

*The attached position paper was presented at the 75th annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association. It was presented to surface issues relating to differences in perceptions regarding national forensics competition. The panel at which this paper was given attracted a very small number of audience members and reactors. Consequently, the ideas in the paper have not received much attention. For the purpose of the philosophical concerns topic area relating to organizational hierarchies of Individual Events associations, this paper is offered to examine issues relating to various organizational groups within the forensics community. Although it specifically addresses nationals competition, the substance of the paper definitely relates to differences between forensics organizations.*

## Community College Programs: How Have the AFA Nationals Affected This Population?

Mike Wartman  
Normandale Community College

Because the content of this paper may inflame the proverbial ire of forensics coaches and zealots, I offer the following apologies, caveats and defensive rationalizations:

- Apology One:** For convenience sake, I have written the paper in direct reference to the AFA-NIET. This is not done to exclude the NFA as a national tournament, but to specifically address the problems that may be associated with both.
- Apology Two:** I think the AFA-NIET is a fantastic model for a national tournament. A tournament which provides competition for the top qualifiers is consistent with competition theory in determining national championships.
- Apology Three:** The ideas represented in this paper do not reflect an empirical or quantitative examination of community college perceptions of the AFA-NIET. Rather, the paper presents generalized perceptions of inevitable differences in forensics philosophy, tournament management practices and competition.
- Apology Four:** I represent a personal perspective that the value of a forensics program should not be determined by trophies, qualified students and national awards. The best interest of the supporting college and the forensics participants are best served by the non-competitive nature of competition.

### Apology Five:

Many of the problems discussed in this paper may blame the AFA-NIET as the culprit, when in reality, the problems are those of the entire forensics community. Non-AFA schools may have their own rigorous procedures for qualification which result in the same problems as those generated by the AFA-NIET.

But enough apologies, what is the point? In viewing the AFA-NIET from afar, I am concerned with the attitudes, perceptions and procedures leading up to and qualifying for the AFA-NIET. I have no quarrel with the actual tournament. In fact, I have little knowledge of what even happens at the tournament, politically or competitively. However, the AFA-NIET is omnipresent throughout the forensics season due to the qualifying procedures it uses for the national competition.

In this position paper, I will discuss some of the problems that may be evident as a consequence of the AFA-NIET and qualifying procedures. Secondly, I will provide some idealistic suggestions designed to minimize the perceived difficulties. As stated in Apology Three, these difficulties may be the inevitable result of tournament overlap involving schools with different national tournament allegiances. However, the fact that these concerns have been expressed by various coaches and competitors may indicate some shared ideas regarding forensics problems.

### CONCERN ONE

The AFA and AFA-NIET competition descriptions and rules have become the standardized rules for many tournaments. Tournaments that used to provide their own rules in tournament invitations (rules which may have been unique to that tournament) now conveniently refer to the AFA rules. In some forensics circles this move toward standardization has been applauded. Standardization of criteria should provide fairness and consistency in competition. But with the inclusion of AFA, NFA, Pi Kappa Delta and Phi Rho Pi schools at the same tournaments, the non-AFA schools may be forced to adapt to the AFA rules. Inconsistencies in duet interp, duet acting and dramatic duo rules and program oral interp involving 2 or 3 literary

genres are both examples in which a participant may need to adjust to the AFA rules because they have become the accepted rules for most tournaments. The participant may need to adjust, but why to the AFA rules in many situations? I'm simply uncomfortable with what I perceive to be a movement toward standardized AFA rules in many tournaments. I think this has limited the breadth and flexibility in individual events.

An unfortunate consequence of this movement has been the elimination of new, experimental or creative events at many tournaments. An attitude of "why bother, it doesn't qualify or get me a leg" appears prevalent in students and coaches. This attitude contradicts the educational and real life applications of forensics. An exception to the experimental event problem is, of course, the AFA Experimental Event. The branding of this event as the AFA experimental event had legitimized the event at many tournaments. Suddenly, program oral interp is popping up at tournaments which would not have dreamed of sponsoring the event prior to its inclusion as an AFA event. The Minnesota State Tournament and Organization has a constitutional provision stating that the AFA Experimental Event and the Experimental Event at the State Tournament cannot be the same event. I find this wisdom appropriate for AFA and non-AFA schools. (Even though I proposed it myself) I would argue, without evidence, that many forensics participants would not dream of entering an event not on the AFA's Magic 10 or Experimental Event entry if they are not qualified in their "primary or real" events. If a student cannot relax or experiment prior to the qualification for the AFA-NIET, the purpose of such rigor in qualification is suspect.

#### CONCERN TWO

The number of schools attending a tournament or the number of entries in an event have become a major source of coach and student concern. For a tournament

or event to produce qualifying entries and legs for the AFA-NIET, certain numbers must exist. A tournament or event's legitimacy should not be determined by how many legs they may produce. Yet, student and coach comments consistently reflect their awareness (and at times dissatisfaction) over numbers at a tournament. Granted, the AFA-NIET has set up guidelines for determining eligibility that should be accepted and honored. But, should a participant be minimizing competing in an event in which only one leg may result? When the end product of qualifying becomes the primary reason for student competition, the qualifying procedure should, again, be suspect.

#### CONCERN THREE

Contestant attitudes toward each other in competition may be affected by the qualifying procedures for the AFA-NIET. A competitor who wonders aloud or under his or her breath toward another competitor "aren't you already qualified in this event" has missed the value of forensics competition. Despite my coaching colleagues' reactions that their students would never utter such profanity, I have consistently overheard this direct comment, have had my own students report these comments to me, or have heard allusions to this attitude toward other competitors. Again, qualifying for the AFA-NIET may have primary importance for some programs and competitors, but the exclusion of previously-qualified contestants (or those unconcerned with qualifying) in thought or action is unconscionable. Even in the best interests of competition, competition from the best competitors should provide a challenge.

