

Perceptions of Past Competitors Presentation of the Data

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Introduction

In the past five years several well established forensic programs in our region have been discontinued. The reasons given to justify these decisions often centered on a lack of resources available to sustain the programs. Certainly the presence of scarce resources in an academic setting is understandable, but what many current coaches and competitors found especially concerning was the perceived lack of resistance by faculty at those institutions who were themselves once forensic competitors and coaches. In fact, in some cases former competitors were active and vocal supporters of the decision to end their institution's forensic program. The idea for this project developed as we discussed what might cause someone who once gained enormous benefits from the activity to willingly encourage the disbandment of a program. Our initial reactions were angry and defensive. As active participants in forensics who commit much of our professional and personal energies to the activity, we felt betrayed by our former colleagues. How could one time kindred spirits shift loyalties? Once our emotions had time to cool and we were able to gain perspective, we realized that our best reaction would be to stop speculating on the motives of others and actually conduct some research that might provide insight into how former competitors in forensics currently perceive the activity. Perhaps by understanding their perspectives, we as active forensic educators could nurture collaborative, rather than adversarial relationships.

Method

Once we decided to pursue this project, we struggled with the selection of a data collection method. Given members of our target population are all still currently active in college/university academics or administration, we wanted an approach that would provide in-depth insight into participants' perceptions, but also maintain participant anonymity. We are a relatively small discipline and when one focuses on an even smaller subgroup within the field, the potential for possible bias and intimidation becomes plausible. We felt participants needed to feel that they could respond candidly without fear of retaliation should their perceptions of forensics be negative.

To help ensure anonymity, we chose to use a survey that could be administered online. We posted our survey using the web based program to which our institution has an educational membership. A member of our campus Information and Technology Services office assisted us with uploading the survey as well as retrieving the data. The use of this third party further protected the identities of respondents. The survey included a combination of closed ended demographic questions, Likert scale based items regarding past and present attitudes toward forensics, as well as some open-ended prompts requesting reflection on key issues. We coded the responses to the open-ended questions using basic grounded theory coding techniques and identified several reoccurring themes.

Given the specialized population needed for our study, we chose to solicit participants through both direct request as well as word of mouth. An advantage we have as researchers is a collective experience working with forensics of over 70 years. Based on our own experience and knowledge, as well as input from other colleagues, we developed a list of potential participants. Using the National Communication Association membership directory, we were able to contact these individuals directly through their listed e-mail address. Our e-mail request explained the project and included the link to the posted survey. We also asked participants to consider forwarding the e-mail to any colleagues they have who might fit our desired population. Because we have no way of knowing to whom the e-mail might have been forwarded we are uncertain of exactly how many people received the survey request. We estimate that about 125 people were contacted.

We received 48 completed survey responses.¹ Of these respondents, 96% had competed in forensics for four or more semesters, 80% competed between 1970 and 1999, with an equal number falling into each of those 3 designated decades. The remaining participants were equally divided between having competed prior to 1970 or after 2000. Additionally, 90% of the participants had served as a forensic coach at some point in their career, with almost half of those individuals coaching for nine or more years.

¹ Some respondents did not answer all items.

