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Should Collegiate Forensics Parent Organizations Take the Lead in Recruiting New Schools to the Speech Activity?

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Abstract

This paper argues that the health of college forensics could be greatly strengthened with increased membership. This paper also posits that forensics parent organizations on the state, regional, and national level are uniquely positioned to recruit new schools to the speech activity. Finally, this essay details plausible approaches for enticing and fostering new programs.

The intercollegiate forensics (speech and debate) community faces many challenges. Budget constraints, fading programs, ongoing insularity, and ever-present scrutiny highlight the need to bolster the health of the speech activity. Growing the number of participating schools in forensics could eventually reduce the costs associated with and time involved in speech travel. Additionally, expanded membership could increase diversity and enhance competition contributing to the overall strength of the activity. This paper argues that the health of college forensics could be greatly strengthened with increased membership. This paper also posits that forensics parent organizations on the state, regional, and national level are uniquely positioned to recruit new schools to the speech activity. Finally, this essay details plausible approaches for enticing and fostering new programs.

Challenges Facing the Forensics Community

Forensics programs have had to weather budget cuts along with the steady decline of programs over the years (Alexander & Strickland, 1980; Derryberry, 1991; Schnoor & Kozinski, 2005). With the completion of each season, additional speech and debate programs are eliminated from their respective college or university (Stepp, 1996). In addition, speech programs are constantly being forced to defend themselves against administration scrutiny and the budget scalpel. The speech community has also been scrutinized for a lack of diversity. Certainly, the activity is more diverse now than in years past. Shelton and Matthews (2001) write that the forensics community has made remarkable progress and has worked to share the benefits of forensic practice with often socially marginalized demographic groups, particularly women and minorities. However, there is much work that can be done to ensure that a broad pool of individuals are involved in the activity. In addition, teams should do more to reach out to individuals who might possess invisible disabilities (i.e., mental disorders, impairments). Thus, the future challenge is to enlist and gain participation from underrepresented groups. Wider participation would extend educational advantages to more individuals and strengthen the overall health of the activity. Forensics

programs must grow and remain vibrant and vigilant if it is to maintain its standing given the many challenges facing the community (Derryberry, 1991).

Unique Role of Forensics Parent Organizations

With budget, participation, and insularity concerns, it is important that forensics parent organizations--such as the American Forensics Association, National Forensics Association and Pi Kappa Delta or regional and state speech associations--carry out a campaign to increase membership in the activity. Organizationally, these associations have the resources, structure, and leadership necessary to effectively undertake such an effort. These organizations have a storied history of working to prevent the elimination of programs. Similar efforts can be focused on expanding the number of forensics programs on the college level. On the high school level, the National Forensics League (NFL) offers a mentorship program along with curriculum suggestions and online resources (Billman, 2008). It seems plausible that college forensics parent organizations could do more to recruit and support new speech and debate programs.

Approaches for Recruiting New Schools

Additional college individual event and debate teams would benefit the forensics community, but enticing new schools to the activity can be challenging. Regardless of the barriers, there are several steps that can be taken to strengthen the membership and enhance the overall health of the speech community. Given widespread budget cuts, professors with heavy teaching loads and other tensions, a foremost approach would be to contact specific students about starting student-run speech teams. The names and contact information for targeted students would be provided by current forensics members. Schnoor and Kozinski (2005) write that the student-run programs sometimes encounter added challenges, but this is a very viable option considering today's academic climate. Ohio State University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have had a successful history with student-directed programs.

Second, and a most ideal situation, forensics organizations could solicit participation from deans, chairs, and professors at respective colleges and universities. It is extremely beneficial to have a faculty advisor/sponsor when requesting the use of university resources. Approaching a friendly department head or faculty member might be the ticket for a sustaining and well-connected speech program. If these individuals cannot be of assistance, approaching instructors outside the field of Communication might prove fruitful. There are scant examples of forensics programs housed in English,

Liberal Arts, and Honors departments across the United States.

Third, graduate students might be willing to help set up a program at their university. It might also be possible for a community member to help establish a forensics team on a local campus. Former high school and college speech coaches could also play a role in helping establish new collegiate teams if so inclined.

