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## Helping Out the "Newbies": A Call for Broader-Based Professional Development in Forensics

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### Abstract

Many Directors of Forensics follow a clear path from student competitor to graduate coaching assistant before holding a professional position. Often this traditional route represents the full training a future DOF may receive. While this experience is invaluable, as a primary means of education it does not account for those starting programs without such a background, or those taking on a director position at an institution with a significantly different emphasis or philosophy than encountered in their training. This paper posits that a focus on training & mentoring is needed at the national level in order to facilitate a broader approach to professional development of forensic professionals.

The forensic community is made up of passionate and dedicated educators who spend countless hours working for the enrichment of students and the larger community. That dedication is reflected and justified by the countless research and position papers acknowledging the many positive benefits of participation in competitive forensics. There exists a wide body of forensic assessment research focusing on attempts to measure the benefits of participation in forensics for undergraduate students (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Rogers, 2002; Selnow, 1994).

An area that receives less attention, but is equally important for the continued growth of the forensic community, is the development of forensic professionals, i.e. coaches, and directors of forensic programs. Thomas A. Workman noted in 1997 that "one solution to the growing problem of coach and program burn-out seems to be better education for the future forensics educator. Yet very little has been written on the subject..." Many forensic professionals follow a clear path from student competitor to graduate coaching assistant before holding a professional position. This path may seem commonsense, and in fact has worked for countless DOF's. Yet, even for the forensic professionals who receive this training, there tend to be few graduate courses available focusing specifically on coaching and forensic administration (Jensen, 1996). In practice, this makes the DOF position extremely difficult for those who didn't hold a forensic graduate assistantship. Given the shrinking resources in higher education today, the forensic community would benefit from additional training resources for newcomers to the activity as well as those who have risen through the ranks.

The current status quo in forensic training, while offering excellent opportunities, can also create some unique problems. To begin, without clearly defined goals for professional forensic education, graduate students likely experience widely differing training from program to program (Jensen, 1996). Additionally, while it would seem common sense that a communication faculty member with a graduate degree in speech communication should be able to step in to

the role of DOF if needed, in practice it is much more difficult. Without clear sources of information about forensic administration and coaching, newcomers to the profession are forced to reinvent the wheel or attempt to reverse engineer what other coaches are doing based on competitors speeches.

This paper argues that the Council of Forensic Organizations (COFO) should create a committee to establish specific resources for training and professional development. Such a committee could work to establish practical forums for addressing the need for training and development for forensic professionals and establish baselines for such training. This paper will focus primarily on the needs and benefits of placing increased attention on professional development for members of the forensic community at the national level.

### Professional Development

As noted above, the majority of professionals in the forensic community today are typically former competitors and graduate coaching assistants. At a practical level, the evolution from competitor to apprentice to professional is an ideal means of training. However, as the sole means of training this route isolates the forensic community and serves to discourage latecomers from taking an active part in forensics. In essence, the profession has become a specialty area within higher education with very few outlets to achieve training and a lack of consistency in training. For example, the skills gained as a graduate assistant in a large university with a well-funded program may not adequately prepare professionals for the challenges of working in an environment where fighting for resources is a political balancing act. Likewise, training in a smaller program that travels regionally may not provide suitable preparation for a career in a nationally competitive program. Establishing standards for training and professional development may not entirely remove obstacles such as these, but it can go a long way towards minimizing them. The forensic community is generally willing to help out new programs and DOF's, but more needs to be done to ensure that new DOF's and non-community members know that such help exists.

As colleges and universities across the nation slash budgets or cut programs, the forensic community also needs to encourage the development of new programs. For colleges who do not have a current DOF or a faculty member with direct forensic experience, there is little incentive to build a program. The promotion of national and/or regional coaching and administration workshops could provide much needed support to floundering programs. Matching new DOF's with more experienced forensic professionals as mentors could also help minimize some of the uncertainty new program directors face. Despite the wide body of re-

search on DOF burnout (Leland, 2004; Richardson, 2005), the passion and longevity of most forensic professionals certainly indicates that a career in forensics is uniquely rewarding. Providing increased opportunities for professional training could serve to open up the forensic community to a more diverse population of educators and could enhance the growth of the activity. Each year, a significant number of communication generalists are hired across the nation into communication departments. Administration of a forensic program could be an attractive option for communication scholars seeking professional activities for career advancement including tenure and promotion. Promoting the profession of forensics beyond the traditional scope of participants can only serve to enhance the forensic community.

