees be aware of and follow our harassment and discrimination policy.*

< insert your policy language >

*Violations of the harassment and discrimination policy may be brought to the attention of our Equity Office. For full details on bios and procedures, please go to **yyy**.*

You might also consider creating a dedicated section on Tabroom.com or other online tournament registration systems. This dedicated section could include the names of your Equity Officers, their bios and pictures, and details about how to get in touch with your Equity Office during the tournament.

Dedicated email:

Creating a dedicated email to coaches announcing the Equity Office will make sure this message doesn't get lost in the many other important details about your tournament. A dedicated email is also easy for a coach to forward to their students and judges.

Possible text for email to all attendees prior to start of tournament:

*Subject Line: Staying Safe at **xx Tournament***

*The **xx** Tournament is committed to providing a safer and more equitable speech and debate competition. In order to do so, we ask that all attendees be aware of and follow our harassment and discrimination policy.*

< insert policy language >

*Equity Officers provide a first point of contact for attendees with inquiries related to harassment and discrimination at the tournament. If you have a concern about how people are treating you that you want to make known to the **xx tournament** and, if appropriate, legal authorities, or you have witnessed behavior that is inconsistent with our Harassment and Discrimination Policy, please visit the **online Equity Office in the Tournament Offices menu**. You will be asked to fill out a form sharing your information and describing the violation. You will then discuss the grievance informally and on a verbal basis with the equity officer, who shall in turn investigate the complaint.*

Social Media post:

If your tournament has a social media presence, you may also want to communicate this information through social media. Possible text for that social media message could be

*We want everyone to be as safe and informed as possible at our tournament this week! Read up on our communication methods and our Equity Officers. **<link to section of Tabroom.com with information>***

Where is your Equity Office?

For in-person competition:

Equity Officers should be given a private space with at least one additional room for conversations in case multiple equity concerns occur simultaneously. This space should be found near your main information desk and in a convenient space for competitors. You may wish to create signage about the Equity Office and Equity Officers so that participants can see this information as they go around the tournament.

For online competition:

For the online National Tournaments, the NSDA created a virtual tournament office labeled “Equity Office” that was staffed with our Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. There were also two password-protected additional rooms labeled for the equity office for private conversations.

A staff person was stationed in the main equity room and anyone could come in. When an individual arrived at the main equity room, the staff person spoke to the person and routed them either (a) to speak to an equity officer immediately in one of the private rooms or (b) to fill out an online equity form to begin an incident report. An alternative version of this would be to configure the Equity Office as a Zoom waiting room that alerted Equity Officers when an attendee was trying to enter. It is important to have a strategy that optimizes privacy for individuals wishing to have conversations with Equity Officers and balances the need for expediency in acknowledging people.

If your tournament adds an Equity Office, we recommend keeping access to that room in a highly visible place, staffing it at all times that students or judges must be available for your tournament, and creating some mechanism for having private conversations.

Equity Office Process

Step 1. Intake

Equity Offices should be easy to find and easily accessible.

At the Online National Speech & Debate Tournaments, when an attendee came to the Equity Office, they were asked to complete the intake form. [The intake form](#) asked for identifying information, coach contact information, a description of the violation of the harassment and discrimination policy, and whether there was a parent, guardian, coach, or other adult they would like contacted about the situation. The intake form described that an Equity Officer would conduct an informal discussion about the reported incident, investigate allegations, and provide the complainant with a conclusion of the investigatory findings and applicable resolutions.

In your intake form, signage for the room, and other communications, please be sure to explain that the Equity Officers will keep information as confidential as possible, but ethically, Equity Officers are required to notify authorities if there is a report of behavior that presents clear and imminent danger to themselves or others, if there is a case of known or suspected child abuse or neglect, or in the case of known or suspected sexual violence. Many of the individuals that you would choose as Equity Officers are very likely mandatory reporters. Many of your school sites may also request that you act as a mandatory reporter in this role. Equity Officers must dial 911 in an emergency. It is important that your tournament's Equity Officers understand their legal and ethical obligations under the law, and it is also important that any potential course of action is made clear to the person filling out the form so they know what actions may occur as a result of reporting their concern.

Other tournaments have provided additional intake options. For example, participants have the option to request a student advocate (an alum at a university who speaks with them first) prior to engaging the Equity Office. Other tournaments provide all participants with access to the online form and have that online interaction serve as the first place of contact. Regardless of the options for intake or initial process, your process should include some advance planning for the next step after the initial Equity Office request has come in.

The NSDA also strives to have Equity Officers approach a situation in pairs so that there are at least two members of the Equity Office in the room (virtual or in-person) when discussing the situation. Furthermore, if a student comes forward with an equity concern, the NSDA process includes asking the student what adult they would like to join them as an advocate or support. Even if the student is 18 years old, pausing the conversation to be sure that they have a moment to gather an additional person to be a support or further advocate in the situation can be beneficial for the student.

Step 2. Investigation

At the Online National Tournaments, after receiving the intake form, Equity Officers available at that time conferred to determine which Equity Officer(s) was most appropriate to take the lead in that matter. Tournament directors were kept apprised of all new reports. Equity Officers sought for all conversations with a student to have a supervising adult present. Students were asked if they felt comfortable with their supervising adult being contacted. If the student was not comfortable, if the report concerned actions by their supervising adult, or if the supervising adult was unreachable, the Equity Officers contacted a parent or guardian. Parents/guardians were given the option to have the Equity Officer inform the supervising adult at the tournament of the situation. This was the case for any contact that the Equity Office had with a student, whether that student was the complainant, a witness to the allegation, or the alleged offender.

