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NATIONAL FORENSIC ASSOCIATION

# *National Forensic Journal*

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*The National Forensic Association is devoted to both education and competitive excellence in intercollegiate speech and debate.*

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# *National Forensic Journal*

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The *National Forensic Journal* is a journal dedicated to ideas that affect the forensic community. Scholarship is accepted that is related to pedagogy, research, methodological issues, and administration in competitive individual events and debate activities. The goal of the journal is to facilitate systematic discussion among forensic educators and students in order to improve the quality of the educational experience. The Editorial Board will consider manuscripts that use any appropriate methodology. The journal welcomes submission by any interested person. While the scholarship need not specifically involve the forensic community, the conclusions drawn should have relevance to the activity. The journal uses a blind peer review policy. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced throughout, including block quotations, notes, and references. Manuscripts should be prepared in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) *Publication Manual*. To facilitate blind review, please avoid self-references in manuscript. Include on a separate page with author(s), academic titles, institutional affiliations, contact information, and any manuscript history. The second page of the manuscript should contain an abstract of no more than 200 words. The text should begin on the third page of the manuscript and should include a title at the top of the page. Because manuscript distribution may be done through email correspondence, please give the document a name that does not include author identity. While under review by the *National Forensic Journal*, authors may not submit the manuscript to another publication source. Articles should not be submitted that have previously been published in whole in other sources. Upon acceptance, copyright for the article shall be retained by the National Forensic Association. Authors are expected to follow the review guidelines established by their institution's research review board for studies involving human participants. Manuscripts should be submitted as a Word attachment by email to [rrichardson@berry.edu](mailto:rrichardson@berry.edu).

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## Contents

Editor's Note.....	3
“...and finally examining some implications”: (Mis)use of Evidence in Informative Speaking.....	5
<i>Ben Walker and Hilary Rasmussen</i>	
A Little Help from My Friends: A Relational Health Communication Competence Approach to Social Support for Forensic Educators.....	14
<i>Heather J. Carmack and Todd T. Holm</i>	
Older, Wiser, Novice: Nontraditional Students and Collegiate Forensics.....	35
<i>Laura Pelletier</i>	

## Editor's Note

### *Enjoying the Song, Toasting the Singer*

The 1982 DSR-TKA national tournament at Texas Tech University will always hold a special place in my heart. My Ball State University teammates and I, with our coaches, Vicki Karns and Keith Semmel, loaded a mammoth RV and headed out of Muncie toward Lubbock. It would prove to be the only trip in 37 years of forensic travel to involve the unfortunate pairing of those two consonants, *R* and *V*. While most of the memories of that weekend have mercifully faded, a part lingers and inspires to this day.

The tournament banquet featured a guest speaker, former DePauw University debater Vernon Jordan. In the years following his competition days, Jordan had distinguished himself as an attorney and leader in the civil rights movement. He had served as the president of the National Urban League from 1971-1981. In May of 1980, Jordan was shot in Fort Wayne, Indiana, by a white supremacist, serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin. Jordan survived. His hospital visit from President Jimmy Carter became the first news story covered by a startup news organization called CNN. In March of 1982, he remarked to the forensic assembly that he was looking forward to returning to the private practice of law. The “privacy” would be short-lived, as Jordan would distinguish himself in several ways: as an award-winning author, tireless public servant, civil rights icon and a member of the Clinton transition team and then private counsel to President Clinton.

Vernon Jordan's distinct booming bass voice loomed nearly as large as his presence at the front of the banquet hall. He possessed the rhythmic inspirational cadence of so many of his colleagues in the movement, most famously Dr. King himself. But it was his message that challenged me to the core—a thesis that I have repeated in front of every public speaking class that I have taught over the past three-plus decades. Jordan confronted every speaker in the room with this observation, “It is wonderful that you are all singers, but it is more important that you have a song.”

The metaphor drifted back to me once again as I sat in the closing moments of the awards ceremony at NFA's 2015 national tournament, listening to a beloved leader belting out an old standard. Larry Schnoor is a singer with a song. From the dawn of comprehensive intercollegiate individual events competition in the early 1970's, no voice has proclaimed the value of public speech competition as strongly as his—and it is a note he has held for fifty years. In the early seventies he led a chorus of voices calling for the inclusion of individual events competition in the realm of intercollegiate forensics. In July of 1976, Schnoor was appointed as the chair of the National Individual Events Tournament Committee. In 1978, the AFA's NIET became the second comprehensive national individual events tournament, seven years after the NFA tournament. From 1985 to 1994, he assumed the role of NFA's Vice President for Administration. From 1995 to 2015, he led the NFA serving as its president. Across the wide spectrum of forensic organizations, from the American Forensic Association to the Interstate Oratorical Association, Larry Schnoor has assumed primary positions of leadership. While most

directors of forensics have focused on developing and managing their own programs, Schnoor has seen to the administration of the bigger picture. Without his voice, and those who joined with him, individual events competition would barely be an activity, let alone a career choice. The tune we have so easily inherited was composed through decades of hard work, sacrifice, perseverance and vision.

