# Older, Wiser, Novice: Nontraditional Students and Collegiate Forensics

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There is a growing trend in nontraditional college student enrollments in the United States. Due to the constraints on nontraditional students' time, they are often unable to spend as much time on campus as traditional students and to fully partake in campus life. Co-curricular activities, such as forensics, can be time consuming activities which may seem like an impossible fit for their already busy schedules. Because there are a growing number of nontraditional students, it is worth researching how much of what we do in the forensic community assumes that our students are only part of a traditional student body. This study uses ethnography and participant interviews to explore the experiences of nontraditional students in forensics.

"Here are your speaker codes. Schemats are posted out in the hall, you're on your own for lunch, have fun and good luck!" This was my first speech tournament. The good news: the tournament was being held on our campus, so I at least knew my way around. The bad news: this was my first speech tournament, *ever*. I was feeling lost and very out of place on what had previously been a very familiar campus. Unlike the majority of my teammates, I did not compete in high school speech. I actually have no idea if my high school even had a speech and/or debate program. The nuances, language, unwritten rules, quirks of college speech (forensics) were completely new to me. In the midst of team warm ups prior to the start of the tournament I realized I did not fit in here. Everyone seemed to know everyone. Competitors were excited to see other competitors and judges from other teams.  I was just getting to know my own team. Everyone seemed to know just where to go and just what to do. My campus suddenly felt foreign to me. As if feeling confused, lost, and alone were not enough, I also felt very conspicuous in this crowd. I felt out of place because I was much older than the other competitors. In most cases I was older than the judges. I was competing as a nontraditional student.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (USDE, 2002a) defines a nontraditional student as one who has any of the following characteristics: delays enrollment after high school (does not enroll in the same calendar year as they graduated), attends school part time, works full time (35+ hours a week), is considered financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, and/or does not have a high school diploma. Nontraditional can also be defined along a continuum in which a student who has one characteristic from the list is defined as "minimally" nontraditional, those who have two or three nontraditional characteristics are defined as "moderately" nontraditional, and those having four or more nontraditional characteristic are defined as "highly" nontraditional (USDE, 2002a). Reports (USDE, 2009a, 2009b) show a growing trend in nontraditional student enrollments and the typical college student of yesteryear is no longer the norm on many

U.S. campuses. Over the past 20 years the number of students 25 and older entering college has increased by 9 percent from 44 percent of the college student body in 1989 to 53 percent in 2009. This means that if traditional students (those enrolling the same year they graduate high school) are currently representing about 25 percent of the college population, the other 75 percent of the student population are considered nontraditional students by USDE standards. Older, nontraditional students are currently the majority on many college campuses and their numbers are projected to steadily increase.

Because college demographics continue to change and there are a growing number of nontraditional students as part of the student body, it is worth researching how much of what we do in the forensic community assumes that our students are only part of a traditional student body. With so much emphasis put on a traditional student body in forensics, it would appear that a majority of the changing student population may be overlooked and underutilized. In order to stay healthy and viable the forensic community needs to address the changing student population and consider changes to the recruitment, assimilation, and retaining of forensic participants who represent growing nontraditional populations.

College forensics is an extremely time-consuming activity that requires a great deal of effort, perseverance, and desire from those who are involved with the activity. Being a forensic competitor means finding the time to fulfill the requirements of travel, coaching events, attending tournaments, and socializing with team members. Once individuals decide that they are able and willing to make the commitment to an organization, such as forensics, they must deal with the process of assimilation and integration into that organization. Assimilation refers to the communicative, behavioral, and cognitive processes that influence individuals to join, identify with, become integrated into, and (occasionally) exit an organization (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2010; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999; Jablin, 2001; Pettigrew, 1979).  Each organization has its own distinctive set of roles, appropriate behaviors, ethical standards, norms, and values – what is defined as culture. While new members of an organization can know their craft or skill prior to entering an organization, they cannot know the specific culture prior to entry. The process of assimilation is long, frustrating, and stressful for some, but especially for those who may be considered as out-group members. Specifically, nontraditional students first must assimilate into the culture of higher education, which may be especially difficult for students who have not been a part of any educational system for a long period of time (Knowles, 1984; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