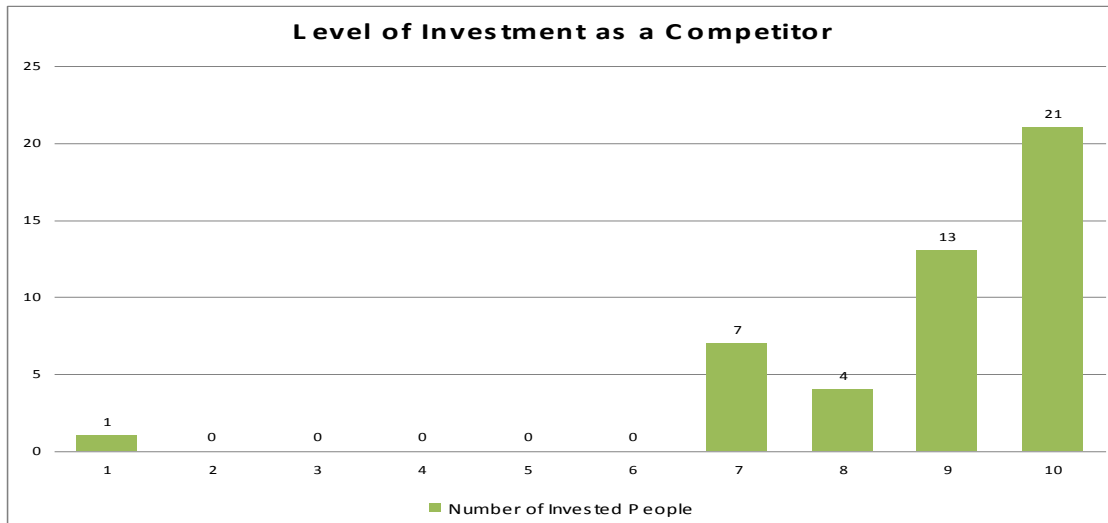
The basic demographic details demonstrate most of our respondents had significant involvement in forensics prior to their current positions. As one might expect from former forensic competitors, our respondents provided us with thoughtful and articulate responses.

Results

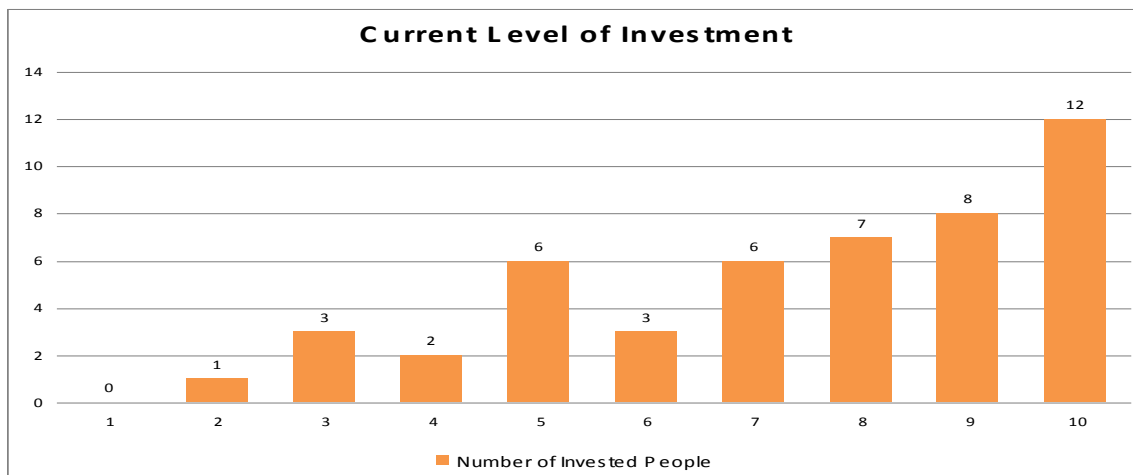
In order to present the data, we will first review the general attitudes participants revealed when responding to the Likert items, and then offer a detailed

overview of the themes found in the answers to the open-ended questions. Initially, respondents self-reported a high level of investment in forensics when they were competing (graph 1). Current support for the activity did decline as the level of investment felt lessened once people left the activity (graph 2). This decrease in support is expected given that respondents are no longer actively involved in a forensic program. In general, however the overall feeling toward forensics is still positive.

Graph 1



Graph 2



Our purpose in asking questions which measured basic attitudes was primarily to help contextualize the more in-depth responses given to the open-ended prompts. Our assumption that attitudes toward forensics become conflicted when one moves to holding non-forensic positions within an academic institution was supported. When responding to