A fourth option is to approach the office that deals with student organizations to see if they might be willing to help start/publicize a forensics program. A college might be looking for the recognition a speech program would bring to the institution.

A fifth approach is to offer workshops at regional and national conventions (e.g., Central States, National Communication Association) on "How to Start a Forensics Program" or "Why Start a Forensics Program at Your School?" A publicity campaign might reach a former competitor who is looking to give back to the activity or college instructor searching for a new professional development opportunity.

Finally, once a program has been established, it must be supported. Forensics parent organizations can take the lead in ensuring universal support across the activity. New programs could benefit from reduced tournament fees, assistance in finding student housing, and by offering a full-service formal mentorship program. Host schools have been known to offer assistance to student-run teams, for example, and with a mentorship service, experienced coaches would be available to answer questions and give advice to new teams when warranted. Carver (1991) and Hefling (2008) write that new coaches and teams have responded favorably to formal and informal mentoring in the past.

Starting a forensics program can be a daunting and challenging undertaking. Questions of funding, travel, membership, and program direction all need to be addressed. A significant amount of time and effort will have to be expended. Luckily, however, there are students on most every campus who have participated in high school speech and debate, or students who are interested in a new challenge, like founding a speech program.

It is understandable that forensics parent organizations have not spent resources and time on recruiting new schools to the speech activity. Boylan (1994) as cited in Valdivia and Simon (1997) notes:

Forensics may place a greater demand on students and faculty than any other college or university course. Even when students and faculty are traveling to a tournament, their free time is usually spent writing, revising, and practicing for the next tournament. Furthermore, forensics coaches often have other classes to teach, professional obligations to meet, administrative

responsibilities to fulfill, and personal commitments to consider. (49)

The high stress level accompanying forensic involvement, in combination with a low compensation level and heavy teaching loads (Gill, 1990), may also contribute to the small percentage of coaches actively involved in an effort to attract new schools to the activity.

Although this paper is not meant to be prescriptive, its purpose is to spark further discussion on the health and sustainability of the forensics community. This paper argued that the health of college forensics could be greatly strengthened with increased membership and that forensics parent organizations on the state, regional, and national level are uniquely positioned to recruit new schools to the speech activity. Finally, this paper detailed plausible approaches for enticing and fostering new programs. Efforts must be undertaken to ensure the growth of collegiate speech. The long-term success of forensics requires that our activity stay alert and respond accordingly to the challenges facing our community.

Example of Letter for Deans, Chairs, or Professors

On behalf of the Minnesota Collegiate Forensics Association (MCFA), we write in hopes that you might consider starting a Forensics (speech and debate) program at your university or college.

There is an active collegiate speech and debate circuit in Minnesota. Students have the opportunity to compete in eleven individual events and Parliamentary Debate. Intercollegiate speech tournaments are offered throughout the school year. Students compete in public speaking (like Persuasive, Informative, After Dinner Speaking), oral interpretation (like Prose, Drama, Poetry), limited preparation events (like Extemporaneous and Impromptu Speaking) and debate (like Parliamentary Debate and Lincoln Douglas Debate). Students can choose to participate in up to six events, plus debate, at a tournament.

Participation in speech and debate provides students with important research, critical thinking, organizational, and performance skills. In addition, time spent in forensics serves to improve a student's overall educational experience. Further, research reveals that speech participation is often ranked as one of a student's greatest memories from college and assists greatly in a student's career success. Forensics competition is preparation for life in many respects.

MCFA is interested in helping start programs at additional universities and colleges across the state. The organization and its members are committed to providing support and guidance to faculty and students starting new teams. It is our hope that you or someone you know at the college might be interested in founding a team. We will follow up with you in a few days to see if you have any questions about collegiate speech and starting a forensics program on your campus. In the meantime, if you have questions, you can contact us at

_____ or call _____. Thank you for considering this offer.

Sincerely,

Example Letter for Students

Dear _____,

Your _____ name _____ was _____ provided _____ by _____ from _____ (school) _____. We understand you participated in competitive speech and/or debate while in high school. We are contacting individuals about starting speech programs at their college or university. Many forensics teams are started as student organizations (and funds are available at most colleges and universities to support these types of organizations). The Minnesota Collegiate Forensics Association (MCFA) is ready to provide assistance to new programs. MCFA will help cover the cost of tournament fees and assist in finding lodging for the first year for new programs.