For nontraditional forensic competitors, the process may also be more complicated or difficult. For those who are parents, they may not have as much time as other forensic students to dedicate to the activity. They may not develop as many events, coach as many hours, or travel to as many tournaments as traditional students may. Older students may also have difficulties assimilating due to the differences in goals, motivation, and social expectations. Because nontraditional students may be spending less time with the team, they may not feel as accepted by team members or as "in the know" as other participants.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Forensics, like all organizations, needs to be researched, entered, navigated, and exited by its members. Therefore, it is important to explain forensics as an organization and investigate the culture that potential members will encounter. Once an individual decides to become a member of an organization, they must begin the process of assimilating into that organization. Many newcomers to an organization experience similar assimilation processes, however, those members who are not considered to be within the typical norms of current members may experience greater degrees of difficulty in assimilating into the organization. Therefore, it is important to explore how nontraditional students view the process of assimilation into the forensic organization. Nontraditional students, especially those with children, are not the typical forensic competitors often seen on the circuit; therefore the goal of my research is to view forensic participation through the lens of organizational culture and assimilation.

The transition to higher education is seen initially as a struggle for personal, academic, financial, and emotional survival. Higher education is experienced by nontraditional students in different ways than by the typical 18-year-old entrants (Bowl, 2001; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). While the transition to higher education may be a struggle for nontraditional students, entering a cocurricular activity such as college forensics may be an added stress on an otherwise highly stressed student. There is a great deal of literature concerning college forensics, however there is little to no research available specifically concerning the assimilation and participation of nontraditional students in the forensic organization.

*Assimilation*

Assimilation refers to the communicative, behavioral, and cognitive processes that influence individuals to join, identify with, become integrated into, and (occasionally) exit an organization (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2010; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999; Jablin, 2001; Pettigrew, 1979). When a person joins an organization, they usually do not automatically become an accepted member of the group, nor do they immediately identify with the organization or its members. Instead, over time, they go through a process in which they and others begin to see the person as an integral and accepted part of the organization.

Organizational cultures develop as a result of organizations' responses to external and internal feedback and the organization's attempts to integrate, or assimilate, new members into the organization. The socialization processes used to introduce new members to the culture and maintain continued loyalty and morale are also significant cultural mechanisms in organizational life (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2010; Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1992). No organization, including forensics, can exist for any length of time without acquiring new members. The ultimate goal of assimilating newcomers into an organization is to achieve a good person-organization fit. Hess (1993) stated that a person-organization fit is "the congruence between patterns of organizational values and patterns of individual values" (p. 189). In other words, employees' goals, work ethic, and morals should match those of the organization. If this match happens, members will work harder and be more satisfied than if the two parties do not match.

Each organization has its own distinctive set of roles, appropriate behaviors, ethical standards, norms, and values – what was defined earlier as culture. While new members of an organization can know their craft or skill prior to entering an organization, they cannot know the culture prior to entry. Members who remain apart from the culture rather than becoming a part of it are unlikely to be as effective or satisfied with the organization as they could be. Organizational cultures can be healthy or dysfunctional, either way they always have an impact on organizational outcomes; they may assist in achieving goals, hinder it, or do some combination of both (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2010; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999; Hess, 1993; Martin & Siehl, 1983; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1985). In the case of forensics, assimilation comes from "this is the way things have always been done" and stories about previous competitors and coaches that make up the (hi)story of the tem (Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006).

*Organizational Culture*

Organizations are influenced by external factors such as demographics, economics, and political conditions; however, they are also shaped by internal forces. These internal forces have roots in the history of the organization and are derived from the values, traditions, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization. The most fundamental construct of an organization is its culture. An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988).

The word culture entered managerial thinking in the 1980s, but the idea that people who worked together and had common occupational backgrounds would form common values and norms has been known since the earliest studies of organizations (Hesselbein & Goldsmith, 2009; Hofstede, Neujen, Ohayv & Sanders, 1990). Pettigrew (1979) first coined the term "organizational cultures" which he defines as "creators of symbols, ideologies, languages, beliefs, rituals, and myths" (p. 574). Schein (1985) defines organizational culture as a "pattern of shared basic assumptions that have been invented, discovered, and/or developed by a group as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (p. 247). Thus, we learn about a culture not only by what members of that culture say, but also by what they do on a regular basis and the items they choose to display in connection with the organization.