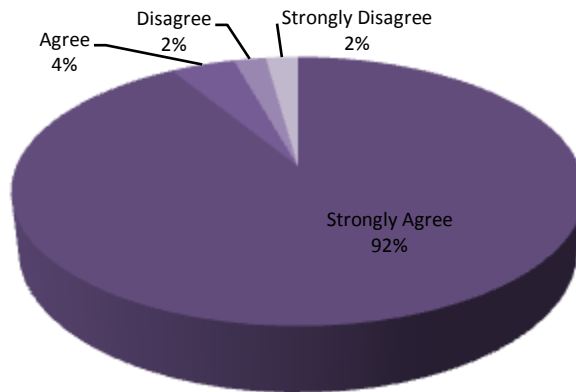
the Likert scaled items, respondents showed a generally positive attitude toward the benefits they gained from forensics, but a weakened resolve to commit resources toward sustaining programs. 92% of respondents strongly agreed that forensics provides students with valuable experiences (graph 3) and 85% strongly agreed that participation in foren-

sics contributed to success in their academic careers (graph 4). Yet, when asked if a Communication Department should provide financial support for a forensic program, only 69% strongly agreed (graph 5). This attitude was consistent with the results to the question of whether a Communication Department should provide personnel support to a forensic program to which only 68% of respondents strongly agreed (graph 6). Even fewer, 60%, strongly agreed that the Director of Forensics should be a faculty member in a Communication Department (graph 7). Although these basic attitude assessments provide some insight into the perceptions past competitors currently have toward forensics, the qualitative data reveals possible reasons for these shifts in support.

The coding of the responses to the open-ended survey prompts revealed six common themes around which responses seemed to center. The themes are: educational value; impact of competition; scarcity of resources; disciplinary identity; conflicting goals; and concerns with organizational culture. Certainly several of these themes are linked in various ways, but in the interest of clarity of discussion we will deal with each individually. For many of the themes, respondents provided comments that praised and critiqued forensics with respect to the related issues. A dialectical tension of sorts emerged in several of the themes.

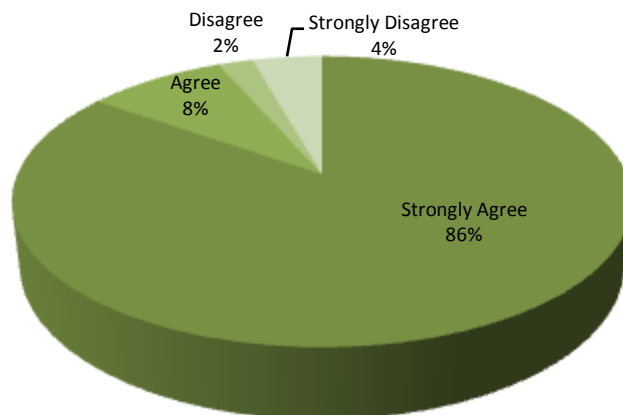
Graph 3

Forensics offers valuable experiences for students



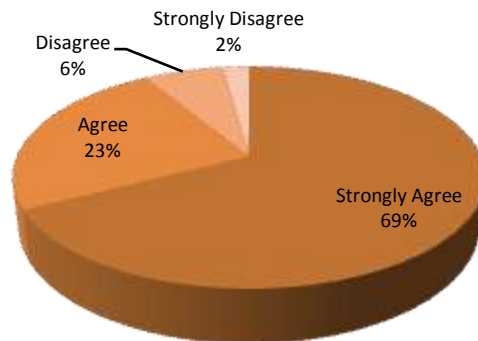
Graph 4

Participation in forensics contributed to success in my academic career



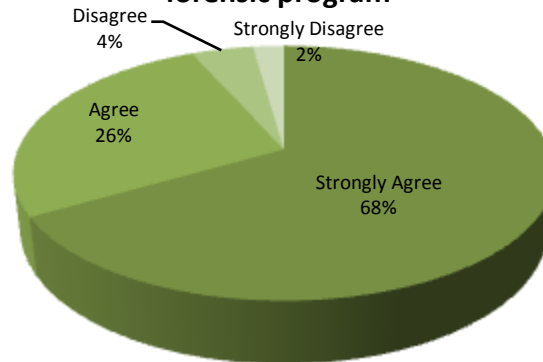
Graph 5

A Communication Department should provide financial support for a forensic program