There is an active collegiate speech and debate circuit in Minnesota. Several intercollegiate speech and debate tournaments are held across Minnesota each year with a state tournament at the end of the competitive season. Students have the opportunity to compete in eleven individual events as well as two forms of debate. Speech tournaments are offered throughout the school year. Students compete in public speaking (like Persuasive, Informative, After Dinner Speaking), oral interpretation (like Prose, Drama, Poetry), limited preparation events (like Extemporaneous and Impromptu Speaking) and debate (like Parliamentary Debate and Lincoln Douglas Debate). Students can choose to compete in up to six events, plus debate, at a tournament.

Participation in speech and debate provides students with important research, critical thinking, organizational, and performance skills. In addition, time spent in forensics serves to improve a student's overall educational experience. Further, research reveals that speech participation is often ranked as one of a student's greatest memories from college and assists greatly in a student's career success. Forensics competition is preparation for life in many respects.

A list of collegiate events is attached. We hope you or someone you know might consider starting a program at your college or university. We will follow up with you in a few days to see if you have any questions about collegiate speech and starting a forensics program on your campus. In the meantime, if you have questions, you can contact us at _____ or call _____. Thank you and we look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Example Letter for Coaches

Dear MCFA Coaches,

Please share this information with your students. Minnesota Collegiate Forensics Association (MCFA) is working to recruit new schools to the speech and debate activity. Please ask your students if they have the names and contact information (if possible) of students who might be interested in starting a speech team on their campus.

MCFA is looking to start programs at additional universities and colleges across the state. In addition, we are committed to providing support and guidance to students starting new teams. We anticipate that most speech programs will start as student-directed student organizations. If you or your students know of friends who are attending schools without a program and who might be persuaded to start a program, please provide their name and contact information. Send information to:

Minnesota Collegiate Forensics Association: Growing Forensics
c/o
Address
City, State, Zip
Phone Number

We are particularly interested in starting forensic programs at any of the institutions listed below. Thank you for assisting with this effort.

List of Programs Without a Forensics Program

College of St. Scholastica, Duluth
St. Catherine University, St. Paul
Saint Mary's University, Winona
Winona State University, Winona
St. Thomas University, St. Paul
Hamline University, St. Paul
Martin Luther College, New Ulm
Metropolitan State University, St. Paul
Macalester College, St. Paul
Carleton College, Northfield
University of Minnesota-Morris
University of Minnesota-Duluth
University of Minnesota-Rochester
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
University of Minnesota-Crookston
Bemidji State University
Rochester College and Technical College, Rochester
St. John's University/College of St. Benedict, St. Joseph
Minnesota State University, Moorhead
Anoka Community College, Anoka
St. Paul Technical and Community College, St. Paul
Inver Hills Community College, Inver Hills
St. Cloud Technical and Community College, St. Cloud
Alexandria Technical College, Alexandria
Anoka-Ramsey Community College, Coon Rapids
Central Lakes College, Brainerd

Century College, White Bear Lake
 Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Cloquet
 Hibbing Community College, Hibbing
 Inver Hills Community College, Inver Grove Heights
 Itasca Community College, Grand Rapids
 Lake Superior College, Duluth
 Mesabi Range Community & Technical College, Virginia
 Minneapolis Community and Technical College,
 Minneapolis
 Minnesota State Community and Technical College, Detroit
 Lakes
 Minnesota West Community & Technical College, Canby
 North Hennepin Community College, Brooklyn Park
 Northland Community & Technical College, East Grand
 Forks
 Rainy River Community College, International Falls
 Ridgewater College, Hutchinson
 Riverland Community College, Albert Lea
 Rochester Community and Technical College, Rochester
 Saint Paul College, St. Paul
 Vermilion Community College, Ely
 Brown College, Mendota Heights
 Duluth Business University, Duluth
 Minnesota School of Business & Globe College, Brooklyn
 Center, Blaine, Oakdale, Plymouth, Richfield, Rochester,
 Shakopee, St. Cloud
 Rasmussen College, St. Cloud, Eden Prairie, Brooklyn Park,
 Lake Elmo, and Mankato

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