Effective leadership, like rhetoric itself, calls for a nuanced understanding of people, issues and contexts. Ironically, an activity that develops an advanced understanding of the most human connection, communication, also tends to bring out a disturbing divisiveness in the overly competitive. Larry's personal approach to enhancing relationships among colleagues has served to draw together communities whose natural course is division. Yes, the "Lion of Mankato" can roar in the face of ingratitude, immaturity and incompetence, but his calming, resonant, Minnesota baritone is typically more reminiscent of Keillor than killer. Long before the buzzwords "servant leadership" dominated the motivational speech circuit, and in the hours after the last round had ended, President Schnoor could be observed sweeping up cigarette butts on the sidewalk or handling any number of tasks that most would deem menial. As a leader, Larry knows when to sweep them and when to kick them.

"Menial" is in the eye of the beholder, or more likely in the peripheral vision of the passerby. As one rushes off to the next round, or scurries to see postings, the tasks undertaken to provide these opportunities often go unheralded. The dash to the next round serves as an appropriate metaphor for our activity. We focus so intently on the game that we miss the context. The collection of cigarette butts on the ground means little to the ones who discarded them, but speaks volumes to the host community. Larry understood that. Forensic activity exists within the contexts of departments, colleges, communities, cities and society at large. The game has a larger end in mind. His leadership takes many forms, from participating in hundreds of panels at NCA and other professional organizations to assuming nearly every administrative position in the activity, from presiding over contentious meetings to balancing tight budgets, from mentoring countless coaches to building future leaders. Larry wears many hats- each with style and flair! While many educators have spent careers in forensic service, Larry truly stands alone in dedication to leadership of the larger individual events community.

On the pages of this journal, it is appropriate that we recognize Schnoor's unparalleled contribution as president of the NFA for the past two decades, and salute his accomplishments as an active founder, supporter and developer of individual events competition. We believe it has been a song worth singing. We are forever indebted to, and grateful for the "Roaring Lion of Mankato."

Randy Richardson  
Co-Editor

## **“...and finally examining some implications”: (Mis)use of Evidence in Informative Speaking**

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In 1983, Bob Frank published his critique of evidence use in Persuasive Speaking at the 1981 NFA championship tournament. While many similar critiques have been done since then, this analysis attempts to update Frank's critique in the light of modern informative speaking. The authors analyzed the 2011 NFA Informative Speaking final round speeches, examining the use of evidence. This article presents those findings and offers points of discussion for the forensic community.

Evidence use in forensics has long been studied (e.g., Cronn-Mills & Schnoor, 2003; Del Casale et al., 2003; Perry, 2002; Perry, 2003; Thomas & Hart, 1983) as has informative deception (White, 2009; Willoughby, 2010). Frank (1983) authored a hallmark study which examined the use of evidence in forensics and found evidence misuse at the highest level: the 1981 NFA Final Round of Persuasive Speaking. Recently, Mendes (2014) sought to revisit Frank's study by analyzing the 2011 NFA Final Round of Persuasive Speaking. Mendes noted that “over the course of more than three decades of study, a recurring pattern of evidentiary abuse at the highest level of competition has been found” (p.21). Mendes' analysis suggests that evidence misuse is still a problem in college forensics today and serves as the impetus for the present analysis.

To honor Frank's (1983) groundbreaking study, other scholars have followed Mendes (2014) and begun to examine the other public address events; Kellam (2014) critiqued vocabulary use in modern Rhetorical Criticism and Hall and Doyle (2013) analyzed the use of humor in After-Dinner Speaking. This analysis aims to continue this push by examining the use of evidence use in the 2011 NFA Final Round of Informative Speaking.

To examine these speeches, the authors purchased the video recordings of the 2011 Informative Final Round from the National Forensic Association and watched them thoroughly, attempting to accurately transcribe the speeches. In order to maintain speaker anonymity, the comments on specific speech content have been kept generalized. Due to this approach, the examination of the speeches is at times intentionally vague. The analysis that follows is for educational purposes only, investigating the state of evidence use in modern forensic speeches. The authors do not attempt to punish any of the speakers in the round for any misuse of evidence as any discrepancies may have been done unintentionally or intentionally. Indeed, the present analysis suggests that the

problem of evidence misuse is not limited to the six speakers in the 2011 NFA Final Round of Informative Speaking – it is a symptom of certain forensics practices that the forensics community as a whole contributes to and is responsible for. Source misuse and misattribution is a collective problem. All members of our forensics community are collectively culpable and it is the authors' hope that the community will collectively address the continued misuse and misattribution of source-based evidence in modern forensic speeches.