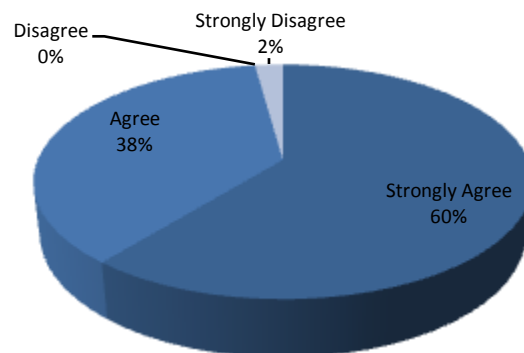
Graph 6

A Communication Department should provide personnel support for a forensic program



Graph 7

The Director of Forensics should be a faculty member in a Communication Department



Educational Value

Initially, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the educational value of forensics with respect to both academic and life skills. The most frequently cited academic benefits were improved speaking and writing skills, developed critical thinking and competence when researching. One respondent stated forensic participation, “refined my ability to think on my feet, to organize and synthesize material, and to analyze ideas and events. It also taught me valuable research skills” (respondent 11). Although numerous respondents echoed that they acquired similar skills, a few made mention of how the introduction to such academic pursuits impacted their overall perspective on learning. Respondent 27 articulated this stating, “I learned to love learning. I honed essential skills for research and writing that served me well in graduate school. I learned to think clearly and quickly, organizing my thoughts well. Forensics helped me find my voice and articulate my beliefs. It also ignited a life-long intellectual curiosity.”

Although supporters of forensics will frequently cite the quality academic instruction participants receive outside the classroom as a benefit of the activity, those connected to forensics are also well aware of the interpersonal growth experienced during involvement. As a community we do not often document the growth in “life skills” our students undergo while participating. Several of the survey respondents, however, did reflect on the personal growth they experienced as a result of competing in forensics. One respondent wrote:

I view my involvement with individual events as the most influential activity of my life. I am a better teacher, writer, time manager, and overall communicator as a result of my involvement in the activity. Professionally, this often means I can juggle more obligations, teach more effective courses, and write more effortlessly than most of my colleagues. My experience as a coach also aided me with budgets and provided administrative opportunities that are rare for people in their 20's. (Respondent 35)

Clearly this individual sees his/her involvement in forensics as invaluable. Perhaps one reason such personal growth is possible is that forensics nurtures unique mentoring relationships between faculty and students. The sheer amount of time spent together as a team allows coaches to know students on a deeper level, and therefore provide more individualized guidance. This educational benefit was mentioned by survey participants as indicated when one explained, “It was forensics that got me interested in the world of ideas. Coaches and peers were role models for things like reading good literature, arguing ideas, being interested in politics etc” (respondent 22).

Another added, “There is little that compares to the mentoring relationships one could develop with undergraduate students. Many were closer than any other level of education. Including graduate mentoring” (respondent 32). Many of us currently involved in forensics would concur that it is the interpersonal connections we are able to build with others in the activity that sustain us.

Some survey respondents were not as optimistic about the educational value of the activity. Usually these comments seemed to center around a feeling that the culture of the organization had changed since their era and consequently some learning opportunities have been lost. Respondent 40 articulates this concern clearly, “There is a culture that impedes serious academic engagement in the activity and keeps students from engaging in serious academic activity/siphons their energy away from it.” Specific concerns mentioned include: “some forms of debate undervalue critical thinking and effective public speaking” (respondent 19); “high speed debate, stupid cases, judge selection processes that make debate a game” (respondent 39); “focus on the judge to the exclusion of the other audience members” (respondent 20); “lack of concern for the public dimension of debate” (respondent 44); “move away from communication to machine gun fire speech” (respondent 30); “tournaments every weekend do not allow time to hone speeches. Students would benefit more by improving in between tournaments rather than just going to lots of them” (respondent 34). This list of grievances is no different from recent concerns regarding the activity being discussed by current forensic coaches and participants at conference panels and business meetings. Perhaps we should be comforted that our potential allies have a developed understanding of critical issues in the activity. Regardless, we need to heed the warning that “there is a growing perception among faculty that forensic skills are no longer developed as previously” (respondent 11).

