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R. Randolph Richardson  
*Berry College*

Kathy Brittain Richardson  
*Berry College*

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## Forensic Leadership: An Isocratean Vision

R. Randolph Richardson  
Dr. Kathy Brittain Richardson  
Berry College

Contemporary forensic students and educators owe much to the leaders of the latter half of the twentieth century who rediscovered the educational benefits of speech competition, founded several collegiate programs and professional organizations, and established numerous tournaments and perfected their management in a time of great technological change and challenge. A long list of noteworthy women and men who sacrificed inordinate amounts of time, money, often careers and professional standing, and more, for the benefit of forensic activity deserve recognition, appreciation and honor. The spirit of sacrifice that characterized the founding generation of leaders and those who immediately followed is in many ways, in many places, the reason for the existence of forensic activity today. A discussion of leadership in the forensics community must begin with gratitude.

“Leader” is a title worn by forensic professionals from the executive level of national organizations to an assistant coach at Mount Nowhere College in the hills of Georgia. Leading students on the educational journey of understanding and practicing rhetoric is a noble task that both unifies and divides. At the same time that forensic educators are drawn together by purpose, we are often scattered by directional differences of interpretation, opinion and philosophy. While diversity of perspective represents one of the greatest strengths of the forensics community, a transcendent sense of identity and direction is necessary for meeting the challenges of the future. Leadership requires a clear vision, especially now.

Critics of intercollegiate forensics have leveled the charge that the activity emphasizes competition to the detriment of education (Thomas and Hart, 1983; Inch, 1991; Burnett, Brand and Meister, 2003). Burnett, et al. (2003) were particularly harsh, labeling education in forensics a “myth” and claiming that “competition coopts education” (p. 12). The authors left little doubt about the nature of their criticism when they explained, “Myth ‘distorts’ because its rhetorical ambiguity offers mere impressions of virtuous behavior” (p. 13). And while Hinck (2003) and others expound on the educational value of forensic activity, questions regarding the balance between competition and education persist. Kelly and Richardson (2008) contend that the prevailing metaphor underpinning forensic practice is an athletic one, in which the game itself is the end result. Competition dominates through overt acceptance or pedagogical complacency. Ultimately, the pedagogy of practice motivates contest activity. The lack of clear educational objectives creates a void that is filled by fads, unwritten rules and opinions elevated to criteria. “What wins is good, and what is good wins” is the unsubstantiated circular premise of forensic competition. Forensic practice perpetuates rules, standards, even a pedagogy of its own. Burnett, et al. (2003) were mis-

taken in referring to the “myth” of education, because even though the lessons of purely competitive ends may be the wrong lessons, students are obviously learning them. Burnett, et al. (2003) charge forensic coaches with “masking” the truly competitive nature of the activity. In reality, a pedagogy of practice likely prevails due to the lack of an active practice of pedagogy. Forensics professionals are much more keenly aware of how to win, than we are of how, or even what, we should be teaching. The continuing dominance of the pedagogy of practice over the practice of pedagogy results in an increasing insularity that separates forensic practice from communication scholarship, rhetorical theory and public speaking in society at large. Competition is no longer a means to educational ends. The game becomes the purpose. Forensic education grows less relevant within communication departments, colleges and universities, and society as a whole.

Forensic leaders at all levels need to reaffirm a commitment to the principles and practice of rhetorical education. These principles have had no better proponent throughout the centuries than Milton’s “old man, eloquent,” Isocrates (qtd. in Wagner, 1922). Isocrates’ approach to rhetorical education, civic engagement and public relations serves as an outline for effective leadership – then and now. As Cicero noted centuries after the glory of Athens, “From his school, as from the Horse of Troy, none but leaders emerged” (qtd. in Benoit, 1984).

### Isocrates and Rhetorical Education

Isocrates reminds forensic leaders today that we are first and foremost rhetorical educators. From his view, there is no higher calling. Garver (2004) notes that Isocrates included the following explanation of the power and civilizing influence of speech in three of his most famous speeches – “Antidosis,” “Panegyricus” and “Nicocles.”

