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## National Forensic Association: An Update from the President

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## **National Forensic Association: An Update from the President**

Karen Morris

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If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

*–Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa*

As I begin my third year as president of the National Forensic Association (NFA), I am in awe of the vast amount of work we have done as an organization in the most recent years. Every three weeks, the National Council convenes on a conference call that usually lasts for an hour and a half. At the end of the agenda for these meetings are both a list of items that we have completed that day and a list of items we have yet to tackle. I am motivated by how we continue to move items from the “to do” list to the “now done” list. In completing the long list of tasks set forth for both the council and the community as a whole, the goal is not to make changes to the organization for change’s sake, but instead to make sure the NFA continues to meet the organization’s purpose in an ever-changing world.

As stated in the NFA Constitution (art. II, § 1), “the purpose of the association is to promote pedagogy, scholarship, and competition in intercollegiate forensics and to sponsor the annual championship tournament in Individual Events and Lincoln-Douglas Competition in Intercollegiate forensics.” At the heart of promoting pedagogy (teaching), scholarship, and competition is the overriding theme that I believe encompasses the NFA: the concept of inclusion. What I mean by inclusion is that the NFA is an organization that welcomes all, no matter the size of the program, coaching philosophy, region-based differences and/or competition goals; we strive to promote the concept of communication as a productive sharing of ideas and argumentation. As the National Championship Tournament is only a portion of what the organization does, the NFA encourages active participation from individual members and institutional member programs who both attend and do not attend the tournament. And so, as I recap the vast number of changes occurring in the most recent years within the NFA, my hope is to show that change has not been radical, but rather in line with the organization’s vision of inclusion in teaching, scholarship, and competition.

### **Teaching/Pedagogy**

With such a time-intensive activity as forensics, it comes as no surprise that the coach burnout rate is high. We have witnessed, especially in the last ten years, a rise in the number of young coaches who briefly shine in this activity and then depart as quickly as they came. If they view forensics primarily through a competitive lens, it is so very easy for young coaches to become myopic in their view of the activity and focus solely on the success of their own teams. In doing so, the wins and losses take a toll over a very short amount of time.

The NFA realizes we are doing a disservice to our young professionals when we treat them merely as coaches. We realize we should be training and mentoring forensics educators. A forensics educator is one who comprehends the activity beyond their own

team and its competitive successes. Forensics educators become advocates for the forensics community. The NFA mission is to mentor forensics educators and we have been pushing toward this vehemently for at least the past seven years. This push began with the NFA Pedagogy Report in 2010. Under the Direction of NFA Tournament Director Dr. Brendan Kelly, several members of the National Council created a document establishing learning outcomes for forensics activities. This forward way of thinking concerning forensics and the creation of shared outcomes across the activity for all programs highlights the NFA's burgeoning commitment to forensics education. Training these educators can occur at any level of experience and it can begin by encouraging coaches to serve the greater forensics community. Past NFA President Larry Schnoor has for many years been providing this type of leadership mentoring in intercollegiate forensics by appointing and training a variety of the NFA tournament directors and *National Forensic Journal* editors, in addition to mentoring the NFA council members, and then graciously allowing others to take the reins while continuing to quietly offer advice.

In the last few years, the makeup of the NFA committees has shifted from being mostly comprised of directors of forensics to a mix of directors, assistant directors, graduate students, and even undergraduate students. The last email distribution list identifying the current slate of NFA committee members included the addresses of 59 participants, all volunteers who stepped forward as willing to serve the general activity. The creation of five new ad hoc committees in conjunction with the nine standing committees allows NFA forensics educators the opportunity to become active in creating the future of the NFA and the activity. A recently-created ad hoc committee which focuses especially on leading the activity as a whole is the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee which has been excellent at keeping its eyes on the world as a whole and teaching the community about issues in this current environment.

The newest ad hoc committee is one we are really excited about, as its membership is comprised of only undergraduate students and chaired by the two student representatives to the council. This ad hoc committee, whose duty is to oversee the student narrative project, is charged with creating an archive of student stories from current competitors who speak to the value of forensics on the intercollegiate level. These stories will be shared with our sister organizations so that high-school students from all backgrounds can be exposed to the narrative of intercollegiate forensics outside of the recruitment venue. Making the activity more accessible for all is the goal of the forensics educator, and the ongoing work and diverse membership of these NFA committees is moving toward changing forensics coaches into forensics educators.

### **Scholarship**

Promoting scholarship and encouraging the sharing of forensics research has always been central to the core of NFA. Although the NFA leadership has constantly been supportive of and in attendance at the Developmental Conferences on Individual Events, the last few conferences (2008, 2010) were inundated with the NFA leadership and the NFA members as promoters, organizers, facilitators, and attendees. The last two Developmental Conferences uniquely promoted attendance by graduate and undergraduate students alike in order to encourage inclusion of all forensics educators

whether at the beginning or ending of their careers. Currently, the planning of a long-overdue Developmental Conference is in the beginning stages, being discussed by many of the NFA leadership as we continue to try to create opportunities to share forensics scholarship and research with the wide forensics community. The Developmental Conferences are few and far between, but the annual opportunity to share forensics research is promoted by the NFA-sponsored sessions at the National Communication Association (NCA) National Conference. These paper and panel discussions are some of the most well-attended forensics panels at each year's gathering.

