January 2013

The Next 50 Years of Forensics: Acknowledging Problems, Preparing Solutions

Christopher P. Outzen
*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

Lucas J. Youngvorst
*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

Daniel Cronn-Mills
*Minnesota State University - Mankato*, daniel.cronn-mills@mnsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel](http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel)

Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel)

**Recommended Citation**
The Next 50 Years of Forensics: Acknowledging Problems, Preparing Solutions

Christopher P. Outzen
Lucas J. Youngvorst
Daniel Cronn-Mills

Introduction

In previous decades, forensics was a well-respected co-curricular activity, with students becoming involved as early as middle school and moving into colleges across the country. The activity provides a multitude of meanings for individuals, teams, and colleges across the nation conjuring feelings of friendship, community, education, leadership, and competition. Many within the forensic community know the reputation of this activity can be attributed to influential individuals such as Grace Walsh, L. E. Norton, and Larry Schnoor, among others. Despite the great past and present of this activity, the future is looming with potential pitfalls that could damage the activity. We propose the next 50 years of forensics are fraught with potential struggles, but through discussion and action, the community can remain as strong for future generations as when it began.

Forensics is Not Prepared for Change

In forensics, degrees of change have occurred in past decades, but change may not have happened in the places where most needed. Although suit styles and topics have kept up with the times, much about the activity has remained relatively unchanged. Stability can be a double-edged sword. On one side, the activity enjoys a level of consistency which can increase its staying power. On the other side, forensics may be experiencing static momentum, and thus an inability to progress and grow. With the livelihood of the community and activity in turmoil, discussion and action must focus on progress in order to keep the program alive. Unfortunately, forensics is ill prepared for looming changes, and therefore threatening the activity as a whole.

A Community Divided

First, the community, although generally unified in the goals of forensics, is divided by the presence of several different forensic organizations. As noted in Outzen and Cronn-Mills (2012), hundreds of organizations in the United States are working for the activity we call forensics. At the national collegiate level alone, teams can be involved with the National Forensics Association (NFA), the American Forensics Association (AFA), the International Forensic Association (IFA), the Cross-Examination Debate Association (CEDA), the National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA), the National Christian College Forensics Association (NCCFA), Pi Kappa Delta (PKD), and Phi Rho Pi. This does not take into account the vast array of state and regional organizations,
including the Nebraska Intercollegiate Forensics Organization, the Twin Cities Forensic League (TCFL), or Mid-American Forensic League (MAFL). While these organizations are each important in their own right, a unified community does not necessarily mean a unified practice. The community does not exist beneath one umbrella organization. Change can be difficult to institute because any change does not necessarily apply to all organizations and, therefore, all tournaments. This leaves suggested changes to be accepted by some, modified by others and rejected by the rest, allowing the entire activity to suffer due to the lack of structural change.

One such situation happened in 2012 with recommended changes to the NFA events Prose Interpretation and Dramatic Interpretation. A proposal to change the events to single-voice and multiple-voice interpretation categories was discussed at the 2012 business meetings and formally discussed at the April 2013 business meeting. While many issues were addressed, one of the biggest problems with the suggested changes was how the proposed changes would be instituted across tournaments and forensic organizations. National qualification standards for AFA-NIET and NFA was one point of controversy. Eventually a counter-proposal was adopted calling for keeping the events as they stand with slight wording changes in the event descriptions.

The suggested changes and the complicated discussion therein, is a prime example of the divided forensic community. Our example is not used to suggest no progress has been made. However, the example showcases how significant change is almost impossible to accept across all organizations and tournaments.

**Lack of Forensic Scholarship**

The forensic community is currently facing a void for effective progress. One challenging area is the lack of forensic scholarship. Forensic scholarship is critical for its scholars to be accepted by the larger academic community. Scholarship is the lifeblood of higher education. Scholarship provides the content for what we teach and how we teach it. With less forensics scholarship, individuals outside the activity may view it as less credible. While everyone within the community understands the benefits of forensics, those outside rely on scholarship to showcase the activity’s worth. Therefore, with less forensic scholarship, the credibility of the activity itself is devalued.