We are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. (pp. 190-191)

A belief in the power to persuade undergirds Isocrates’ entire educational system. While he has been called “the Father of the Liberal Arts” and “the Father of Humanism” (Marrou, 1956, p. 79), because of his unique broad-based curriculum, at the center of instruction, every day, was the

study and practice of rhetoric. Wagner (1922) summed up Isocrates' philosophy of education, noting that the three marks of Isocratean schooling were that education should be practical, rational and comprehensive. Isocrates railed against the philosophers for their preoccupation with abstractions that lacked practical application. He attacked the Sophists as well for their polished displays of affectation that served selfish ends. Isocrates had little patience for impractical rhetoric that lacked virtuous functionality in Athenian society. Rationality grounded students in the practice of well-reasoned argumentation. Isocratean rationality also included the idea of the development of the whole intelligence, not a highly specialized professional or technical routine. A comprehensive, well-rounded education served as preparation for all of the duties of Athenian life.

Isocrates' educational philosophy was grounded in pragmatism, but a closer look at his approach to the teaching of rhetoric reveals moral and philosophical objectives as well. For Isocrates, the ability to speak eloquently represented the surest sign of a sound understanding (Conley, 1990). Employing the right word at the right time ("kairos") in the right way demonstrated appropriateness, understanding and good reasoning. The arduous process of speechwriting and speech making at the heart of the Isocratean system, ultimately resulted in good thinking. "To speak well is to think well" is an idea often associated with Isocrates. His notion of "right thinking" differs from the moral absolutes offered by Plato. For Isocrates, the practical outcome of sound reasoning was the most nearly right solution, the best to be found in the particular circumstance (Marrou, 1956). The concepts of rhetoric and truth were interdependent.

Isocrates' teaching methods both reaffirm and challenge forensic practice today. His teaching of no more than nine students at a time, and usually only four or five, mirrors the common practice of individualized attention present in most contemporary programs. His placement of performance at the center of pedagogy is another common element (Ober, 2004). Leff (2004) compares Isocrates' methods with typical higher learning practices today.

Isocrates taught performance at the center of a curriculum designed for a small number of students who remained at his school over a period of several years. These circumstances obviously no longer exist – not even at our liberal arts colleges, let alone our research universities (p. 252).

Leff's lament emphasizes a significant niche for forensic educators. The very elements that provided success for Isocrates' school provide educational benefits for students in forensic programs today.

Berquist (1959) added that Isocrates' success resulted from his dedication to his students. Beyond individualized attention, Isocrates displayed compassion and concern for each of his pupils. While all students shared the same general course of study, their paths differed according to their spe-

cific educational and professional needs. Berquist characterized the bond between Isocrates and his students as follows: "At the end of their term of studies, students wept. Many kept up a lifelong correspondence with the master, and a few erected statues in honor of his friendship and wisdom" (p. 254). Similarly, forensic activity typically encourages a level of familiarity that goes beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom setting. When approached professionally, the journey from student to friend can be a rewarding experience for both student and teacher.

Another characteristic of Isocratean instruction was a dependence on models and the practice of imitation (Marrou, 1956). Students pored over worthy speech samples as a means of both understanding *topoi* and refining style. Beyond this, they also worked on repetitive recitations of the speeches—for the sake of developing effective delivery technique. Interestingly, Isocrates was known for attacking the imitative practices of the Sophists (Haskins, 2004). He rejected the genres of discourse identified by Aristotle and adhered to by the Sophists. Isocrates preferred to group public discourse according to its relative significance to society. To Isocrates, "imitation is not a mere repetition, but a timely reaccentuation of already uttered speech" (Haskins, 2004, p. 78). Jebb (1962) observed that Isocrates' approach to imitation contrasted with the Sophists in that he was a stickler for making students develop their own ideas before moving to imitative exercises designed to accentuate the artistic excellence of the great works. Behme (2004) concurred with Jebb's analysis, claiming that originality was one of the main criteria of a successful speech in Isocrates' system. According to Isocrates, "That man seems most artful who both speaks worthily of the subject matter and can discover things to say that are entirely different from what others have said" (qtd. in Behme, 2004, p. 198). Isocrates' ancient ideas regarding imitation and originality serve as valuable guides for forensic educators today.

Isocrates' approach to rhetorical education calls forensic leaders to remember that we are educators first. Pedagogy must lead forensic practice.

### **Isocrates and Civic Engagement**

Education does not exist in a vacuum. By its very nature, it is both a product of and a reaction to a social context. Forensic leaders would do well to heed the lessons of the ancient world's "greatest speech teacher" (Berquist, 1959). Isocrates enhanced civic engagement through the direct effect of civic-minded students, through active socially engaged rhetorical criticism, and through adapting his teaching to the current communication climate.