In addition to the organization's support for Developmental Conferences and NFA-sponsored NCA panels, the strong presence of the *National Forensic Journal (NFJ)* speaks clearly to the identity of the NFA as more than just an organization who hosts a national tournament. The *NFJ* has been in existence since the spring of 1983 and has produced 34 distinct issues under a variety of editors, all of whom have adhered to the stated purpose of the journal: "To facilitate systematic discussion among forensic educators and students in order to improve the quality of the educational experience." The *NFJ* leads the way in forensics scholarship. As a peer-reviewed journal, the publication speaks to what the previous editors, Drs. Randy and Kathy Richardson (2016), referred to in their closing editorial: "In a field bound to adjudication, the willingness to engage in the peer review process demonstrates that we as forensic educators practice what we preach to our students and colleagues" (p. 3). In trying to encourage as many forensics educators as possible to take advantage of sharing their research by publishing in the *NFJ*, the current editors, Dr. Richard Paine and Dr. Emily Cramer, have created a new website for the journal. Not only does this website spell out the submission process, but it also provides all past issues of the *NFJ* to both NFA members and non-members alike. Open access to NFA research clearly reiterates the NFA mission of inclusion.

Although the NFA is working towards mentoring forensics educators, the mentoring of forensics scholars is a bit more difficult. The challenge is creating the desire to publish. Even though the forensics community is thoughtful and active in the planning and preparation of presentations at conferences, we are not as actively engaged in the process of subsequently guiding those conference presentations forward through the rigors of seeking and securing their publication. The difficulty that the most recent and current editors of the journal are encountering is the community's general lack of motivation, and/or time, and/or energy, and/or desire to publish. Towards this end, the NFA research committee has been charged with developing avenues for encouraging young forensic educators to write, research, and publish their forensics works. The current and future changes in the manner in which the NFA approaches scholarship are exciting as we strive to more fully engage forensics scholars across the activity.

### **Competition**

Probably the most discussed changes occurring within the NFA involve recent adjustments to the National Championship Tournament. These changes are noteworthy in that they are, for many of our members, the most visible. The distinguishing feature of the Championship Tournament had, for many years, been the fact that there were four preliminary rounds, quarterfinals, semifinals and finals. The presence of four preliminary

rounds, along with the lack of Dramatic Interpretation and Program Oral Interpretation, have traditionally been what some said distinguished the NFA National Championship from the American Forensics Association National Individual Events Tournament (AFA-NIET). But these distinguishing features have changed. In 2008, Dramatic Interpretation became the NFA Championship's tenth event; in 2016, students competed in only three preliminary rounds; and in 2018, it seems likely that Program Oral Interpretation will be added as the 11th event.

So how is the NFA National Championship distinct from the AFA-NIET? As this question seems to arise quite a few times in online discussion posts, here are just a few of the items that make the NFA National Championship distinct:

- Lincoln Douglas Debate
- Students can enter Pentathlon and the top 15 placements are recognized
- Team Sweepstakes Awards (Open, Presidents I, II, III, and Community College)
- Octafinals
- Four patterns of events
- No restriction on entries per student
- No restriction on entries per team
- Novice Finals
- States affiliations (not districts) are used to limit judge use in out-rounds
- General business meetings for all members to attend and participate in discussions
- Each member school has a vote
- Committees comprised of members and not just elected officials
- Graduate Student Representative on the National Council
- Distinctive seeding process in out-rounds
- Sweepstakes points earned in out-rounds
- Impromptu prompts vary year to year
- Distinctive qualification procedure (based on the number of schools present, number of entries in the event and the number of times placing in out rounds)

All of these specific items make the NFA National Championship a uniquely different tournament from any other national tournament and specifically distinct from the AFA-NIET. The Championship Tournament has always been one that promotes team effort, encourages extended student participation, awards programs of varying sizes and focuses on member input. The most recent changes to the Championship Tournament, namely replacing the fourth round with an octafinal round, offering novice finals in all events, and awarding the Community College Sweepstakes, are all adjustments to the Championship Tournament that have been made in order to promote inclusion in competition.

### **Additional Inclusion Measures**

Membership in the NFA does not require participation at the National Championship. There are two membership categories for the NFA, as seen below.

**Individual Membership or Patron Membership**

Receives *National Forensic Journal*

Receives all mailings and newsletters

Receives NFA Final Round video links

Can serve on NFA committees

Can serve on National Council (must abide by school conflict restraints if applicable)

**Institutional Membership**

Receives *National Forensic Journal*

Receives all mailings and newsletters

Receives NFA Final Round video links

Receives voting rights (the designated voting delegate for the institution will receive ballots)

Registration fee waived for NFA National Championship

NFA has always had individual members and institutional members who do not attend the NFA Conference and/or the NFA Championship tournament. In the past, since organizational business has been voted on at the general business meetings hosted at these venues, members who were not in attendance were not able to fully participate in the business of the NFA. In order to better include these non-attending members, we have recently made some changes. In 2016, we began uploading the recordings of the final rounds of the Championship Tournament onto YouTube and providing that educational link to our members. With this new practice, the number of schools becoming members who did not attend the National Championship Tournament began to rise. In order to ensure that all members would have access to discussions and votes, 2017 brings electronic voting, Facebook discussion groups, and streamlined election of officers to the NFA. These new practices ensure that we include all member schools in the decision-making process for the organization they have chosen to support.

We have witnessed quite a bit of transformation in the most recent years in the NFA. However, I believe wholeheartedly that the changes are in line with the NFA philosophy of inclusion in pedagogy, scholarship, and competition. I am proud of the direction we are moving in as an organization. Ultimately, it is the same direction we have always been moving in, perhaps just with some adjustments for organizational growth.

**References**

National Forensic Association Const. art. II, § 1. Retrieved from:

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