Organizational cultures are created as people act and interact with one another. When multiple people share the same social identity, this identity creates group norms and, thus, culture. Within every national culture there are thousands of smaller cultures based on religion, ethnicity, geography, and multiple other factors, and each organization develops its own internal culture, even if it is of a similar type or serves a similar function as other organizations. Organizational culture comes to represent the glue that holds an organization together because it provides its members with a frame of reference (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Schein, 1985).

Cultural elements are important components to organizational culture. While some organizations may incorporate different cultural elements than other organizations, all organizations exhibit various forms of cultural elements that set them apart from other organizations and these elements must be navigated by newcomers. In the case of

forensics, well developed team cultures, regardless of regions, generally have happier members as well as retaining members longer (Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006).

Forensics has an ever changing culture since members are continually entering and exiting the organization and students deal with different competitors at different tournaments. The cultural paradigm is applicable to forensics because newcomers to the organization need to learn and adopt the reality of the organization and that reality is shared through communication by forensic directors, coaches, and fellow team members. New members, even those who have prior forensic experience, cannot know the individual team culture prior to joining a specific team, thus the communication and cultural assimilation that happens is important. Many forensic team members have a moment in their forensic career that they can point to and say that moment changed their attitude toward the activity, their team members, or their events. These are the moments that mark the process of true assimilation into the organization.

## METHOD

In order to understand the concept of assimilation of the nontraditional student, specifically within the realm of college forensics, this study used autoethnography and participant interviews. In order to research the forensic culture and the assimilation of newcomers into that culture, it is imperative to use a research method that best enables me to examine culture. No questionnaire, experimental study, control sample, or statistical analysis can capture the essence of a culture as completely or as richly as an ethnographic study can. The goal of this research is to address the stresses and difficulties that nontraditional students deal with while attending secondary education and whether the forensic community is conducive to, or a hindrance to, nontraditional student participation. Additionally, the steps that both the forensic community and higher education might take to create an open and welcoming environment for nontraditional students are explored.

Research Design

While quantitative research methods are valuable in many respects, quantitative research is unable to represent research subjects the way that autoethnography is able to. Qualitative research is the one way in which researchers are able to derive direct quotations from research subjects and allow their personal narratives to come through in the final project. Narratives represent something much larger and more significant than the idea that stories are just another source of data used for the purpose of advancing theory and criticism. Narratives facilitate a way of knowing that emphasizes the relationship between performance and experience to substantiate abstract claims (Bennett, 2003). The personal narrative is part of the study of everyday life, particularly performance in everyday life and the culture of everyday talk. Studying the "communication and performance of ordinary people invites researchers to listen on the margins of discourse and give voice to muted groups in our society" (Langellier, 1989, p. 243).

Autoethnography as a research method works well because the subject of nontraditional students has been directly tied to my life experiences over the past seven years. I conducted my (auto)ethnography by becoming a collegiate forensic competitor. I

traveled to, and competed in, eleven tournaments with my team including one national tournament (American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament). I attended team-sponsored events such as our spring showcase, nationals weekend retreat, work days, weekly speech meetings, and team social events. I spent roughly 400 hours in the field during my year as a forensic competitor and kept a journal of my experiences, which included coaching, traveling, competing, and my professional and social associations with my teammates as well as my experiences with coaches and competitors from other teams.

My experiences in forensics led me to seek out the stories of other nontraditional forensic competitors.  In order to compare my forensic experience as a nontraditional student to other nontraditional forensic competitors, other participants were interviewed. A call for participation was sent out asking for current or former forensic competitors who were competing or had competed as nontraditional students. The criteria for "nontraditional" were students who were 25 years of age or older and/or were parents of minor children at the time they competed. Over the course of a four- 11 potential participants responded. All potential participants were sent interview consent forms, and eight of the 11 potential participants signed and returned the consent forms agreeing to participate in the email interviews. Of the eight original respondents who agreed to participate in the interviews, six returned completed interviews.

