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Student Research as a Method for Developing New Forensic Leaders

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Abstract

For years, a call for more forensic research has echoed across the nation. While some respond to the continued challenge, many others have not. Numerous programs have disappeared from the collegiate forensic map over the years, with the questioned legitimacy and effectiveness of forensic programs and forensic professionals cited as the reason for their disappearance. In order to maintain a strong participation of programs, students, and coaches, we must develop strong leaders who, through research, will promote and stabilize forensics in the collegiate scene. As forensic leaders, it is our responsibility to nurture students into leadership positions where they, through research, will help ensure the activity's survival. I advocate for student-authored forensic research as a method for transitioning students from competitors into active forensic scholars. I will share the gains of involving students in forensic research and then offer suggestions on how to encourage student to engage in forensic research.

Introduction

I want to clarify something before we get too deep into this paper: I am a graduate student in Communication Studies and a graduate-student assistant forensic coach. Initially, I debated the merit to openly disclose this information as one would think my status as a graduate student has little to do with the quality of ideas presented to the community. I determined a faux-confession was in order, however, after careful re-examination. My admission does not act as a *mea culpa* by any standards. I will rarely apologize for my opinions regarding the forensic community, no matter where I stand on the academic totem pole. The clarification of my status as a graduate student highlights my unique position on student-authored research. Instead of well-established forensic leaders calling for veteran scholars to seek publication, I (a student) am calling for more student research through the help of current community leaders. My plea seems like a selfish one at first: Help students (like me) advance in the field of forensics. My call for more student-authored research, however, is about more than myself.

As an undergraduate competitor on a peer-coached speech team, I spent the majority of my time figuring out basic elements of collegiate forensics: where to find literature, how to write a speech, tournament etiquette, winning strategies, etc. I had questions, but no idea how to ask or who to ask. My senior year was a personal revelation, after three years of struggling. I felt like I belonged. I understood how certain aspects of the community worked. However, I believed I had missed out because it took so long for me to “get into the game.” Other competitors may never get past the question phase and may quit the activity out of frustration, robbing them of a fantastic experience and robbing our community of another contributing member. I have great interest

in forensics as a graduate student, and, like before, the path is clouded. Luckily, my department is supportive and helpful in letting me pursue my research interests—I am fortunate for the guidance. I am fortunate to find exceptional mentors during my graduate studies, yet I often wonder how many students are left to wander when they have academic interest in forensics. If a student wants to explore forensics academically but no one is there to help them, they are more than likely going to turn away. The community potentially loses a new scholar every time a student misses an opportunity to engage in forensic research. The oft-referred Madsen (1990) article strikes at the heart of my message: finding ways to help forensic students become forensic scholars. While Madsen focused on graduate students, we need to include undergraduates in our attempt to gather students into the research fold. Student-conducted forensic research will “foster advances in the field of forensics ... [and] serve to increase the professional advancement of ... students” (Madsen, 1990, p. 48).

Workman (1997) outlines six competencies for a forensic professional: one competency involves “demonstrat[ing] an interest in scholarly activity in the field” (p. 85). Leaders can be effective for entire careers without publishing. Like Workman (1997), however, I believe we should be balanced forensic professionals. Leadership includes being a supportive coach, an attentive administrator, and an active scholar. Coaching helps students learn; administrative duties keep the program running. Scholarship provides the link between what we do and communication theory—it also helps legitimize the activity as worthy of support by school administrators and funding committees (Aden, 1990). Many forensic professionals publish on a fairly regular basis, but many do not. We must support our scholarly colleagues by writing and researching with them, so that they no longer are the sole contributors to what is often looked at as justification for having a forensic program. Forensic programs are in the decline (Klosa, 2008), and leaders in the community need to do whatever they can to help ensure a future for forensic programs, forensic competitors, and forensic professionals.

We must prioritize supporting upcoming leaders to be active scholars. The community will “lose mentors and mentoring opportunities regarding scholarly inquiry, processes, and productivity” when current leaders retire (Hinck, 2008, p.8). We must help students advance as scholars, or we may be looking at a bleak future for forensics. Our duty to mentor new leaders starts with research.

