Thirteen years after the debate program was dropped at College of Eastern Utah, Jeff Spears stood in a Utah State University Eastern classroom full of debaters and individual events students who each hoped to bring the program back to its national level of competition.

Spears, who was a freshman debater at the college when the program was dropped in 2002, was elated when USU Eastern Chancellor Joe Peterson allowed him to bring the program back as a competitive club.

“We’re always looking for ways to increase enrollment at USU Eastern and a debate program fit the bill,” Spears said.

He spent the past year researching and writing proposals to secure funding for travel. He also reached out to Neil Warren, who along with assistant coach Scott Pullan, brought back to campus hundreds of regional and national awards.

Warren’s debate career spanned almost four decades: CEU 32 years and Carbon High four years. In 1991, his team brought home 272 awards and in ’92 they brought home 273 awards, thus propelling them into a national powerhouse.

In 2001, Ben Warner and Scott Odekirk represented CEU at the National Debate Tournament for District Nine. This was the first and only time a two-year college team represented the district made up of the University of Utah, Idaho State University, Southern Utah University, Weber State University, Utah State University and the University of Wyoming.

Odekirk now coaches at Copper Hills High School in Salt Lake City and sent two of his best debaters to Eastern this fall: David Rawle and Rodrigo Leon. Warner went on to coach debate at the University of Kansas where his team won the national championship in ’09, earned his doctorate and now teaches communication at the University of Missouri.

Warren said he always thought the college would bring back debate. He was glad he got to see it return in his lifetime.

Warren remembers loading two vans full of students on a Wednesday or Thursday night, and driving to tournaments throughout the United States. The students would compete all weekend and would make the return trip on Sundays so everyone could be in class on Monday morning, including Warren.

“I used to keep track of the miles I traveled every year and it was a lot,” he said. “We were always pretty well funded in terms of travel and scholarships.”

Since Spears is just beginning the program, his student won’t travel to the extent the old CEU teams did due to limited funding. But where they lack in dollars, they make up for in enthusiastic support from well-placed coaches with CEU-debate ties.

“CEU produced 10-active Utah high school debate coaches who are extremely successful running programs at their respective schools,” Spears said. “… I made a phone call to some of my coaching friends to send students my way. They were all excited to hear the college brought the program back and I got great talent from those coaches.”

Spears has been able to secure enough funding from USU Eastern and from private individuals to travel to tournaments in Utah, Wyoming, California, Nevada, Colorado and Louisiana. His team is attending seven tournaments in individual events and four in policy events.

Coaching the team is all volunteer for Spears who came back to his alma mater two years ago as director of residential life.

His debate and IE students are stoked to begin the new season of competition. Josh Bone from Carbon High School has high expectations for the team and is excited to try his skills on the collegiate level.

Eric Love from Taylorsville, competed three years on the high school circuit in public forum. He plans to hone his
skills in the collegiate level this fall with an increased level of intensity.

Khyra Colley, Winnemuca, Nev., has already formed a bond with the club and likes the idea of competing on the collegiate level to see how good she is.

Tasia Roach, from St. George’s Deseret Hills High School, has six years of experience in oration. Her expertise will be in persuasive, informative, interpretive and communication analysis. “Once I get used to the rhythm of the competition and build upon my research skills, I should do well.”

Bringing debate back to the college is now a dream come true, both for Warren and Spears.

“My first day of class, the students called me coach, and it’s then that I realized this is for real,” Spears said.

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