Isocrates' rhetorical education prepared students for the popular and professional demands of 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athenian democracy. The pragmatic focus of his teaching engaged pupils in politics, law and public service of nearly every kind. Isocrates was, by far, the most influential teacher of his time. A list of his famous students reads like an Ancient Athenian Hall of Fame. Statesmen, politicians, three of the Attic Orators—including Isaeos, orators, logog-

raphers, teachers, historians, and his beloved general, Timotheus—are listed among his successes by several scholars (Benoit, 1984; Berquist, 1959; Marrou, 1956). Conley (1990) notes that it was Isocrates' ideal of "the good man speaking well" that would define educational instruction for centuries. Clearly, Isocrates' students learned the lesson of civic engagement. While his contemporaries Plato and Aristotle may have taught Athens philosophy, it was Isocrates who taught Athens.

Isocrates also modeled civic engagement through a socially active rhetorical criticism. Two of his major speeches, "Against the Sophists" and "Antidosis" exposed the Sophists for their misuse of forensic rhetoric. "He thought that the pressure to win at all costs was forcing the practitioners of judicial rhetoric to put the art of persuasion into such unethical uses as misleading, lying, deceiving, using false witnesses, and so on" (Poulakos & Poulakos, 1999, pg. 19). As a leader in the area of rhetorical education, and as a concerned citizen, Isocrates used the power of the speech to expose corruption, greed and empty rhetoric. His rhetorical insight and use of a fully developed prose speech allowed him to engage in educating the polis beyond his pupils.

The shift from the spoken word to the written speech represents a major transition in public communication. Depew and Poulakos (2004) point out that Isocrates was the central figure in this transition. His shift to a written prose style of speech was attacked by those in Athens who were distrusting of the new medium. Isocrates' wisdom provided a vision for the future of rhetoric and education. As with those who emerged from the Horse of Troy, history proves Isocrates to be the winner.

Implications for forensic leaders abound. Forensic education should inspire students to meaningful civic engagement. Events like extemporaneous speaking and persuasive speaking are excellent venues for such inspiration, when students are allowed to glimpse the world beyond the round of competition. When world issues are treated as expedient means to more trophies, we do our students and our world a grave disservice. The rhetorical excesses and fallacies of our own time demand thoughtful, analytical criticism. Engaged forensic educators are positioned well to lead these discussions in the classroom and beyond. Our society is depending on a new generation of critical rhetors to lead the way. As we move forward in the age of Google, and communication is transforming before our eyes, we need to borrow the rhetorical wisdom of Isocrates to know when to adapt new forms of communication and when to reject technological impediments to critical thinking. As forensic leaders, our pedagogy must adapt to communication innovation. If we continue to fight the insular battles of the preceding decades, our irrelevance will most certainly win out. We need to engage society where possible, and work to reform it when our rhetorical instincts perceive threats to democratic values. Leaders in our community need to dedicate their efforts to affirming a pedagogy that drives meaningful rhetorical practice. This vision requires real education and civic

engagement. From a practical standpoint, an Isocratean vision also suggests improved public relations.

### **Isocrates and Public Relations**

Similarly, at its most fundamental level, the practice of public address calls for engagement with audiences and publics, an engagement that leads to mutual benefit, rather than exploitation or propaganda. Isocrates argued for a "moral, symmetrical rhetoric" that seeks to unify and build consensus, rather than vilify or defeat those with opposing viewpoints (Marsh, 2001; see also Marsh, 2003, and Marsh, 2008). Thus, Marsh has argued, Isocratean ethics provides the ethical principles and impetus for the practice of public relations exemplified in what Grunig and Hunt called the "two-way symmetric model" (1984) of excellent public relations practice. Rhetoric should seek to establish engagement, rather than enmity or even mere entertainment.

As Grunig and Hunt describe it, the communication within this model is dialogic; both the organization and its public may be changed as a result. Thus, a two-way symmetric model of public relations is the most ethical and effective. Those involved in this type of communication plan their communications in order to "achieve maximum change in attitude and behavior" (p.23), planning that is based on feedback and analysis of the key public. Grunig and Hunt write: "In the two-way symmetric model, finally, practitioners serve as mediators between organizations and their publics. Their goal is mutual understanding between organizations and their publics" (p. 22).