Ironically, despite the almost unanimous opinion that forensics teaches students valuable skills in argumentation, public presentation and research, some respondents did mention a disillusionment with the activity due to “poor academic attendance and performance of some forensic competitors” (respondent 24). One participant showed concern that “many graduate students are coaxed into coaching and their course work suffers because of the activity's time commitment” (respondent 13). If our activity serves as an outlet to teach skills well beyond what is experienced in a typical classroom setting, we certainly lose significant credibility when our “advanced” students make irresponsible decisions regarding the balance between their forensic participation and academic course performance. When asked to speculate on major reasons why forensic programs are disappearing, one respondent frankly

stated, "It's hard to sit in a faculty meeting and defend a team whose cumulative GPA rivals low sports teams" (respondent 11).

Generally, the negative critiques of the educational value of forensics were based in concerns over the impact of competition. As one self-reflective respondent noted, "The activity can sure move from being academically sound to a full-contact sport (competitively speaking) very fast. It is difficult to maintain a healthy balance. I failed to do so" (respondent 26). The balance between education and competition in forensics is tenuous at best. Numerous survey respondents reflected on how competition has shaped and changed the activity.

Impact of Competition

Although some respondents identified the value of competition, as expressed in the claim, "I believe that a forensic program should be educational as well as competitive" (respondent 45), many did not like how competition, rather than education, seemed to drive decision making among coaches and forensic leaders. One respondent complained of, "excessive competitiveness of some coaches that do not place education first" (respondent 30). Another pointed out that "really competitive programs have been forced to 'professionalize' their staff" (respondent 37) which in turn prevents these individuals from serving their departments in any other way than securing forensic wins.

Respondents also offered criticism regarding the shifts in larger organizational policies and practices that further lead to the glorification of competitive goals. When asked why he/she chose to leave forensics, one respondent explained it was an:

increasing heavy emphasis given to qualifying for nationals. This is evidenced by the increasing number of two day swing tournaments that diminish the number of rounds competed and judge critiques available for the goal of creating two chances to qualify where previously there had been one. A clear message is being sent that good competitors are ones who get qualified and good teams qualify massive amounts of people. (respondent 11)

Another respondent echoed these concerns regarding national tournament qualification procedures stating, "Legs are corrupt and lead to poor forensic practices. Same for at-large bids for the NDT. Too much focus on winning at specific tournaments rather than on entire experience" (respondent 15). Simply put, many of the survey respondents felt there is currently, "too much emphasis on winning" (respondent 12), which has led them to harbor negative feelings about the current state of forensics.

When asked to consider reasons that might explain why many forensic programs are failing, sever-

al respondents linked their responses to issues tied to the pressures related to building and maintaining competitive success. When discussing why some potential supporters of forensics might perceive maintaining a team as an either/or dilemma, one respondent argued "there is no middle ground to occupy if they like the activity but don't want to make it their life" (respondent 21). Either those involved commit full force to maintaining a highly competitive program, or they choose to not have a program at all. Should a program choose to pursue a high level of competitive success, there is still room for criticism from some survey respondents who argue, "It is all about individuals winning, rather than contributing to the culture of the local community. Forensics serves no purpose for the general public" (respondent 29). This participant went on to speculate that this focus on competition has alienated those not involved in the activity and "as a result people on or off campus don't care what happens to forensic programs and they die away as the dedicated people who kept them going retire or finally tire." Although we as current forensic educators do wrestle with the issue of the role of competition within our activity, perhaps we need to consider more carefully how an emphasis on competition may be eroding support from possible alumni allies.