Of the six respondents, four participants were male and the remaining two participants were female. Ages of the participants at the time they competed ranged from 24 to 62. One competitor competed from ages 24-28 after spending five years in the Navy before attending college, one specified competing from the ages of 28 to 31, another was 27 in their senior year of competition, one competed between the ages of 34 and 38, one current competitor (as of this writing) is a first time, first year competitor at the age of 30 while my final participant is a 62 year old, first time, first year competitor who is also a college senior.

Beyond asking basic demographic questions, the interview also included questions about prior forensic experience; participants' reasons for joining and continuing forensics; initial feelings and experiences upon joining; the nontraditional student experience; teammate and coach interactions; assimilating into forensics; goals and advice. The raw data were sorted into conceptual categories that created themes or concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Emerson, 1983; Neuman, 2009). Coding was a two-phase process: an initial phase followed by a focused phase of coding (Emerson, 1983). In the initial phase, interview data were coded line by line, and each incident was coded into as many categories of analysis as possible (Emerson, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the second phase of coding, focused coding, larger themes or categories to which the initial coding can be applied were identified. The purpose of focused coding is to "build and clarify a category by examining all the data it covers and variations from it" (Emerson, 1983). This focused coding allows diverse properties to become integrated and helped me develop a framework of overarching themes that allowed me to explain the issues and events being studied (Emerson, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interview data gathered along with my autoethnographic data proved to provide rich information that can be used to shed light on nontraditional students in forensics and answer my research question concerning how the experiences of nontraditional students in collegiate forensics may aid forensics and higher education to

improve the experiences and educational value for nontraditional students.

## ANALYSIS

Being a nontraditional student has elicited a wide range of emotions for me during my collegiate career. Returning to college after a 15-year plus absence caused me more than a little concern. I was excited about the possibilities of becoming a student again and finally finishing my degree; however, knowing that I was old enough to be the majority of my classmates' mother was very disconcerting to me. In the classroom, my age was an advantage. Outside of the classroom however, my status as a nontraditional student posed other difficulties. Once I began my journey as a novice forensic competitor, my old feelings of insecurity, fear, misgivings, and a sense of being an outsider began again. My experiences as a nontraditional student in forensics enticed me to find other nontraditional forensic competitors to see how their experiences compared to mine and to see if there are ways the forensic community can create an environment that allows for more participation of nontraditional students.

The major categories that evolved from coding interviews are: reasons for forensic involvement; initial feelings and assimilation into the activity; conflicting emotions concerning participation; and the nontraditional experience.

### Reasons for forensic involvement

During the interviews, participants frequently discussed their reasons for participating in forensics. Specifically, the following themes emerged: influence of high school participation, a desire to take advantage of what college has to offer, enjoyment of the activity, success and competition, and camaraderie. Initially, for many respondents their decision to participate in forensics was tied to previous high school experiences. In the area of high school participation, four of my six research participants did not compete in high school forensics, yet chose to join forensics in college. One participant, like me, noted that he did not participate in high school because, "We did not have a forensic team as far as I knew, but I would not have done so anyway." One participant indicated his high school had a program; however, "My sister had done speech and went to state. I didn't want to follow in her footsteps." While another participant said she wanted to join the high school team, but she didn't have time because she "was raising my two little brothers."

For those participants who did compete in high school, they went on to compete in college in order to continue doing an activity which they loved in high school. These participants were quite vocal about the thrill of performing and enjoying the competition. As one competitor explained: "I thought it was a great activity that allowed my performance side to meet my competitive side. I just loved the activity, loved performing, and loved competing."

However, what makes someone unfamiliar with forensics join? Several participants talked about choosing to participate in forensics because of a desire to take advantage of what college has to offer. Several participants noted that it was harder for them to get to college and being there meant more to them because of that struggle. Therefore, they wanted to take advantage of everything they could in college in order to

truly get the most out of their experience. One participant noted: "Since I was paying for my own college, I decided to take advantage of everything. I joined the choir, did theater, ran for student senate, and joined the Speech Team." Another participant explained that she "was originally in theatre but went to forensics for a change in social aspect." Forensics gave some nontraditional students an opportunity for social bonds with other college students that they often could not achieve elsewhere on campus.