Equity Officers spoke to the complainant and their supervising adult, if applicable, and then worked to contact any available witnesses privately to discuss the allegation. If applicable, the Equity Officers also conducted meetings with the alleged offender separately and privately.

After hearing from all parties and witnesses, the Equity Officers determined an appropriate course of action. These resolutions depended on the circumstances, and often ranged from finding no violation of our policies to an apology to removal from the tournament to contacting authorities. Anything that affected administrative action regarding the tournament was signed off on by the tournament director. All parties were notified of the approved action step.

A few considerations for conducting investigations:

1. Given conversations with your administration or district, who and how should investigations occur?
2. Have you made it clear to complainants early what the process will look like and what kinds of situations may trigger mandatory reporting or calls to the appropriate authorities?

Step 3. Resolution

After hearing from all parties and witnesses, the Equity Officer may confer and determine their suggested appropriate course of action, which ranges from finding no violation of the harassment and discrimination policy, to an apology, to removal from the tournament, or to contacting authorities. Depending on the procedure decided upon prior to the tournament, Equity Officers will share with the decision maker, potentially the Tournament Director.

The Equity Officers shall not discuss general or specific details of any complaints with anyone other than the parties involved and the Tournament Director or designated individuals. For privacy concerns, even discussing situations without mentioning names might violate the privacy of individuals.

If the administrative action is approved, the Equity Officer might communicate the decision to the complainant, alleged offender, and the supervising adults and/or parents previously involved. Discuss in advance who would best deliver this information and in what form (phone call, written, etc).

Notification to participating parties is the final step in the Equity Office process. Closing the loop in whatever way is possible allows people to know that the situation was taken seriously and addressed, even if they cannot know the end resolution in detail.

Common situations in the Equity Office

The following are some possible situations to consider and discuss prior to the tournament. Discuss with your Equity Office team and administration what may be the range of actions or remedies taken for these situations. As individual circumstances arise, you will tailor your responses, but this will help you and your team be more prepared.

- An individual in a round said or behaved in an inappropriate manner. Examples of this may be comments made before, during, or after the round perceived as condescending, dismissive,

aggressive, or otherwise rooted in sexism, racism, or other structural inequities. These situations might include instances like one team mumbling during an opponent's prep time, making an inappropriate gesture during a speech, or disrespecting their opponent in other ways. When considering these situations, please discuss how you might handle the situation if the alleged behavior is from a student, a judge, an observer (student or coach), etc.

- Individuals outside of the context of a competition round yelling or behaving in a potentially aggressive manner in a public setting. Again, consider the possible roles that may cause you to consider this situation in different lights.
- Potentially inappropriate language based on an understanding of what is culturally appropriate or a norm for one area vs another. For example, someone referring to another individual as a "sweetie" saying that it is the norm in their area. Another example could be suggesting an individual was too aggressive about a point and that tone policing is being applied in inequitable ways.
- Questions about equitable access to competition spaces. For example, what happens if access to an elevator or an accessible bathroom delays a student to a round? What if that student is participating in extemporaneous speaking and has set time limits?
- Questions about equitable access to technology or resources. For example, at an in-person tournament, is one team using a hotspot for more reliable internet inappropriate? What if a team or a judge makes a comment about the lack of technology such as "a lapel mic may help you deliver a more smooth informative speech". What if a competitor's internet cuts out during an online round?
- Questions about the type of arguments that a student can make. What if an argument a student makes may be considered an attack on a group of people or humanity, even if not done or applied to any of the individuals in the specific round?
- A variety of possible judge comments on ballots or in post round feedback including whether a topic has been overdone, even though it might be avante garde in a particular region or to that student.
- Perceived inappropriate contact or communication from a judge or coach to another tournament participant. This contact might be physical contact, email outreach, private message through social media prior to or during the tournament, etc.
- Questions about perception of bias of a judge to one participant. These may come as a result of perceived bias if that judge was a former lab leader, camp director, friend, etc.
- Instances of perceived intentional or unintentional but consistent misgendering of an individual.

- Questions about trigger warnings or general content warnings. This may be a question of whether a participant should have given a trigger/content warning or an individual coming forward to discuss the impact of being a part of a round with discussions that were triggering for the specific individual.
- If your tournament live streams or allows spectators in rounds, there may be students who wish to opt their performances out of outside viewership. Students may feel uncomfortable with widespread public viewing based on the content of their speeches or the sharing of their pronouns or other aspects of their identities.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive of the instances that may come to your Equity Office, but rather a source of potential discussions in advance to prepare for possible conflict resolution and reactions. In some instances, the Equity Office may simply be a space for an individual to discuss broader societal questions or concerns they have. Although no action step may come from those conversations, those discussions can be just as important for participants.

The Equity Office is often a *reactive* way to address equity concerns at a speech and debate competition. A well prepared and equipped Equity Office can help to provide a supportive environment for students to feel safe being advocates for themselves.

However, it is important to also discuss ways that your tournament can address equity in a proactive manner. In addition to sharing and conducting [judge training](#) that includes a cultural competency component for *all* judges, please consider discussing the prompts in the [NSDA's Inclusive Tournament checklist](#) to look for additional steps to create a safer and more equitable speech and debate experience.

Do you have feedback on this document? Please send feedback to nicole@speechanddebate.org, NSDA's Director of Development and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.