Bartanen (2006) noted few rewards exist for forensic scholarship in the communication discipline at large; therefore, forensic scholarship tends to be put on the backburner. Although several forensic journals are in existence, research is often slow to develop. Instead, publications often consist of discussion pieces, which entertain an idealized forensic world, a sentiment echoed by Brand (2000). Brand noted the journals are not easily accessible to all. The Online Index for Forensic Scholarship operated through Minnesota State University, Mankato is often one’s best hope to find forensic research, but this one resource cannot counter the isolation of forensic research in its entirety. Because forensic research tends to exist in lesser-known journals and the backchannels of online databases, the creation and use of forensic research may be viewed as an unproductive endeavor.
Crisis of Future Leadership

Forensics may soon be facing a leadership void as long-time coaches and national leaders leave the community for retirement or other positions. Although forensics has been around for quite some time, many of its leading figures have been involved since the early years of the activity. However, Richardson (2005) explained, as time commitments and competitive demands of forensics continue to increase, conditions are ripe for high levels of coaching burnout. Rogers and Rennels (2008) argued many forensic educators leave because of family commitments. Thus, we expect many of our current leaders will soon be ready to move on and leave forensics to the next generation of forensic educators.

The question, however, is whether the next generation of forensic educators is ready for the challenge. Littlefield and Hinderaker (2012) noted leaders in forensics are perceived as having certain qualities and actions, such as longevity and commitment to the community, and have “affected the rules or nature of the activity in some direct way” (p. 17). However, with the groundwork of forensics already established and few options for a forensics-specific education available, Littlefield and Hinderaker’s characteristics of forensic leadership may become a secondary part of their professional lives.

Current options for forensic education are dwindling, which, as Compton (2012) noted, is one of the biggest issues facing the forensic community, especially graduate students. Students may go on to any number of colleges to coach while working toward a master’s degree or, in some cases, a doctorate. However, this means matters of research and leadership outside of forensics often take precedence; coaching students is the primary forensics-related duty for many of these graduate coaches. Nelson (2010) reflected on how his expectations for a job in forensics did not meet reality. He explained “little things such as budgets, creating a team, dealing with seniors, and all the paperwork was what I was not familiar with” (Nelson, 2010, p. 29). Although coaching is often a key task for graduate students, a holistic education in forensics is often missing. The holistic education can be difficult because, as Bartanen explained, forensic educators must be a “jack of all trade” teacher (as cited in Williams & Gantt, 2005, p. 54). Bartanen noted very few forensic-related classes are available to learn these skills. The MFA-Forensics, a graduate program specifically designed to train future forensic coaches, is one exception to this rule; however, the degree is currently offered only at Minnesota State University, Mankato (“Communication studies graduate,” 2013). With limited education options specifically for forensics, it is difficult to say if the next generation is prepared to maintain the activity, or to keep the activity alive and adaptable.

Judging Enforces the Past

Many former competitors may not enter coaching but instead return as alumni-judges. However, similar to coaches, judges may fall into forensic norms learned during their years competing. Nelson (2010) argued the competitive nature of the activity helps breed these norms and conformity; it is easier for students to speak and judges to critique based on a well-known “blueprint” of forensics. The blueprint is important considering judges dole out rewards and
punishment for performance choices. Even if students and coaches were to take a risk and attempt a new style or make decisions outside of the mainstream, the deciding factor over whether it is a good or a bad choice is decided by each individual judge. Cronn-Mills and Golden (1997), in their seminal study on the unwritten rules in forensics, documented the haphazard way new styles/approaches are rewarded in forensics.

Swift (2013) noted students tend to fall into a mindset of meeting the standards for one specific audience, the judge and norms of forensics. This mindset is passed on through generations of competitors as students become coaches and judges. Morris (2005) narrowed this scope to those who have recently finished competing, explaining how they often fall into a habit of evaluating students based on their familiarity with forensics as opposed to critiquing students based on standards of rules and good practice. Thus, forensic norms are held above the practice of the activity, continuing to be perpetuated as judging criteria without questions.