#### CONCERN FOUR

LEGS! LEGS! LEGS! If the AFA ever changes a logo, a representation of the three qualifying legs should dominate the design. The discussion of legs/qualifying tournaments is evident at all levels of competition.

- \* "how many legs will this event provide at this tournament?"
- \* "how many legs do you have in Prose?"
- \* "how many legs does your extemporaneous need?"
- \* award ceremonies often center on the joy that in poetry there will be three legs for the AFA-NIET
- \* computer programs and results provide immediate leg information

Coaching in a program which has no "need" for legs, I am bombarded by team members questions on what legs are and how to get them. Seriously, the process contestants go through to qualify and receive their legs may cause countless other problems. In a position paper for the "Perspectives on Individual Events Conference," I argued for the problems associated with double entering. Among these were tournament logistical difficulties, decreased audience members for listening and intense competition for individual and team sweepstakes awards. These problems are also directly applicable for competitors intent on qualifying for the AFA-NIET. Contestants must simply enter as many events in as many tournaments to meet their schools' or the AFA-NIET's qualification criteria in those events. Intent on qualifying in as many events as possible, the contestants may simply be causing too many additional problems because of their entry.

#### **CONCERN FIVE**

The following concerns are entirely based on "rumors" of these activities happening at various tournaments. If they do exist, the seriousness of the problem warrants definite examination.

- \* Last minute or pop up tournaments close to the end of the forensics season and prior to nationals. Tournaments being held solely to provide last chance opportunities to qualify for the AFA-NIET minimize the entire qualification procedure.
- \* Run down tournaments in which tournaments are held and completed until qualification is completed. I hope this is only a rumor.

- \* Tournament managers bending entry guidelines to add more non-sweep entries but possible AFA-NIET qualifiers as individuals. If maximum entry guidelines exist, they should be adhered to.

Overall, these concerns are not the direct result of the AFA-NIET. These problems persist in the attitudes of forensics participants and coaches. If the vehicle of the AFA-NIET and its qualification procedures are responsible for these concerns, then the vehicle and qualification should be examined. The following ideas and suggestions are offered to provide general insight on attitudes and changes. In providing suggestions to what I feel are some of the difficulties related to the AFA-NIET, it must be stated that there are always going to be problems associated with any type of competition. Participants and coaches pressured by themselves or the schools they represent may need to be less ideal in their attitudes toward competition. I do, however, feel that suggestions need to be discussed to resolve some of the perceived problems.

#### **SUGGESTION ONE**

In arguing the merits and budget for forensics as an activity, factors other than numbers of qualified students, award winners and national championships should be emphasized. A program which has to qualify students to survive as a program will invariably be more driven by competition than a program that has other criteria for evaluation. Arguments regarding the additional benefits of the forensics program may serve to sell the program in areas other than competition and therefore eliminate the pressure toward results.

#### **SUGGESTION TWO**

The AFA-NIET should simply NOT be emphasized as the "end all" to the forensics season. Because the AFA-NIET does "crown" individual winners and team awards it is inevitable to look at the tournament as the event to finish the season. Bottom line, however, is that all contestants cannot win first place or even make it to

an out round at the AFA-NIET. What should be emphasized throughout the year and at the AFA-NIET are the billions of benefits that may come out of the forensics activity and season regardless of the AFA-NIET even existing.

#### **SUGGESTION THREE**

Participants and coaches should be frank in accepting the fact that all competitors will NOT qualify for the AFA-NIET. If memory serves correctly, the AFA-NIET was developed for this reason alone! For a coach to continually look for endless ways to qualify a contestant who has not qualified through the forensics season and the district tournament sheds some insight on the ethical practices of that coach. A coach should not minimize a participants chances to quality, but a degree of reality must be communicated by the coach.

#### **SUGGESTION FOUR**

The semantic emphasis on qualification and legs should be lessened in all areas concerned with qualification. The qualification procedures and results should be handled by the individual school and the district committees designed to process this information. Award ceremonies and publicized emphasis on AFA-NIET related concerns do not need to be such an obvious part of tournaments in which non-AFA schools are part of the tournament. This may seem like a petty suggestion, but it could lessen the overuse of the qualification procedures and language.

#### **SUGGESTION FIVE**

Bickering on the relative status, of national forensics organizations and their national tournament needs to stop. Conversation and bragging rights regarding which tournament produces the true national champion or team is ludicrous. The Phi Rho Pi National Tournament, for example, is no less of a tournament because no individual is awarded the top honor in an event. There is nothing wrong with a

national organization having a different philosophy and format to qualify or run a tournament.

#### **SUGGESTION SIX**

The AFA should investigate tournaments which may be hastily scheduled and administered. If last minute tournaments are being hosted simply to act as a last chance opportunity to quality contestants then the entire qualification procedure is undermined and in need of examination.

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The perceived problems with the AFA-NIET are probably minor when compared to the unique experience the tournament provides for participants and schools. With this experience however are some unique problems which may be consequence of the AFA-NIET. Hopefully, participant attitudes regarding competition and the qualification procedure may receive attention by the AFA, coaches and participants in the tournament. Ideally, the AFA-NIET experience should be judged by the experience generated by the tournament and not entirely by the competitive experience alone.