The Echoing Call for Research

The call for forensic research has been resonating for decades. The Sedalia Conference was a plaintive call for the forensic community to focus on research (e.g., Becker, 1975; McBath, 1975; Rieke & Brock, 1975). The 1984

Northwestern Conference yielded similar discussions on the importance of research in the forensic community (e.g., Goodnight, 1984; Logue & Shea, 1990; Parson, 1990). Others have picked up the torch, spurring the community into the research so vital to the activity (e.g., Cronn-Mills, 2008; Hinck, 2008; Rogers, 2000). Despite the repeated request for more research in our field, we rarely see it. The community appears to be ignoring this crucial aspect of forensic existence. Forensic journals have bemoaned the dearth of writing, citing the lack of submissions as a major problem for the future of forensics (e.g., Geisler, 1993; Klumpp, 1990; Ryan, 1998). The calls for more research bounce around the community only to be taken up at the next conference—to little or no avail.

It is surprising so few submissions are received by forensics journals (Klumpp, 1990; Ryan, 1998). According to its website, the *National Forensic Journal* (NFJ) last published in the fall of 2006. In a recent discussion with Dan Cronn-Mills, editor of *Speaker and Gavel*, Cronn-Mills attested that the journal rarely receives a forensic manuscript. The importance of research has been repeatedly highlighted (e.g., Cronn-Mills, 2008; Goodnight, 1984; Hinck, 2008; Logue & Shea, 1990; Parson, 1990; Rogers, 2000). Forensic professionals need to be active scholars in their field. Aden (1990) suggested three main reasons why forensic professionals should engage in research; I provide a fourth reason:

1. *Forensic research assists coaches by offering perspectives for approaching the various events.*

Simply put, research helps coaches see the activity in new and, hopefully, improved ways. As Aden (1990) pointed out, countless articles offer thoughts and suggestions on the individual events. When unsure of how to approach an event with a student, coaches can turn to the material generated by other forensic professionals.

2. *Forensic research provides a valuable resource for students and coaches.*

Aden (1990) explained coaches can guide students to the research to help explain current thoughts in the community. Instead of relying only on ballots, students can learn from reading research.

3. *Forensic research enhances student and coach understanding of the connection between theory and practice.*

Aden (1990) believed forensics research can provide clear explanations for why forensic competitors and professionals do what they do. Forensic norms are linked to communication theory. Forensic research offers rationales for norms that many in the community deem to be pointless.

4. *Forensic research can help legitimize and maintain forensic programs and forensic professionals.*

Aden (1990) conceded research does not hurt a career, but he argued the focus should be on enhancing the practice of communication. I am inclined to agree with Aden. However, with increasing regularity, budget cuts threaten

many programs. Faculty, staff, and administrators are questioning the need for a forensic program when the members of the community are not actively engaged scholars, something many of our peers expect us to be (Aden, 1990; Kay, 1990; Madsen, 1990; McKerrow, 1990; Parson, 1990). Many departments withhold tenure promotion for forensic professionals who have not conducted much “real research” (Danielson & Hollwitz, 1997; Kay, 1990; McKerrow, 1990). Forensic professionals have a duty to research and write about forensics as well as other research interests—and the standard that we hold current professionals to should be the same standard to which we train our new leaders.

Involving Students: Gains

Students gain from doing research. When taking the initiative of performing original research, a student may be paired with a faculty member or forensic professional. Conversely, writing an essay that is not original research (such as this one) allows the student to work in a more independent fashion. Whatever the situation may be, a student involved in generating original forensic research will enhance his/her future as a forensic professional.

1. Students benefit from Aden's reasons.

What Aden (1990) wrote about forensic professionals holds true for students. The more research generated the better, regardless of authors' credentials. Students and coaches can learn from perspectives shared in the research process. Involving students in research creates opportunity for fresh points of view. Given the limited range of research interests in the forensic community (Croucher, 2006; Kerber & Cronn-Mills, 2005), we need to be open to new ways of thinking and seeing that students might provide. Increasing student research may be a way to increase our points of view. More students involved in understanding (and creating) past, current and future forensic research can only enhance the quality of student involvement in the activity. Active involvement in scholarly forensic research may help the student create stronger competitive speeches, as well as offer justifications for choices made in the creation process. Students that conduct research may influence other students, as students may be drawn into the academic arena to read perspectives of other students. The more research perspectives, the more everyone gains.