Scarcity of Resources

In times of tight academic budgets and a growing economic down-turn, the presence of scarce resources as a theme is not surprising. None of the comments connected to resources were particularly positive or optimistic. Generally comments centered on how there simply are not enough resources to easily sustain forensic programs. Often when we think of resources we limit our focus to finances. Certainly those responding to our survey did discuss the monetary cost of forensic programs as a possible drawback, but many of the comments focused on less obvious areas where resources are sparse. Specifically, respondents discussed resources in terms of three key areas: inadequate time; the lack of Ph.D. trained forensic professionals; and a cost/reward balance

Initially, many respondents discussed the issue of time. Specifically, how when one is coaching there simply is not enough time to meet the needs of the program, one's professional responsibilities as well as nurture one's personal life. As one respondent admitted, "I was worn out from travel, financial concerns about the program, using my own funds to help support the program (respondent 37). Another complained "I tired of the sheer amount of work required to coach a successful program" (respondent 24). When answering the question "what were your reasons to stop being involved with a forensic program" more than 10 individuals mentioned the amount of time forensics takes, specifically the travel

commitments. Respondent 9 confessed, “it is simply exhausting to keep up the schedule year after year”. This time pressure helps explain the high rate of burnout among forensic professionals, which in many ways relates to the second key scarce resource discussed by survey respondents.

Several individuals mentioned that there simply are not enough forensic coaches who have earned their doctorates. “Having disciplinary trained coaches who can ground their coaching in rhetorical and communication theory” (respondent 45) was mentioned as being vital to program health, as was the ability “of program directors to argue for the pedagogical benefits of the activity over the competitive component” (respondent 12). The perception seemed to be coaches at the MA level or who serve as adjuncts cannot provide the professional and intellectual support a program needs. One respondent suggested, “Quality has gone down with adjuncts and MA instructors as the director (respondent 34). Another added there are “diminished tenure track directors who fight for programs when budgets get tough. Only having staff or MA people doesn’t hold sway for many departments (respondent 15). In some cases program leadership has been delegated to graduate students, which to some survey respondents is equally as harmful to the activity. One such former graduate coach explained:

A large and successful program that I led for many years is one that has since disappeared. The reason in that case, I believe, is that the program was run by graduate students as opposed to a full-time member of the faculty. The rest of the department failed to see the benefits of the program, and without an advocate among the faculty, it was lost. (respondent 27)

Granted, there are few active coaches who have their doctorate degrees and are in tenure track positions. Yet in many ways this has become somewhat of a cyclical problem. Some respondents pointed out that there are fewer and fewer options for people to seek solid forensic training while pursuing a doctorate degree and once they complete their training there is a “lack of tenure-line DOF jobs in the field (respondent 35). This is resulting in what one person called, “The erosion of training of forensics directors in graduate programs (respondent 25). Another added:

Fewer colleges that offer graduate degrees have forensic programs. When students get away from forensics during the graduate years, they are less likely to return to it...At the time I coached, there were a number of coaches that stayed with the activity for a long time. The maturity and expertise that they brought to the activity are hard to replicate with a coaching pool

that has a critical mass that is starting to be much younger and less experienced. (respondent 45)

Further, the fact that many of the current coaching professionals are in non-tenure track positions contributes to significant turnover. As explained by one individual, “You look at most programs without a ‘lifer’ it’s a position in constant flux. This makes the DOF position (and fielding a team) a constant headache for administrators... each time we lose someone (because of burnout or lack of pay) we must justify hiring someone new; lose that battle once and your program no longer exists (respondent 35).

The scarcity of long-term, well-trained coaches is a problem of which current forensic professionals are aware. As much as we appreciate colleagues in our discipline who also recognize the need for active coach advocates in departments, we do find their expressed concern somewhat ironic. All the people we directly invited to complete our survey had completed their Doctorate degrees. One can assume, then, that since 90% of our participants did coach at one point in their career, the majority of our survey respondents have in some way contributed to the exact scarcity of human resources that they are critiquing.

The final area around which comments related to resources centered is the issue of a cost/reward balance. Respondents recognize the financial commitment an institution must make to support a forensic program and believe there needs to be a measurable balance between that financial cost and the benefits gained. Some expressed the opinion that a program “takes a lot of funding and does not typically generate credit hours” (respondent 30). In academics, credit hours are the magic measurable marker of value and any department, program or course which doesn’t “carry its weight” is perceived as the first to the chopping block. Additionally, some respondents argued forensics “can be a huge drain on time and resources of a department with only a small body of students really being served” (respondent 9).