Once a competitor joins forensics, they often find out how time consuming this activity can be. For nontraditional students this time commitment can be compounded by demands outside of college. With time constraints and demands on competitors' time, it is also important to explore themes relevant to why nontraditional students continued their participation in forensics after initially joining a program.

Many participants found they stayed because they enjoyed the activity. Part of the enjoyment entails the competition and having some success in the activity. The experience of making it to, and performing in, a final round makes a competitor want to compete even more. As one participant explained: "I had a little bit of success at my first couple of tournaments and it motivated me to do more of it."

Finally, enjoyment of the activity and success aside, one of the main reasons that competitors remain in the activity is for the camaraderie and friendships that form. When asked what kept them involved in college forensics, one participant shared this story: "I made some of the most lasting friendships I've ever had while in forensics in college – I just went to the wedding of my former duo partner. Even though we live thousands of miles apart, we're still in each other's lives, and that's all because of forensics." The amount of time spent with teammates traveling to tournaments, the long days competing, hotel stays, and the van rides all create an atmosphere like no other.

Whether individuals choose to continue forensics in college because of their high school experience or because they want to try something new and take advantage of what college has to offer, it is clear from my participants that in either case, once they join the forensic community, there are many reasons to maintain their involvement.

## Assimilation and Initial Feelings

Quals, schemats, legs, black books, dress codes, proper public address gestures, and the list goes on. The world of collegiate forensics is loaded with unwritten rules and norms as well as a language all its own. The ability to navigate this world as an outsider is a key component to the success of forensic competitors. For those with limited or no exposure or experience with forensics, this learning curve can be daunting, confusing, and frustrating. During the interviews, participants frequently mentioned their own frustrations with learning to navigate through this new world. Specifically, two themes emerged from the interviews: exclusionary language and tensions relevant to generational differences.

Initially, the ability to become a member within the forensic community revolves around learning the language of forensics. Those who are unfamiliar with the language of forensics often feel like outsiders and may feel excluded from the dominant group due to the language barrier. One participant explained: "Getting to know the rituals, warm-ups, expectations was tough – every team is different, every team wants things done a certain way. This was intimidating at times." Another participant explained his initial feelings

upon joining as: "There was this culture of rules and procedures that I wasn't familiar with. In my first round of Parliamentary Debate, I didn't realize we were supposed to leave the room for prep time. We just sat there quietly talking to our partners."

Further compounding anxieties about joining a forensic team are the tensions relevant to generational differences between nontraditional and traditional students. Not only did my participants and I not understand the language and culture of forensics, but making our apprehension about joining forensics even greater was the age differences many of us experienced between our teammates. I was old enough to be my teammates' mother. This made me feel even more like an outsider because I felt that I would not have enough in common with them or they would be less likely to accept me into the group. One of my research participants had the same feelings. As he described, he was nervous because he "was the old guy and didn't know how I would fit in." While many of us experienced some apprehension or even "panic and excitement" as one participant explained, the one common experience that we shared was the acceptance by our teams. As one 62-year-old first time competitor explained: "I had some apprehensions about being the only older team member. As for my teammates, they have been exceptionally gracious in not making me feel out of place." My experience is much the same. I also have been very accepted and embraced by my team.

## Conflicting emotions concerning participation

The process of joining forensics, developing events, adjusting to rules, written and unwritten, norms, and just trying to fit in may be daunting for forensic competitors, traditional or otherwise. My perspective on forensics changed in a fairly short period of time, and I got much more out of my experience than I ever thought possible. Because I felt such a transformation in myself and my experience, I wanted to know if other nontraditional competitors shared the same experiences, both positive and negative. What we all had in common were only a few negative aspects of forensics that were outweighed by the positive aspects we discovered.

*Negative aspects*

The few negative aspects that my participants cited fell into three general themes: time -consuming, complex, and demanding nature of forensics; the difficulty in learning the culture, rules, norms, and procedures; and personality clashes.