This Isocratean perspective as demonstrated by Grunig and Hunt informs and underlies the understanding of public relations explained by Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006); they view the field as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failures depends" (p. 5). The groups known as publics or stakeholders vary depending on the priorities associated with a given issue by the organization or the stakeholders themselves.

Organizations typically face multiple publics with different interests and conflicting goals. ... All of these different forms of relationships suggest that relationships in public relations can be two-party or multiple party. And, all of these relationships are situational. That is, any of these relationships can come and go and change as situations change. Finally, these relationships are behavioral because they depend on how the parties in the relationship behave toward one another. (Hon and Grunig, 1999, pp. 13-14)

A forensic administrator or leader who seeks to implement this Isocratic ideal of public engagement and symmetrical rhetoric would benefit from understanding some of these core principles of public-relations practice. Leaders might begin by exploring who their key publics are and what common interests or rhetorical goals they share. (See Figure I.)

For example, leaders within national forensics organizations and various institutional teams might identify a variety of stakeholder groups as key publics. (See Table I.) Why would it be advantageous for the forensic leaders to be engaged in mutually beneficial communication relationships with each? Take, for example, the university or college administrators with association-affiliated teams. National association leaders are interested in sustaining (or increasing) institutional support for their member forensic programs. Institutional administrators are interested in providing economic and assessable learning opportunities for students and in garnering positive attention for their students and programs. Establishing and maintaining a symmetrical flow of communication between program leaders or association leaders and the institutional administrator can be achieved by developing and delivering messages in a timely, accurate and believable manner that addresses these mutual concerns, in effect, by answering key questions sometimes even before they are asked. Fact sheets or background reports that identify and justify learning outcomes of forensics programs could be developed and shared annually with administrators. Feature stories that highlight successes of current students and alumni could be written or videotaped. Tracking the retention of involved team members and sharing that data with key administrators offers another way of demonstrating how the practice of forensics increases the engagement of the individual student. In short, messages that focus on the following seven elements could be developed and disseminated in ways that address common concerns of college and university administrators:

- 1) Explanation and demonstration of learning outcomes of program
- 2) Building institutional or individual pride
- 3) Fostering positive public image for institution
- 4) Recruitment of team members and other students
- 5) Retention of team members
- 6) Engagement with institutional fund-raising activities
- 7) Public service activities

Obviously, message creation and dissemination is not enough. Creating opportunities for administrators to observe forensics activities and to ask questions of students and forensics leaders is equally important. What do administrators want to know? How would they like to know it?

These questions are clearly appropriate for another key stakeholder: College and university public relations and news bureau personnel. How much do they know about the forensics program and how it contributes to the overall reputation of the institution? Are they aware of opportunities for individual feature stories or video streams of performances or speeches? Inviting news bureau or public-relations personnel to a team showcase or providing them with an appropriate information kit would be simple ways to foster mutually beneficial relationships.