Current forensic coaches and judges are the ultimate enforcers of the activity, whether in rules or norms. Little prevents judges from falling back onto previously held beliefs about the activity and, thus, forensics will remain static. Essentially, without a focus on training and education for the next generation, forensics will not have the tools to grow and evolve. The next generation of forensic leaders will maintain the version of forensics they have always known, making the activity a thing of the past.

**Battle of the Budget**

During the next 50 years, the forensic community must consider internal struggles, and recognize and act against external forces. Given the country’s economic hardships over the past several years, universities have taken a considerable blow. Shaw (2011) explained the demand for a college education started to show signs of weakening through a decline in enrollment, which hurt both tuition-dependent private colleges and public universities dependent on enrollment for state funding. As colleges struggle to maintain a functioning budget, forensics teams are at the forefront of budgetary concerns, through budget cuts or department “streamlining.” Although university funding may not necessarily disappear, funds for forensics will likely reduce as money is diverted to keep other programs alive. As the changing realities of funding forensics take shape, there will be implications for programs and tournaments of all sizes.

**Running a Team on Limited Funds**

First, funding has always been an essential part of running a team; however, as budget concerns take hold, programs without a network of funding options are more likely to disappear. Bartanen (2006) explained forensic assessment tends to be more process-based than outcome based. As a result, justifying the value of forensics to administrators can be difficult because the activity does not fit within standard assessment. This is a threat to all programs, but particularly small schools which may already have limited funding due to school size or the tenure of the program. Forensic teams are unlikely to come into existence under
these conditions. Schnoor and Kozinski (2005) explained starting a team is already a difficult prospect and without support by the department or college, the difficulty is increased. Even if students take matters into their own hands and start a team, these teams are unlikely to flourish. As Holm and Miller (2004) argued, forensics teams need to work within a variety of systems and subsystems within on-campus, off-campus, and forensic communities to gain the support necessary to keep a program afloat.

The struggle for funding is complicated because competitive success is often a key marketing tool for teams. However, having a competitively successful team may require resources impacted by funding. Transportation costs have been the most well-known indicator of troubling economic times. In order to save on transportation costs, forensic programs will have to begin making choices about the number of tournaments attended, the distance traveled to tournaments, and the number of students they can bring. As Kirch (2005) explained, directors already make decisions about travel in terms of numbers of students against number of tournaments; budgetary concerns can only create added pressures. Programs existing where the density of tournaments is low will likely find this troubling; although we market ourselves as an educational activity, competition is the tangible marker of success. Being able to attend fewer tournaments means less recognition and competitive success in terms of numbers, thus reducing the appeal of the program to administrators. Although students may have individual success, earning team recognition may be difficult simply because other teams may bring more students to contribute to team points. This only perpetuates the lack of change within the forensics activity, as few new organizations are joining the community and ultimately damages the future of the activity. Thus any disparity between large and small, funded and unfunded forensics teams will continue to expand.

Tournaments and Limited Budgets

Concerns over budget and increasing costs will have an impact on tournaments. In the past, concerns over cost were responsible for the rise of swing and double-up tournaments. Alexander and Schnoor (1997) explained swing tournaments provide a great advantage of condensing two tournaments into one, saving both time and budget for hosts and attending schools. As costs continue to rise and funding becomes a problem for more and more schools, the need for these tournaments will only increase; hosting one tournament in a weekend may soon become an outdated practice. The issues continue when the entry requirement to make a tournament nationally recognized is considered. As an example, the AFA-NIET bylaws (2011) require at least nine schools be represented at a tournament for national qualifications to count. The bylaws dictate fewer entries equal fewer opportunities for national qualifications. Unfortunately, with less schools traveling to tournaments due to transportation costs and budget concerns, fewer tournaments across the nation may qualify for national-level competition.

