

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FORENSIC EDUCATORS

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John Dewey in the 1920s suggested that moral rules in America were like castles built in air and had little contact with the affairs of everyday life. "What we need," Dewey said, "is to have these moral principles brought down to the ground, through their statements in social and psychological terms ... All the rest is mint, anise, and cumin" (Hassett, p. 49).

As we head toward the 1990s, Americans appear to be more concerned than ever with the issue of "ethics" and, as John Dewey stated, the need to have ethical principals "brought down to the ground." This surge of interest in studying moral behavior has led to the development of courses in ethical behavior as well as the development of more explicit codes of conduct in business, professional, and educational settings. It seems only appropriate, then, that we as forensic educators should explore the ethical nature of forensics. As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore ethical considerations to which forensic educators who serve as coaches, tournament directors, judges, and re-cruiters should aspire.

In 1984, the Ethics of Advocacy Committee at the National Developmental Conference on Forensics defined forensics as primarily an educational activity. In addition, that same Committee defined "ethical behavior"

as that which promotes the educational goals of the activity while "unethical behavior" hinders such educational goals (Parson, 1984, p. 14). With this educational perspective as the focus of this discussion, I will posit three specific ethical responsibilities to which I believe forensic educators should aspire. While these ethical responsibilities do not dictate specific policy, they do provide an educationally-based philosophy from which specific ethical policy may be formed.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY No. 1

Forensic educators must instill students with the belief that virtually every communicative act, because of its power to influence, carries with it ethical obligations.

Forensics cannot be viewed by educators, administrators, or students as

merely as "academic exercise" with little relevance to real-world experiences. Instead, the forensic activity must be perceived as a vital training ground for the development of communication skills students will use continually throughout their lives. Such skills as reasoning and critical thinking skills, effective writing skills, researching skills, effective delivery skills, and interpersonal communication skills are all developed through the forensic activity. An educationally-based commitment to the development of these skills is an ethical responsibility for forensic educators.

Because of the necessity for such an educational commitment, forensic educators should be supported by and accountable to the larger academic community. Ideally, forensic educators should hold an academic position housed in an academic department associated with speech communication.

Such academic support for the activity hopefully will foster an educationally-based program with forensics educators who are active in the academic community of forensic educators. Hopefully, such forensic educators will be acquainted with formal "codes of ethics" established and espoused by the forensic community. Adherence to such a "code of ethics" is essential to meet the educational goals of the activity.

In addition, forensic educators must clearly define their role in the forensics activity as one of student "facilitator" rather than as a substitute for student effort. If we, as forensic educators, truly believe that learning is the educational goal, then students must be afforded the opportunity to learn and succeed through carefully-guided effort. Again, forensic educators grounded in such an educational philosophy and housed in an academic department hopefully will support the educational goals attained through this facilitative role.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY No. 2

Forensic educators must instill students with an appreciation for the competitive nature of forensics and the necessity for ethical rules that govern the activity to guarantee equality, consistency, and a sense of "fair play" within the competitive arena.

The competitive nature of forensics is inherent in the activity. Among forensic educators, there is an old adage which states that "learning is more important than winning." If we are to instill within forensic participants the value of the competitive arena as well as success within that arena, contend that the old adage needs a slight modification. It's not that "learning is more important than winning" or that "winning is more important than learning;" instead, "learning is winning" and to accomplish the goal of learning is worthy of reward in the competitive arena.

To facilitate student success through learning in the competitive arena, coaches, judges, and tournament directors must be knowledgeable about the rules that govern the activity. While the forensic community has made some strides in making forensic educators better informed about the policies

and procedures that govern forensic competition, the forensic community must continue to formulate clear and specific policies and procedures; in addition, the forensic community must disseminate such information widely throughout the forensic community.

For example, the forensic community should establish a clear and specific "Code of Ethics" that would delineate such specific policies and codes of conduct as student recruitment policies, student eligibility standards, tournament rules, ethical coaching practices, definitions of plagiarism, and even a speaker's guide to accurate source citation. In addition, such a code should include a policy of enforcement to which the forensic community would adhere.

Currently, the American Forensic Association and the National Forensic Association each have a "Code of Ethics" established by their organizations. However, neither code is comprehensive and neither code is widely disseminated throughout the forensic community. Coaches as well as students must have easy access to an established code of conduct so that ignorance, rather than moral choice, is not the reason for unethical behavior among coaches and students within forensic competition.

In addition, the forensic community must encourage the development of coaching/judging workshops so that both coaches and judges may become better acquainted with the activity's policies and procedures. Again, unethical behavior may stem from simple ignorance rather than a moral choice by coach or student; it is the forensic community's responsibility to assure that both coaches and judges are informed about ethical policies and procedures so that students can be informed during the coaching process and judged fairly during tournament competition.

Such workshops may be offered as a "short course" at the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention to attract both old and new coaches/judges with a commitment to educational excellence. In addition, tournament directors may choose to institute coaching/judging training workshops to be held just prior to the start of a tournament. While such training workshops lengthen the tournament schedule, certainly such sessions instituted at key tournaments held regionally throughout the country at the outset of the forensic season may prove most efficient on a "one time per season" basis. Perhaps even a program of coach/judge certification that includes information about ethical policies and procedures of the activity could be instituted to insure that quality coaching and judging are encouraged within the activity.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY NO. 3

Forensic educators must strive to treat all students fairly and promote equality of opportunity for all participants regardless of sex, race, physical handicaps, or other potentially discriminating variables.

The forensic community must encourage forensic educators to conduct research that will provide an accurate profile of the type of student typically drawn to the forensic activity. If forensic educators believe that the communication skills learned through the forensic activity will benefit all students, regardless of such variables as sex, race, or physical handicaps, then these same educators must encourage all students, regardless of potentially-discriminating variables, to participate.

If the forensic community discovers that specific student groups are suffering from discrimination through a paucity of participation and/or success in the activity, the forensic community should seek supplemental funding through grants so that recruitment and training of these students may be encouraged and enhanced. In addition, financial assistance to supplement forensic programs and tournaments that seek to provide special accommodations for handicapped student participants should be sought by the forensic community. Again, all students should have equal access for participation and success in this academically-based, educationally-sound training ground for the development of communication skills.

Ethical behavior cannot be legislated; instead, it must come from within the individual. Individual forensic educators who serve as coaches, tournament directors, judges, and recruiters, must instill ethical behaviors within individual student competitors. However, as forensic educators we cannot instill what we do not know; ignorance about ethical behavior within the forensic activity may account for more unethical behavior among both forensic educators and students than simple morality. From an educationally-based perspective, forensic educators must preserve the educational goals of the activity, recognize the unique constraints of the competitive arena, and equal access to participation and success for all students who wish to develop effective communication skills.

REFERENCES

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