1. *Students are exposed to advanced material and gain research experience.*

Working closely with forensic professionals on research will give students the opportunity to be exposed to research techniques and a greater understanding of their research topic. A student may be collaborating on a project with a faculty member who can use the opening as a teaching opportunity. Communication theory and research can be introduced to students while working on the research project—an opportunity the student may not have taken if working alone. Students who research a topic will discover new concepts and ideas in areas of interest. Ex-

panding a student's knowledge and experience in theory and research is a service to the student.

Students learn higher level thinking skills and gain greater understanding of communication and forensic research while working directly with a faculty member/coach. Students are often unsure of the research process. An experienced researcher demystifies the process of scholarly writing for the student. The student can observe and ask questions. When a student first competes at a tournament, the experience gained gives the student a better understanding of what forensics is all about. The same can be said about research. Jumping into research can be intimidating. Students who gain the experience of research are better suited to handle future research projects and publication submissions. Just getting started and doing the research can gain the student invaluable experience.

2. *Students receive guidance/mentoring.*

A mentoring relationship may develop when a student works directly with a forensic professional and can serve many functions. A forensic mentor can help a student interested in future scholarship, graduate/doctorate school, coaching, or other professional endeavors, as well as make a difference in a student's personal life (White, 2005). Close bonds are formed between students and coaches. The relationship can develop into an advice seeking/distributing duality. Students seeking a career as a forensic professional may also find a mentor to be helpful in making the transition from graduate student into a coach or director (Hefling, 2008).

Additionally, forensic professionals can steer a student toward a faculty member better suited to guide the student. For example, if a student was interested in intercultural communication, the forensic professional might direct the student to the faculty member whose research interests coincide. As a mentoring relationship develops, the mentor may begin to recognize what a student needs help. Forensic leaders should guide students to where they can receive the most fruitful assistance, even if that assistance is not with a forensic professional.

3. *Students are more likely to stay with forensics after competition.*

A student researcher may continue to serve the forensics community, which benefits everyone. Retention of forensic students after competition must be a priority as we are seeking forensic leaders. Nagda et. al. (1998) concluded pairing undergraduates with faculty on research projects increased retention rates in the particular programs. The Nagda study (and other studies like it) implies we need to mentor students through research in order to foster new leaders. Cronn-Mills (2008) echoed the belief of mentoring students in research, contending "the earlier students engage in the forensic research experience, the more likely they may continue and become strong contributors to the development of forensics" (p. 11).

While positives can emerge from involving students in research, many professionals do not actively mentor students in the research process. Training students to be active forensic researchers is an important task, but merely being an important task does not equate to it being an easy one.

Plan of Action

Hinck (2008) outlined the obstacles standing in the way of forensic research: 1) lack of skill and training; 2) lack of reward; 3) lack of resources. Hinck's obstacles are commonly heard when asked why more forensic research is not generated. Generally, I am sympathetic to the situations of forensic professionals. Running a program takes an enormous effort, compounded by other professional obligations and duties, and fitting in personal and family commitments: Life as a forensic professional can be rough (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Richardson 2008). Life as a forensic student is difficult as well. Students may not start research projects because they do not know how, do not see the point, do not have the time, and see little tangible rewards. For example, the forensic community spends tens of thousands of dollars on tournament trophies, yet very little rewarding strong student-led forensic research. The following suggestions are designed to support student-led forensic research, and thus promoting effective forensic leadership.

1. *Encourage meta-analysis of forensics in student performances.*

Interest in forensics for undergraduate competitors starts with the events. Students participate in forensics because they enjoy some aspect of speech competition. Coaches can encourage students to tackle issues in the forensic community through competitive speeches/interpretations. A student showing interest in expressing their thoughts about forensics should be encouraged to do so in the most basic (and public) way they know how: during a tournament.