For those who want to get the most out of forensics, either educationally or competitively, the activity is very time consuming, complex, and demanding. In order to achieve educational or competitive success, a student must travel to several tournaments a semester and be entered in multiple events. This means most weekends are spent competing and traveling to and from tournaments. Depending on the location of the tournament, the time spent each weekend could be anywhere from two to four days. Forensic competitors spend a great deal of time working on, practicing and polishing their events while still maintaining a full college course load, maintaining a high enough grade point average to remain eligible to compete, and often times working full or part time jobs. As one participant noted, "It is far more complex and demanding than one would think from the outside…it is demanding in terms of time commitment."

Second, beyond the time commitment, competitors also addressed the difficulty of learning the culture, rules, norms, and procedures. For those unfamiliar to collegiate

forensics, this can be a slow and frustrating process. One participant expressed her wish to "learn about the system faster." She went on to explain, "Forensics is one of those things you have to learn on a schedule by experience, one day at a time." The few written rules in forensics are purposely ambiguous in order to allow for multiple interpretations and creativity; however, there are many unwritten rules that have developed and been perpetuated in the activity. These unwritten rules entail topics such as competitors' dress for tournaments, behavior in and out of rounds, addressing judges, book work, tech and blocking, gestures, movement within the performance or speech, signing into rounds, entering and exiting rounds, and so many more. Navigating and negotiating the numerous unwritten rules can be frustrating to new competitors. To make matters worse, those who have been members of the forensic community for a longer period of time often take it for granted that everyone just "knows" these rules and norms and therefore they are not addressed as part of the learning process.

The final negative theme was that of personality clashes. Those that expressed concern over personality clashes thought it was possible that these differences could be attributed to the age difference between them and their teammates; however, from my own experience, age may not necessarily be the contributing factor. Any group that spends a great deal of time together is likely going to end up experiencing some conflict. Personality clashes can also occur between competitors and coaches surrounding what, when, and how things should be done, or when competitors and coaches disagree on performance choices. One participant explained, "When my former duo partner coached me, and I disagreed with her – being older than her (and her being a former teammate) really hurt her credibility with me." Another respondent noted, "Occasionally the head coach's personality will clash with mine but nothing too horribly negative." The things that bond a team together such as team retreats, social events, tournaments, and long rides in cramped vehicles can also be the same things that contribute to personality conflicts.

*Positive aspects*

While the difficulties in learning the forensic culture, the demands on competitors' time, and personality clashes may seem like serious reasons to consider leaving forensics, or not joining at all, research participants and I agree that the positive benefits of forensics far outweigh the negative. The positive aspects described by participants fell into three general themes: learning experiences; professional development; and interpersonal and personal development.

The first theme that was identified was that forensics is a great place for learning experiences. While some believe that forensics is more concerned with competitive success, others, including competitors, approach forensics as a co-curricular activity in which education is the main priority. As one participant explained, after becoming a coach he "realized that the educational value of forensics is much deeper than the competitive value." Research participants listed qualities gained in forensics such as: "the ability to learn a lot about yourself," "learning about the world," "realizing that school is much more than a piece of paper," "the opportunities to see amazing speeches," "the ability to speak about subjects that your care about," "it gives you a chance to explore speech and performance in a fun way," and that "overall forensics is a good learning experience." Forensics is great way to improve speaking and critical thinking skills. As one participant explained, forensics is "the single most important part of one's collegiate development in terms of critical thinking and public speaking."

Along with the educational value of forensics, participants also noted positive aspects that fell into the theme of professional development. Professional development included such things as: "helping you prepare to interact with the world around you," "helps you with future plans and goals," "the ability to travel," "the feeling [of] fulfillment when you achieve success," and "a great resume builder."

Beyond the learning experiences and professional development, another major theme that developed was personal and interpersonal development. Many participants enjoyed sharing stories about their interactions and experiences with teammates and coaches. Specific items discussed by participants included: "the camaraderie and fun associated with forensics," "support from coaches and teammates," and "acceptance, pride, and lasting friendships." One participant noted that what keeps her in forensics is that "it's a great deal of fun and camaraderie, and of course the chance to travel with the team and experience many different fun activities together." She explains that her most memorable interactions (thus far) are, "just sitting in the forensics room before meetings, talking, laughing, joking. It's great camaraderie. I love hearing people laugh and there's always someone ready to lift spirits with a joke or a hug." She also enjoys, "having friendly faces and conversations about forensics as we bump into each other around campus." Another participant indicated that "the camaraderie, the people I was around," was what kept him involved in forensics. He went on to explain his interactions with coaches and teammates. "I made some of the most lasting friendships I've ever had while in forensics. Nothing bonds you with people like driving across the country in a small cramped space, playing stupid games, and acting silly. Those were great times."