As fewer schools attend a tournament, the nature of the competition will shift. As previously noted, the competitive disparity between programs with
more funding and those with less funding may become obvious. Teams which can afford to bring more students are more likely to receive team sweepstakes and recognition. This may prove detrimental to larger programs, as the smaller pool of students force tournaments to schedule teammates against each other. Further, in many cases, tournament hosts may struggle to find places for school judges which cannot have them judging their own students (American Forensics Association, 2009). The events seen at tournaments will become homogenous as a few large schools begin to take up the majority of slots in every round. Essentially, funding issues will affect numbers and travel, and the educational and competitive nature of the tournaments which are the cornerstone of the activity.

Struggles in Debate

Although we write from a position of primarily individual events experience, we argue debate programs will face similar struggles. In fact, the problems may be intensified for debate because the nature of the activity already has a sense of separation and fragmentation. First, debate is often seen as an entirely separate endeavor from individual events, despite both being forms of forensics. Although national organizations may recognize the importance of both, a sense of separation still exists in the community at large. Many organizations, such as the American Forensics Association, institutionalize the division in the creation of separate charters (American Forensics Association, 1995; American Forensics Association, 2005). Finding both debate and individual events offered at the same college-level tournament is unusual. Where the two do exist at the same tournament, such as at the NFA national tournament (National Forensic Association, 2012), scheduling becomes a struggle, which only further entrenches the divide.

Debate as a forensic activity is fragmented by the multiple forms of debate which have come to exist over decades of competition. Policy debate, Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate, public forum debate, and parliamentary debate have all found their place at the high school and college levels. Creation of these formats was primarily reactionary to problems within other formats. For example, Cirlin (1986) noted the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) wished to focus on debate as a communicative event. Similarly, Williams (1996) argued the addition of Lincoln-Douglas debate would create an ideal bridge between debate and individual events competition. On one hand, the formats are distinct. On the other hand, with differences between the formats, understanding what debate is becomes a much more difficult endeavor. Tomlinson (1986) noted one of the primary struggles faced by CEDA was differences between the philosophical goals of the association and the evaluative and competitive practices of those participating in the tournaments.

Those outside of the immediate debate community, especially administrators, may find the fragmentation inaccessible. This is problematic because debate is often viewed as less accessible than speech. Butler (2002) noted debate, especially policy, is generally not understood by those in other academic disciplines due to exclusive community language and standards. Minch (2002) observed Lincoln-Douglas debate is similarly misunderstood, even by the individ-
ual events community, because the intent of this particular format of debate became lost. Without ease of understanding and complicated by the multiple formats, debate programs risk losing funding to travel or having a program at all.

**Moving Forward for the Forensic Future**

The forensic community of the present is durable; however, current trends and practices could potentially lead forensics down a dismal path. Forensics is a community of leaders, educators, and activists, a pool of talent which can be tapped to make great change in the world. The time has come to turn this talent back on ourselves. If forensics is to continue to thrive, as we feel it can and should, it is time to set goals for growth.

**Elevating Scholarship**

First, we as a community must elevate the status of scholarship and theory in forensics to a new level. This work has already begun but members within the community must act to increase the academic standing of the discipline. Scholarship must continue to be produced within and about forensics as an activity. However, scholars must find ways to link forensics back to communication theory outside of the competitive realm. Brand (2000) noted the importance of research beyond competitive forensic practice in order to broaden forensics’ territory and reconnect our scholarship to the communication discipline. The activity cannot exist in a vacuum. The activity emerged from communication theory and must reconnect with theory if it is going to continue to grow. Forensic journals cannot be the sole publication point for forensic scholarship. Reconnecting with the academic community requires showing our work to the discipline as a whole, publishing in journals and presenting in conference divisions which are not forensics-specific. Brand argued forensic organizations should be fighting to add forensic journals to mainstream communication research databases. Forensics can be a strong part of the communication discipline and our scholarship should reflect this potential.

Updated research and theory on forensics provides a strong grounding for future generations of forensic educators. Rogers (2002) explained a rigorous program of research and publication is imperative for present and future forensic educators and will establish a culture of professionalism and credibility which can hold up to the standards of academia. Rather than falling back on norms of the past, educators can use theory and research to elevate forensics and move it to the next level.