In recent memory, several students have attempted to address forensic issues through their competitive speeches: Christine Zani of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire wrote an Informative speech on the history of forensics; Erin McCarthy of Bradley University wrote an ADS on the way students structure speeches in forensics; Elizabeth Wehler of Lafayette College wrote a Persuasion speech about academic integrity in extemporaneous speaking; Justin Rudnick of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire wrote a Persuasion speech on the AFA qualification system. Following personal passions for a speech will allow students to start preliminary reading on a topic of interest and may spark further research on the area. Discounting performances with a forensic focus deters students from transitioning from competitor to scholar. Ribarsky (2005) suggested tournament directors try experimental events to encourage outside-the-box thinking, assuming students (as well as coaches and judges) might see forensics in a different light. Ribarsky's approach is well-intentioned, but delegating innovation to special events blocks the path to change. Offering special events to encourage creativity in regular events

only makes it more difficult for forensic community members to see the creative approach as a part of normalcy. Meta-analysis of forensics should be integrated into regular events and not segregated to experimental events.

Students may continue on as forensic professionals after competition, yet we know most move on to other things. Meta-analysis will fuel future research projects. Students can be active members in their own community outside forensics, seeking to inform or persuade their audiences about an important issue that impacts everyone. Since we know that most students will not be forensic professionals, forensics should prepare students for communicating and leading no matter where they end up (Derryberry, 1991; Madsen, 1990). There has always been criticism that the impact of a speech does not leave the round; empowering students to impact the activity through meta-analysis can help our students' work actually make a difference in forensics and outside of it. Allowing students to be self-advocates in forensics is training to be a self-advocate in future endeavors. Empowering competitors garners additional appeal for the activity, and may convince students to continue their forensic studies.

We as coaches can make a difference in this area by letting students pursue their interests in forensics through their performances, even if it means we think they might not final at a tournament. As judges we can help students by not immediately dismissing a forensics-related speech as "not being far-reaching" or "not applicable to many people." I truly hope the dozens of persuasive speeches I hear every year on foreign tragedies have made a difference for those suffering, but I know a passionate speech about something happening right now in forensics and is clearly relevant to that student is likely to elicit debate, and possibly change, in the community. Regardless, we should not put any approach or topic area on a pedestal, so encouraging students in this fashion is up to the discretion of the coach/judge. Perhaps the best practice is to merely not discourage or discount meta-analysis of forensics in student performances.

2. *Work on research projects.*

Hinck (2008) is quick to point out obstacles to doing our own research in forensics. He argued for the Nike approach: *Just Do It*. The expectation of students bailing forensic professionals out of their research onus is laughable. How can we ask students to write and submit if we do not take the same interest and effort? There are many obstacles to overcome. Because of the hectic travel demands of the forensic coach, we often feel as if research is "something external to the daily demands of our jobs" (Worth, 2002, p. 67) and, thus, something that can be ignored or put to the side for later attention. Hinck suggested that we make forensic research part of our routine. Leaving our research to when we have time is dangerous—we rarely "have time." Instead of making it a luxury, make forensic research a priority.

We can do this as Hinck recommended, by making a plan for a project and sticking with it on a regular basis. Divert time from other projects to these projects, or use down-time at tournaments for research. Many tournament directors are open to having research performed at tournaments if they are only asked. Tournament research is highly under-used (Worth, 2000). Finding ways to collect data is critical, and we cannot turn away from our basic area in which we function.

While doing more research is important, we also need to focus on doing quality research. Several scholars have argued that forensic scholarship is not up to par with other communication study fields (Croucher, 2006; Klumpp, 1990; Ryan, 1998). Forensic leaders must "satisfy each standard at the same level of QUALITY expected of their colleagues; the AMOUNT of ... scholarship ... however, may distinguish forensic educators from their colleagues" (Parson, 1984, p. 25-26). Due to the added rigors of forensic life, forensic professionals should not be expected to publish as often as their colleagues. However, holding our research to the same standards as our colleagues is the only way to increase the quality of forensic research.

We can measure where our research is at by submitting to non-forensic journals for publication. Forensic scholars need to show the link between communication theory and forensics for the communication discipline to take them more seriously. An enhanced focus on communication theory in individual events research at NCA and in journals will improve the overall image of forensic research (Porter, 1990). Croucher (2006) noted that, with the exception of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, no major communication journals publish articles about individual events. Focusing on the link between communication theory and forensics will give forensic scholars a better opportunity to get published in non-forensic journals. If forensic articles can get published in journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, or even a smaller journal, we will have seen the quality of forensic research change for the better.