I realized after my year of competition that I gained far more than I had hoped to accomplish. I went in hoping to gain some experience to help me as a coach and to navigate the forensic culture. I have much more positive perspectives of forensics, a sense of unity and support, a better understanding of teamwork and small group dynamics, improved writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills, professional connections, and best of all, some of the best friendships I have ever had. One participant noted that competitors should "Enjoy your time, because it's going to go by WAY too fast." At the end of each competitive season, I long for more time with my students and fellow coaches who have become more than friends to me.

## DISCUSSION

When discussing why a person would invest the amount of time it takes to fully participate in forensics, issues regarding the development of skills, making the most of college, and the love of performing and competition were listed. We discussed forensics as a learning opportunity with the ability to improve public speaking skills, writing skills, and critical thinking skills. These skills are not only important to forensics, but also in academics and employment. I argue that adult learners are more likely to succeed in these skills and in a quicker fashion than their traditional counterparts.

Some have noted that nontraditional students may be more serious and more motivated and are self-motivated (Jinkins, 2009). While forensics is a great educator for participants, the life experiences that nontraditional students bring with them to the activity may give them an added advantage for which traditional students will have to work harder and wait longer. This advantage may further a participant's skill

development, success in the activity, and enjoyment of the activity. Along with the higher motivation that nontraditional students typically have, the likelihood of participant retention and recruitment of other nontraditional students may also increase.

Participants noted that despite their age or the amount of time they spent on campus, they felt highly connected to their forensic teammates. They were made to feel accepted, wanted, and integral members of the group. The integration of students into extracurricular and co-curricular activities, peer friendships on campus, and relationships with instructors outside of class was positively related to persistence in college (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Thus, forensics can offer students, both traditional and nontraditional, a place to become more integrated with their university as well as members of the student body, thereby giving students a better chance at remaining in school and achieving their desired degree.

In light of tough economic budges and the need to defend forensic programs to administrators, it is important to promote forensics to the members of an ever changing demographic. When promoting forensics or working to recruit members, directors should emphasize that all levels of participation are welcome and the benefits of forensic participation should be emphasized. Campus-wide recruitment will always be necessary for programs; however, specific recruitment should be implemented in specific departments. Recruitment should be emphasized with international centers, business colleges, and nontraditional centers on campuses in order to increase team diversity as well as promoting the program to students who may not otherwise know about the activity and its benefits. Limited participation programs may be developed on or off campus to include more nontraditional members who are unable to dedicate as much time as traditional students. Forensic directors who increase the diversity on a forensic team will find it beneficial to both the program and its members.

### Limitations and Future Research

The first major limitation of the study was the number of participants who participated in the interviews. While the number of participants in this study may seem small, it may be that it is representative of the percentage of nontraditional students who actually participate since the majority of competitors are the typical traditional student.

The second major limitation was the underrepresentation of female participants and participants who were parents during their forensic career. Only two of the six participants were female. While I can only speculate as to why so few women participated in the study, it may be an indication of larger issues. It may be an issue that nontraditional female students do not have the same opportunities to partake in co-curricular activities as nontraditional male students due to a higher level of constraints at home that women often have.

Despite the limitations, I argue that my research demonstrates that nontraditional students can enhance their collegiate experience by participating in collegiate activities such as forensics. The implications of this study show that future research needs to focus on the strengths that nontraditional students add to the college classroom and to the forensic community. Research should focus on how more nontraditional students can be recruited into co-curricular activities in order to help both the activity thrive and help the integration of nontraditional students into the collegiate culture. Further research should

also be conducted in order to see how colleges and collegiate organizations can create welcoming environments for the growing number of nontraditional students. Creating this kind of environment will not only offer nontraditional students a successful and positive college experience but will also do the same for the traditional student body

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