The link back to academics and the communication discipline bodes well for justifying the educational purpose of forensics. Competition is often the central focus of the activity to administrators when it comes to issues of funding. However, Goodnight and Mitchell (2008) argued forensics itself can constitute knowledge generation based on argument, criticism, and pedagogy. Mitchell, Woods, Brigham, English, Morrison, and Rief (2010) noted forensics, and debate in particular, fosters skills which are important for research and forensics students are often far stronger at generating scholarship, particularly in a collaborative environment. Through widespread visible scholarship by forensic educa-
tors and students, the link between academics and forensics is underscored, emphasizing the importance of a forensic program for educational purposes. This helps to counter critics of the competitive nature of forensics. Millsap (1998) suggested the wisdom of forensic professionals needs to be shared to faculty in their university across disciplines, highlighting the educational utility of forensic knowledge. Forensics may be competitive in its actions, but the educational and scholastic opportunities afforded through competition can be highlighted for the sake of scholarship and to the benefit of the community.

Bring Debate Back into Focus

Second, debate may be at a higher risk than speech because it is perceived as inaccessible to those outside of forensics. However, debate is an important part of forensics and offers clear educational value. Thus, steps must be taken to help debate. Of particular importance is restraining reactionary forms of debate. As debate has grown and changed over time, more formats of debate have popped up due to a particular demand of the community or because an aspect of debate was problematized. However, this has made understanding and supporting debate as a whole very difficult. Further fragmentation of debate must be prevented to make debate accessible and to consolidate efforts to keep debate alive. Butler (2002) suggested in order to foster an understanding and connection between debate and outside disciplines, the debate community needs to begin using more lay judges to bridge the gap and to bolster the educational value of the activity. If a clear focus on a particular format(s) of debate could be defined and current divisions overcome, then schools, tournaments, and national organizations might be able to find a unified approach to help debate programs stay afloat and make debate more accessible to the community outside forensics. Herbeck (1990) advocated for more scholarship for debate in a variety of arenas, such as pedagogy and argumentation theory. Herbeck noted educational goals must be reconnected with debate practice. Herbeck’s suggestions would serve to underscore the value of debate beyond competition, thus creating common ground between forensic practitioners and other educators and administrators.

Consider Virtual Forensic Opportunities

Transportation and hotel expenses are among the highest costs for most forensic programs and therefore represent the greatest threat in the battle with limited funding. Solving this problem at the economic level is difficult. Therefore, forensics must consider ways of adapting tournaments to meet budgetary shortfalls. Hinck (2002) wrote, although the forensic community should be cautious about virtualizing forensics, it is time to acknowledge the possibility and to study its effects and implementation. One such option is to consider technological advancements in tournaments.

The idea of running tournaments completely online via video programs has been discussed and, despite a couple of attempts, has never been considered a serious option. Although we recognize this situation would be far from ideal, the possibility should be seriously discussed. As technology advances and costs shrink, online tournaments may become a viable option. Robinson and Reese
(2012) noted even familiar social media, such as Facebook and Skype, have enormous untapped potential for saving money and for pedagogical benefits. For example, when holding a debate via Facebook’s chat feature, they found their ability to go back and examine archived chat from the debate was a bonus for both coaching and judging purposes. Of course, an online tournament is just one option among many potential technological developments in forensics. Although budget issues have not yet reached dire levels for many teams, the survival of the activity may one day depend on finding ways to overcome the limits of funding and transportation.

Training the Future of Forensics

Finally, we have to develop more formal ways to train coaches and judges. The individuals involved in forensics are constantly shifting, whether because of graduation, burnout, retirement, or any other number of causes. Therefore, a strong training infrastructure to educate our educators is important for those who will be coaching and judging students to be strong communicators.