Forensic professionals need not solely focus on forensic interests for their research (Kay, 1990; Parson, 1990). Merely being an active scholar in the communication field will increase the credentials of a forensic professional. It may be difficult to conduct research with many obstacles in the way, but to generate new leaders in the community, we must be willing to put the work in ourselves. Without an example, potential future leaders may not see the need for research in the field. Modeling the research we hope that future leaders will do will help them see how it is done.

3. *Mentor students.*

This is where we bring students into the game. If you know of a student who shows interest in forensic research, talk to them about it and see if they have any questions. Offer help to your students that express interest, but do not shy away from working with students whom you are not already working directly. If you see a student that you

think you might be able to help, contact them and ask them to assist you with something on which you are working. Asking students to help you in your research provides two potential benefits: It helps the student gain valuable research experience, and it also can decrease the work load of research/writing. Not only can students provide manual labor, but they also can reenergize an idea or project that may have become stale. If students becomes involved extensively in the project, they might be able to be added as co-authors, giving individual students a leg up in their future forensic academic and professional endeavors. A forensic professional might also connect students to other faculty for assistance. For example, a study on conflict within teams could be helped by the interpersonal specialist in a department. Reach out to students—you never know which students are too intimidated to speak up for themselves.

Education plays an important role as well. Like Cronn-Mills (2008), I, too, urge departments with forensic and graduate programs to offer forensic pedagogy and research courses. Students will research the areas in which they study, and a course on forensic issues will provide the arena in which to do it. Bartanen (1996) claimed that less than half of all universities with graduate programs offered a directing or administrative forensic course. I might guess that number has not increased since 1996. Formally training our future leaders in classrooms designed to help discuss and research issues of the field only makes sense—all other disciplines do this. Being thrown into forensic leadership positions without training can be unsettling, confusing, and could be contributing the high burnout rate attributed with DOF positions. Elton's (1989) call for more formal training still has yet to be heeded. Without formal training, new forensic professionals have no where to turn for information on forensics pedagogy and how to coach events (Dean, 1990). We need to offer courses in forensic issues so that students can learn about, discuss, and research them. These courses will better prepare the students to become independent forensic leaders. While new coaches continue to surface, new scholars are scarcer. A search on the Online Index of Forensic Research revealed that only three of the ten recipients of AFA-NIET Outstanding New Forensics Coach Award have published an article in a forensic journal. Our education of new forensic professionals needs to change to include scholarly forensic training with an emphasis put on publication.

An area that should also be mentioned is that of graduate students' capstone work. Many students who work with speech and debate teams during their graduate experience do not focus their thesis on forensics. This is a trend that we should be encouraged to change. If graduate students wish to pursue a career as a forensic professional, their thesis work is a perfect opportunity to perform original research in their field. Encouraging graduate students to research their passions might go a long way in assisting them in their forensic careers.

4. *Pursue a terminal degree.*

Many forensic professionals do not have terminal degrees. With so few coaches having research degrees, it makes sense that fewer people do research. The coaches themselves have not had the formal training. We need more forensic professionals with Ph.D.s and M.F.A.s to stay in forensics. If you find yourself without a terminal degree, look into pursuing one. Having a terminal degree will help in two ways. First, administrators are more likely to hire faculty, promote faculty, and grant tenure to faculty with a terminal degree; second, forensic professionals with terminal degrees will have more experience and formal training with advanced research. Forensic professionals with terminal degrees may be better prepared to conduct research and help mentor students.

5. *Create opportunities for student publication.*

As mentioned earlier, relative to other academic areas, forensics has a smaller level of submissions into discipline journals. This would seem to suggest that students have a greater chance of publication, and that may be true. Opportunity is there, but students are not taking advantage of the situation much like many of their forensic mentors. To help recruit new forensic leaders, we need to create special student sections for forensic research and discussion in our journals and at our conferences. By creating specific forensic sections and panels for students, we can help remove the daunting feeling of submitting against their coaches, judges, and mentors. Even something small like one student forensics panel at NCA—there are plenty of sessions that do not produce publication (Cronn-Mills, 2008) and could be used exclusively by students—or a featured student submission in *NFJ* would go a long way into bringing students along into the academic world of forensics.