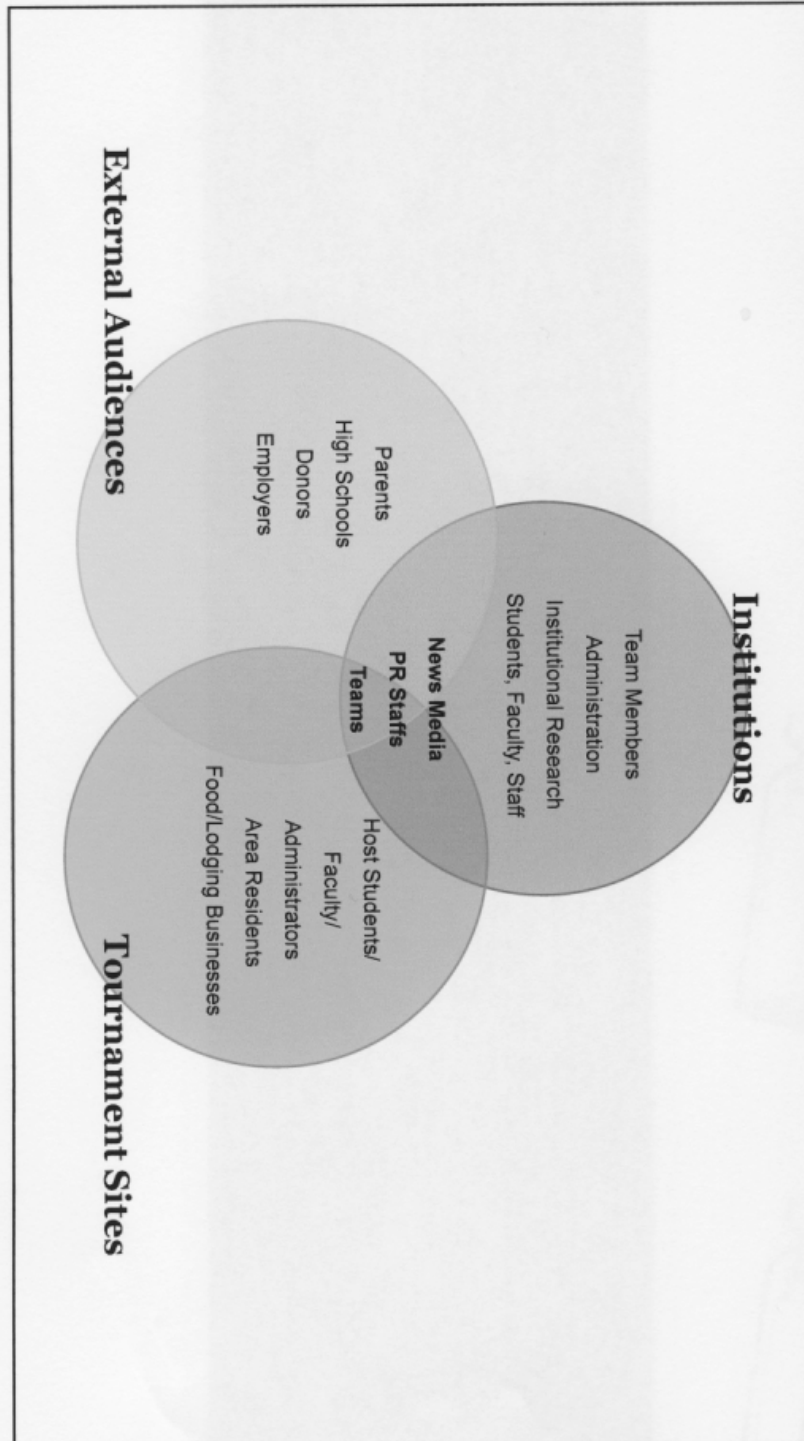
What other symmetrical public relations practices could allow association or team leaders to become more engaged with their key publics? Here is a quick listing of other ideas.

- 1) Establish a news center for each tournament through which information would be channeled on campus, to area and to the national association at large.
  - a. Provide standard advance news release giving information about the tournament and the competitors who are participating
  - b. Provide social-media feed of events and breaks and winners
  - c. Feature vlog or Twitter stream during events and awards
  - d. Invite local media to cover story (see #4)
- 2) Develop stronger social media presence for the associations, with Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts.
- 3) Develop templates for standard news releases: Preview of tournament; announcement of winners and participants.
- 4) Develop media kit for national tournament with standard releases, bios for director and/or host, fact sheet about organization, fact sheet about local host team, FAQs, backgrounder on specific events, fact sheet about events, feature story about one or two competing teams, etc.
- 5) Use flip cameras to record brief segments of speeches for video streaming online and in digital news releases.
- 6) Expand website to offer breaking news and streamed video, background of the association and rhetorical competition, electronic media kit, speech manuscripts, etc.
- 7) Develop digital national media tour for national presidents or tournament directors.
- 8) Develop promotional video and brochure (posted on website) touting how forensics prepares participants for success and service.

Isocrates provides a vision for effective leadership in contemporary forensics. His emphasis on education, civic engagement and practical public relations serves to enhance pedagogy and connect forensic practice with the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

**TABLE I**  
**Stakeholders or Key Publics for National Association**  
**Leaders**

- 1) Institutional administrators
- 2) Institutional public-relations staff  
(Alumni; donors; governing boards)
- 3) Institutional research staff of each college and university
- 4) Campus media
- 5) Institution's students, faculty and staff
- 6) Faculty, staff and students of host sites
- 7) Residents of host cities
- 8) News media in host cities
- 9) Convention and visitor bureaus in host cities
- 10) Parents of team members
- 11) Home towns and high schools of team members
- 12) Members and competitors of national associations
- 13) News media in significant cities within regions or states
- 14) Users of social and Web-based media



**Priority Publics**

Figure 1

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