Coaches

First, coaches need more formal training to be strong forensic educators. Up and coming coaches may be aware of forensic norms and practices. They may know how to find literature and make events “competition ready.” However, if the link back to scholarship and theory is not present, then the educational value is lost. Kelly and Richardson (2010) explained linking back to scholarship not only maintains the history of education forensics is proud of; it also helps to justify forensic programs to administration by linking to the institution’s academic goals. Workman (1997) stated future directors of forensics must be trained to deal with administrative tasks, a long-neglected area of education for upcoming forensic professionals. A coach can only do so much to help their students if the program cannot be maintained from an administrative perspective. Kuyper (2011) explained, although appealing to administrators is an important part of coaching, it is time to re-examine what administrators are looking for when making funding decisions. As future generations come into forensic leaderships, a new generation of college administrators also appear, leaving us to forge new relationships and connections. While experiences is a good teacher, providing a strong foundation in the administrative practices necessary to lead a team is fundamental to keeping programs alive.

Theoretical and administrative knowledge could be imparted in many ways; however, formal degrees and training programs are the strongest option. Compton (2012) suggested educational degrees, forensic workshops, or even mentorship programs across the circuit would be a strong step toward effectively bringing young coaches into forensic leadership. These programs help to train new forensic educators and help to lend forensics a new level of credibility. At this time, such programs do not widely exist. However, the MFA-Forensics at Minnesota State University, Mankato provides one option for what a program might look like. The program blends a traditional communication education with specific courses related to forensic education. The MFA-Forensics has gained na-
tional recognition for its approach to forensics, winning the Most Innovative Program by the Masters Education Section of the National Communication Association (“Communication studies graduate,” 2013). The degree, which provides a blend of traditional communication education with specific courses related to forensic education, is by no means a universal answer to the problem, but may provide a springboard for new ideas, degrees, and programs which could bring training our educators to a new level of formality and credibility.

Judges

However, coaches are not the only forensic educators. Judges at tournaments play an important role in the education of students. Coaches and students can work as hard as they want and make clear choices about their performances, but judge scores are the competitive “carrot.” However, the role of judges often goes under-recognized and unappreciated. Therefore, elevating the status of forensic judges is an important step toward keeping our activity alive and well. Ross (1984) noted the role of judges is often misunderstood, even by judges themselves, as primarily observers and not as educators. However, judges need to be judging on good communication practice and with a pedagogical emphasis. If the academic integrity of forensics is to be maintained, judges must be, as Morris (2005) lamented, true critics, not just evaluators.

Ross (1984) made several suggestions for improving the state of judging in forensics. First, a judge’s competencies in particular events should be honored. Second, there must be more commitment to professional research for self-education. Finally, more discussion on judging philosophies and paradigms should be held in conjunction with speech tournaments. Despite the fact Ross made these suggestions nearly three decades ago, the state of forensic judging is still problematic and without clear efforts toward improvement. We believe judging seminars would be especially important for the community, including emphasis on both judging philosophies and discussions on effective ballot writing. If forensics is to remain educative through competition, then judges must be able to judge on good communication practices and communicate their decisions in a way which is educational for the students.

Conclusion

The next 50 years of forensics is fraught with potential, both positive and negative. Forensics is currently in a relatively strong state of being; however, we foresee problems in the future if the status quo is maintained. Therefore, we suggest it is time to take action and begin to make changes in the community to prevent forensics from falling into our predicted pitfalls. As this activity has had a major impact on generations of students and educators, it has the potential to continue to do so. If we as a community are willing to put in the time and effort to shoring up the activity, then in another 50 years we may be able to say “Where will the next 50 take us?”
References


Authors’ Notes

Christopher P. Outzen (B.A., University of Northern Iowa) is a graduate teaching assistant, forensics coach, and MFA-Forensics candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato. His research interests are forensics, performance studies, rhetoric, and gender studies with regard to masculinity and sexuality.

Lucas J. Youngvorst (B.A., Gustavus Adolphus College) is a graduate teaching assistant, forensics coach, and MA candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato. His research interests include health communication and interpersonal communication.

Daniel Cronn-Mills (Ph.D., University of Nebraska) is the interim Assistant Vice President of undergraduate studies, professor in Communication Studies, and Distinguished Faculty Scholar at Minnesota State University, Mankato.