The drain on resources which seemed to cause the greatest concern was once again related to the *time* forensics takes away from the faculty involved. When expressing reasons why it might not be good for forensic programs to be associated with Communication departments, one respondent stated, “they take a lot of time of the faculty members that coach. Those faculty members could be working with students on research or other projects to help mentor rather than forensics practice (respondent 3). Perhaps respondent 9 explained the tension best writing, “It is more expensive to travel to regional and national tournaments, to have a number of faculty and graduate assistants who can serve as coaches, etc. The costs are no longer worth the limited return

to most departments. That same money can serve a greater number of students if put to different uses". Many of our survey participants seem to think like administrators, perhaps because several of them are.

Disciplinary Identity

Most of the comments which fall into the theme of disciplinary identity appeared in response to the question "what are the positive and/or negative aspects of a forensic program being associated with a Communication Department". Although this theme is not as developed as others, these reflections reveal some interesting tensions. Respondents identified both benefits and disadvantages of linking forensics to the discipline. In terms of benefits the more frequently cited were, "recruitment to the major and minor, positive public relations, alumni support, and national recognition (respondent 41). Others added forensics can "be the public face of the department" (respondent 19) and it "can be a highlight of an otherwise undistinguished discipline (respondent 15). Although several cited the advantages of recruitment and positive public relations, some respondents were not as supportive of the historical attachment of forensics to communication departments.

The concern seemed tied to a larger argument in the discipline regarding to what degree should the field hold onto its public address origins. Many departments have dropped the term "speech" from their titles now preferring Communications Studies as a more accurate name. How this relates to the role of forensics within communication departments is explained when respondent 9 writes:

The nature of communication departments themselves has changed. Interpersonal, organizational, intercultural etc, areas mean that rhetoric/debate/public speaking no longer define a department. As such, the activity no longer accurately reflects a department's academic activity and lead to the same old belief across campus that all the Comm. Department does is teach speech.

Another respondent counters this arguing, "too many departments are indicating that forensics is not 'central' to what they do, while simultaneously offering countless public speaking classes for profit and graduate assistantships" (respondent 35). Perhaps one of the key tensions revealed in this study is found in this basic debate. We cannot both simultaneously praise and shun our history.

Conflicting Goals

This same conflicted relationship with history is also found in the theme which explores respondents' professional and personal goals. The number of respondents who directly attributed their decision to choose a career in academics to their experience as a

forensic competitor was exciting. Comments such as, "I majored in communication because of forensics and this experience contributed to my going to graduate school to get an MA and PhD. I trace each degree back to forensics (respondent 9) and "Forensics influenced my choice to pursue graduate school. My scholarship and pedagogy for the first half of my academic career was largely shaped by forensics" (respondent 32) were common. Respondents also reflected on the networking advantages forensic provided as well as the positive impact of mentoring. One individual wrote, "It definitely opened the door to graduate assistantships and to networking contacts that are still vital to my academic career today" (respondent 41). The desire to stay connected with forensic professionals led others to the field. Respondent 17 admitted, "Absent my intercollegiate debate experience I would have gone to law school. The chance to work closely with several gifted forensic educators led me to pursue a graduate degree in communication". "My mentors were my coaches" wrote another, "I would not have earned a doctorate unless I was in forensics" (respondent 20).

Despite this initial passion for forensics, survey respondents are *past* forensic participants. All eventually chose to leave the activity. One particularly eloquent statement best summarizes the transition from forensic past to the present. "The activity took me from one place in life to another. Then it seemed over. To this day I have friends in the forensics community but on the whole the community seemed a different sort of club than I wanted to be a part of long-term—BUT, I'm very glad I was in for awhile. It did change my life for the better (respondent 22). The reasons cited for leaving the "club" were varied, but most were related to a desire to pursue new professional and personal goals.

