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Suzanne Miller-McFeeley: What Forensics Did For Me

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Alumni Corner

Suzanne Miller-McFeeley: What Forensics Did For Me Concordia College (Moorhead MN) Forensic Alumni (2005-2009)



Suzanne Miller-McFeeley

Suzy is a Business Development Officer at Counterpart International, an international NGO that builds capacity in leaders, organizations, and the social sector in the developing world, where she manages and writes funding proposals for work with the US government and international community. Suzy competed for Concordia College in Moorhead, MN from 2005-2009, and her favorite event was After Dinner Speaking. Her favorite memory is the AFA-NIET tournament her sophomore year where she competed in ADS and Persuasion and helped Concordia take 14th place.

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Suzanne Miller-McFeeley: What Forensics Did for Me

Suzanne Miller-McFeeley
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Washington, DC

ALUMNI CORNER: The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.

Keywords: forensics, benefits of forensics, Alumni Corner

When I left my last job for a new opportunity, my team took me out to lunch to celebrate our time together and wish me well. They took turns going around the table and sharing their favorite “Suzanne moments.” They spoke about the fun and stressful moments we’d had together working on challenging proposals, and person after person came back to their appreciation of what they described as my “unflappable” demeanor and ability to remain calm and capable even under extreme pressure. Our Deputy Director said, “I remember one proposal where our support from programs fell through and I had to ask you for 20 pages of inputs that were due in 3 days. Most people would have freaked out, but you just smiled and said ‘I’ll get it done’... and then you did.” The ability to face stress and pressure calmly and competently has served me well throughout my career, and I gained the confidence and skills to make it possible through competitive forensics. As a Global Studies major who has pursued a career in International Development, the benefits of competing in forensics may not be as readily apparent in my professional life as it is for my former teammates and competitors who have gone into careers in communications or related fields, but the skills I developed through competitive forensics have served me well, and I know I would not be where I am today without them.

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Competing in forensics taught me what it took to be truly prepared. To be a successful competitor I needed to have written a solid piece and to know the content and subject so well that even when the inevitable memory slip occurred, I could seamlessly cover until I was back on



track. Being prepared for the forensics season was different than what I needed for my classes where I prepared for a single paper or presentation because it was ongoing. Writing a good speech and memorizing it before the first meet was not good enough, it had to be ready and polished for every performance, every time. Limited prep events like extemporaneous and impromptu speaking called for a different kind of practice where continuously prepared research and technique were key. Knowing how to maintain this level of preparation across skill sets has served me well in the professional world where I have to be prepared not just for one-off big projects, but continuously prepared for whatever my job throws at me. These skills have enabled me to succeed in a wide variety of tasks ranging from navigating medical emergencies and transportation crises during my field work in Guatemala to managing daunting last minute writing assignments.

Another invaluable skill I developed through competitive forensics is the ability to analyze and adapt. I poured my heart and soul into the pieces I wrote and performed, but success in forensics required not only good first versions, but continuously adapting and improving through analysis of judges' critiques, feedback from coaches, and suggestions from teammates. I learned how to assess my pieces, performances, and the feedback I was getting to identify what was working and what was not and to adapt what I was doing accordingly. I have had to analyze and adapt every day of my professional life and have heard time and time again from supervisors and coworkers that it is something I do better than most. Competitive forensics taught me to take criticism and feedback and use it to improve my performance, a skill which I successfully implement today across the wide variety of roles I play in my career, whether it's facilitating program design sessions, setting up data management systems, or improving my managerial techniques with those I supervise.

I could fill pages upon pages with the many skills competitive forensics helped me develop and hone: public speaking, writing, critical thinking, tackling deadlines, not to mention the incredible lifelong friends I made along the way. The culmination of all of these skills, however, has proven the most valuable to me—the confidence that I am capable of successfully tackling daunting tasks. This confidence shows in my work, in my “unflappable” demeanor as my coworkers described it, and in turn instills confidence in my abilities in those with whom I work. I know how to prepare, analyze, and adapt so even when the unexpected is thrown at me I can address it with a level-headed professionalism I developed from my time in competitive forensics.

Suzu's Advice
“Pick topics that you're passionate about, not just because they can win. Your audience can tell when you really care, and when else will you get the opportunity to address a captive audience about something that's important to you?”