Most DOF's who have served in the position for several years can point to a number of smaller programs that have died off, or attempts to start up programs that have faltered. Much of the literature in the field typically focuses on arguments for the value of forensic education when competing for tight resources on campus as one means of slowing this type of attrition (Sellnow, 1994). This information is key for existing programs but more basic information is often needed for untrained or new DOF's. At present, there is a much smaller body of work available regarding new program development, and very few textbooks address this area. Issues such as locating suitable tournaments, making contacts within the region, budgeting, and learning pragmatic coaching strategies, can all serve to frustrate those "outsiders" attempting to build programs. Furthermore, there are enough regional differences in areas such as competitive styles and national organization affiliation that even a graduate student who has risen through the ranks may struggle when hired out of his or her competitive region.

Individually, the vast majority of members of the forensic community are willing to go out of their way to help foster new programs or work with new coaches or DOF's. Anecdotal evidence suggests that informal mentoring is fairly common; this practice could be greatly enhanced through institutional mentoring programs at the national and regional level. Likewise, there are resources available including research papers, conference proceedings, etc. that can serve as training materials. However, these resources are difficult to track down for forensic neophytes as not all journals are connected to electronic resources like Ebscohost and information is frequently spread across a disparate group of websites. Clearer web design for national organizations and inclusion of welcome packets with directions for accessing resources for new coaches could help more forensic professionals take advantage of the wealth of information available. A basic guidebook for forensic coaches, sponsored by a national organization could provide some much needed assistance for newcomers as well as a source of revenue for the national organization.

### **Training & Development Resources**

National organizations including the National Forensic Association, the American Forensic Association, the Council

of Forensic Organization, Pi Kappa Delta and others currently maintain websites which include a variety of resources, including peer reviewed journals, for forensic professionals. The next challenge for the future development of the activity is to focus on improving ease of access and organization to these resources, and to sponsor an increased focus on professional training and development. The following are suggestions geared towards the national organizations, particularly COFO, which could provide assistance to both the new coach as well as the seasoned veteran DOF looking for new ideas and approaches. This list is not inclusive but is meant to spark discussion, debate, and reflection on the state of professional development within the forensic community.

1. Provide a centralized location for coaching materials (for example, a well-organized set of links could allow national organizations to provide access to such material without having to own or control the material).
2. Provide information on proper tabulation practices as well as hosting responsibilities and duties.
3. Provide training materials for judges. (Most DOF's have their own version of the "training handout", having a place to post these would keep everyone from having to reinvent the wheel, and would likely evolve a smaller number of excellent guides.)
4. Provide regional and national contacts of individuals willing to provide advice or mentoring to new forensic professionals.
5. Provide a centralized location for information about using forensic experience in tenure portfolios, as well as evidence and arguments for inclusion of forensic experiences as a component of tenure.
6. Conduct an assessment on the state of the profession. Assessment could include tracking percentages of forensic professionals receiving tenure, long-term contracts, etc.
7. Foster increased research on pedagogical strategies for DOF's, such as National Communication Association panels focusing specifically on training & professional development.
8. Foster a national guide with standards for forensic education, similar to other communication fields (for example, the Commission on Public Relations Education report, *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, A Port of Entry.*)

### **Final Thoughts**

Many forensic competitors have risen through the ranks to pursue careers in forensic education out of love of the activity. For members of the community, a quick perusal of journal articles and national developmental conference pro-

ceedings is the closest thing forensic professionals have to a national yearbook. These are just two indicators of the value of pursuing a career within this particular collegiate area. For too long, the feasibility of having a career in forensics has been a secret kept within the family. If the activity is to continue to grow and evolve, national and regional organizations and membership need to think beyond coaching and undergraduate competition and remember that training and development is a critical component of any professional activity. Helping new coaches and newcomers to the professional forensic world can only improve the status of forensics as a whole.

The National Development Conference on Individual Events has been a sounding board for a diversity of issues related to coaching and pedagogy. The challenge for the future is to use the conference and other forums to provide clear assistance to those wishing to join the ranks of forensic careerists. At present, career training is inconsistent and insular, and may serve to keep interested faculty at arms-length from the activity. Starting a national dialogue on the needs of and expectations for forensic professionals could evolve to greater consistency in training, a more comprehensive approach to professional development, and recognition of the need for formal mentoring programs. Countless undergraduates in a dizzying array of majors have entered the workforce better prepared due to the dedication and diligence of forensic professionals. As forensic professionals, we owe it to ourselves to ensure that current and future members of our profession receive the same assistance, care, and attention in their career paths as we impart upon our students.

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