Also, we need to encourage the current efforts of forensic professionals to help students with forensic academic ambition. This past spring, JoAnn Edwards of the University of Mississippi helped create the first DSR-TKA Student Research Conference dedicated to have undergraduate students present research on communication. Sadly, only five students submitted, and the conference was canceled. We need to be encouraging our students to be submitting to conferences such as one created by Edwards. Students need opportunities to shine, and it is our responsibility as leaders to help them get those opportunities. I also strongly urge other national forensics organizations (PKD, AFA, NFA, etc) to follow Edwards' lead and create their own student research conferences or workshops dedicated to forensics. For example, much like the dissertation workshop NCA sponsors, AFA could sponsor an "outstanding student project" research weekend where selected students have a retreat weekend with top scholars in forensics. At the least, other national organizations should support the DSR-TKA effort.

Students have opinions on issues in forensics. Giving them more venues to express these issues will keep them as vest-

ed members of our community and hopefully guide them into forensic leadership roles.

6. Increase reward/acknowledgement for student research and publication.

As Cronn-Mills (2008) noted, rewards and acknowledgement for forensic publication are scarce. That needs to change. Without any kind of incentive, why should students engage in research? Undergraduates might see little need as most graduate programs will accept students with no research experience. Graduate students generally are focused on their capstone work and find it hard to devote their remaining time to additional projects. The main incentive to perform academic work for the student is to advance their career. As forensic professionals, we need to urge our colleges and departments to initially only consider forensics job applicants with strong academic forensic backgrounds. If our new leaders are to continue what we have started, they should be willing and able to seek publication. Research is important to the field—our actions in choosing our new leaders must reflect that. Of course, not all forensic professionals will seek publication. That is their choice and their right. Those that do not seek publication should not be excluded from hiring, nor should they be made to publish. Every coach and director has their strengths and all candidates should be considered for a position, but the best candidates are well-rounded with experience and eagerness for coaching, administration, and academic writing. The optimal forensic professional should be trained and active in a variety of ways (Workman, 1997). To ignore this in the hiring process is to short-change our programs. Once students notice that academic contributions matter more in hiring, they should focus more of their efforts on publication.

Hiring criteria used by departments is not where this starts, however. Regional or state forensics organizations should jump on this idea of research rewards as soon as they can, offering an annual season award to the best student forensic paper. Simply by appointing a subcommittee to handle the few details, an organization can give public recognition to our students willing to engage in research. Being recognized in front of the community can be a powerful incentive. Just look at what competition and awards do to forensics now. Students who commit time to do forensic academic work should be just as highly lauded as those that make national out-rounds. I propose that AFA should include “forensic research” in the criteria for All-American. Currently, a student must document their service work in and out of the forensic community. For the forensic research portion, a student may document forensic research work if applicable. Students who have contributed to forensic research in some fashion will have initial preference, while other students are still able to apply and receive All-American status. The practice of rewarding students for their all-around contribution to forensics should extend to research, and the All-American status is meant to award students for going above and beyond mere competitive success. Without recognition

or incentive, students have little reason to join the ranks of forensic scholars.

Conclusion

These are steps that forensic professionals can take, but if you are student, you need to step up as well. The responsibility is not all with coaches and directors—part of it falls on you as a student. Take the initiative: If you have questions, ask. If you want to get more involved, talk to someone. Being passive will not get you noticed by forensic professionals who are more than willing to assist you. If you have interest in pursuing a career in forensics, speak with your coach. They will be able to answer your questions or, if they cannot, find someone who can. Invest in your future and the future of this activity by discussing your forensic passions with a forensic scholar—you might be surprised to find that there are many people out there who think similarly and are willing to help you express your ideas.

I am aware that these suggestions require more work for all of us, but we can never be satisfied with the status quo. We must constantly be seeking to improve for the future, or there might not be a future at all. As Hinck (2008) implored about research, we all need to take chances and not be afraid of failure or rejection. As leaders, it is our responsibility to help train the next group of forensic leaders by getting them involved in scholarly forensic work.

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