Given the unique skill set Directors of Forensics develop, it comes as no surprise that many survey respondents left forensics because they were asked to take on administrative roles. Several made comments such as, "New opportunities were developing for me career wise in terms of moving into senior faculty responsibilities and moving into administrative roles" (respondent 45) and "After a decade of directing our forensic program it was suggested by colleagues and by my dean that I would make a good department chair" (respondent 17). Some, however, were concerned with basic survival in the university. These respondents wrote of fears related to receiving tenure and the lack of respect they received from non-forensic colleagues. One individual confessed he/she left forensics because, "I saw many of my colleagues who were prevented from achieving tenure and promotion because of the different (or lack of value) placed on coaching and directing forensic programs" (respondent 41). Another explained the origin of this bias:

Forensics used to be an entry into the discipline. People with debate and IE backgrounds commonly populated departments of Speech, Speech Communication and the like. Graduate programs in the discipline commonly recruited graduate students with backgrounds in forensics. As the emphasis increasingly shifted to more publications in both the graduate institutions, but increasingly undergraduate programs, the emphasis in hiring and promotion made it difficult for forensic-oriented faculty to be valued in their departments. (respondent 32)

When one reflects on these comments in light of the observations made with respect to the lack of Ph.D. level coaching professionals, the reasons explaining the exodus from forensics becomes more apparent.

In addition to a desire to meet professional goals which seemed to conflict with forensic participation, many respondents also mentioned the need to pursue personal goals that appeared unattainable while coaching. Family, specifically parenthood, was frequently cited as a reason for leaving forensics. Many reported a need, “to watch my children grow” (respondent 14). A respondent explained, “I was torn by the growing sense that my own children (aged 10 and 7 at the time of leaving) were not going to be there for me if I continued not being there for them” (respondent 32). Another joked, “it is difficult to explain to a young child that Dad will be gone for three days because Johnny needs a prose leg” (respondent 35). Although many active forensic professionals do successfully parent children, they would be the first to confirm that it is a difficult juggling act to perform.

For others the desired personal goals were not as specific. In some cases, an individual simply felt he/she had nothing left to give to the activity and in turn was ready to move on. One respondent described his/her reasons for leaving the activity as “I wanted to do other things with my life. The realization that I’d accomplished all I could” (respondent 15). Perhaps the best way to ensure former forensic participants will continue to maintain the positive feelings that initially lead them to the field is to create an environment where people leave because they are fulfilled, not because they have been drained by the stress of the job.

Concerns with Organizational Culture

This final theme addresses some of the common concerns respondents mentioned regarding the organizational health of forensics. This section of the paper is revealing in that the comments discussed here provide us with the perspective of informed observers looking in on our culture which was at one time their culture as well. What they see is not always positive.

Initially several expressed concerns with what they perceive to be the “politics” of the organization. One individual commented, “I dislike the politics (especially as a coach and DOF). I feel that some programs mimic some of the negative practices of athletic programs” (respondent 32). An even stronger critique was offered by Respondent 7 who argued, “Competition favors elite teams and those with resources. The politics of forensics is sickening...culture of elitism”. The concerns with politics were not always linked to a perceived disparity in resources. Some critiqued forensics for being too insular. One wrote, “I do believe forensics is its own little world. Critics talk of its ‘cult like’ quality and there is something to this critique” (respondent 22).

Some respondents also expressed concern about perceived ethical violations within the activity. Coaches writing speeches for students was the most frequently mentioned offense, but respondents were generally bothered by any actions where it seems coaches are doing the work for students. For many, these ethical violations link directly back to the perception that competition has destroyed the educational value of forensics. As one person stated, “I firmly believe that there are unethical coaching practices done in some programs (writing PA speeches, ‘creating’ literature for interp, etc) that are stains on the activity” (respondent 9). Another adds, “Forensics needs to strengthen its ethics. Too much is allowed to slide because you don’t want to upset coaches/programs” (respondent 23). As forensic professionals we must recognize that these negative perceptions of our activity exist and be diligent in our attempts to ease interpersonal tensions between programs and also hold ourselves to high ethical standards.

The presentation of the data from our study is simply a first step in a larger project. Our hope is that as a community we can reflect on the insights offered by former forensic participants. Such reflection will not only help us better align ourselves with these potentially strong allies, but will also provide us with the opportunity to see ourselves from a new perspective.