### **Analysis**

Relying on Frank's (1983) controversial critique of evidence in persuasive speeches, this analysis frames misuse of evidence into the same categories: Fabrication, Source Deception and Plagiarism. While Frank generally attributed these violations to intentional abuse, we have approached this analysis with the belief that speakers and their coaches intend to cite evidence ethically but often lack the tools and strategies necessary to prevent and address mistakes.

#### *Fabrication*

Fabrication, as defined by Frank (1983) is where "either (1) the speaker attributed data to a wholly non-existent source, or (2) the speaker attributed data to a source that does exist but does not contain the information claimed" (p. 97). In these instances, the speaker cites accurate information, but the source either does not exist or the information is found in another place. For example, if a speaker cited information from Time Magazine of June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014 and there is no such publication on that date, Frank would dub this the first version of fabrication. An example of the second kind of fabrication would be if a speaker cited information from the New York Times of January 27<sup>th</sup> and there is indeed an article about the topic present in that source, but the information cited in the speech is not present in the source cited. Frank's (1983) analysis revealed fabrication of sources to be a significant problem and this analysis found similar results.

Out of seventy-eight total sources cited, forty showed evidence of source fabrication. Of those forty, in fifteen instances, the source cited could not be found. This mishap most often occurred when the source being cited was a newspaper or magazine. Twenty-five citations presented information that could not be validated by the source that was cited: speakers attributed data to an existing, but inaccurate source. One example from the round includes a citation for a magazine that exists but did not contain the information shared. The specific information cited, however, could be found in two separate sources: a different article from the same source and a Wikipedia page. That is not to say the speaker used those other two sources to gather the information, but rather the information was verified from non-cited sources. It is important to reiterate that this analysis cannot ascertain where the student gathered their source material, nor is that its purpose. Rather, the key element is that the information presented could not be verified. In such cases, it is unclear whether or not the source fabrication within the speech (and more specifically, the verbal citation) was intentional. What is clear, however, is that fabrication, as defined by Frank (1983), was present.

Complicating the enterprise of verifying source material was the inaccuracy of several dates and titles throughout the speeches. Some citations had incorrect months and dates cited, making it more difficult to verify information. One speaker continually cited the date of many of his/her sources as the same day of the month (January 1st, March 1st, August 1st, etc.), which became suspicious when the sources were difficult or impossible



to find. Another trend making sources harder to verify included the citation of websites using copyright or “last updated” references; many speeches used these citation practices and this analysis was unable to confirm the information from those sources due to the vague nature of that particular citation method and the ever-changing nature of a website.

While it is possible the speakers engaged in deliberate fabrication, it is perhaps more plausible that the age and type of the citation (the majority of citations being from older issues of news reports/magazines) factored more prominently into the authors’ inability to locate the precise article or webpage cited by the speaker. Many sources were found easily, while others took more diligent effort. Most major newspapers and magazines make it easy to search for old articles but in some instances we were unable to locate sources cited. In such cases, verification of source information might have been aided considerably if speech manuscripts, and their references, had been annotated and catalogued completely for future reference.

#### *Source Deception*

Source deception can be construed as a subtle variation on fabrication and refers to the “tactics used [by the speaker] to deceive the listener as to the true source of evidence” (Frank, 1983, p. 97). Again, while Frank places blame on the speaker we believe source deception can and often does occur accidentally. In this case, the evidence used by the speaker is real but the original or primary source of the information is masked. To distinguish from fabrication, instances of source deception, for example, may bolster the credibility of a speaker’s message by attributing a fact/claim to a source more reputable than where the information actually came from. This may be the most difficult of the categories to track due to the shifting nature of the sources during the analysis.

There are several possible examples of this. Consider the hypothetical following: “According to the LA Times of April 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, the rioters have started to organize into groups. Leaders of the groups have said they refuse to move until their voices are heard.” In this quotation, the speaker correctly notes that the LA Times reports that rioters have organized. However, a review of the source confirms that the LA Times did not report on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, about the leaders’ intentions. Therefore, we can assume that the information came from the speaker's own extrapolation of events, or from another, undisclosed source.

Undisclosed sources, or sources that were used but never verbally cited in the speech, were present in each of the six speeches. To account for the exceptional difficulty in accurately tracking this phenomenon, this analysis deemed that only the claim immediately following the citation (be it in the same sentence or the next) be associated with that source. Once a new claim or information was presented, this analysis looked for a new source to help verify its accuracy. We found at least forty instances where information was present but the connection to a source was unclear. This means that of the seventy-eight total sources cited, more than half that number should have been present but were not. The vast majority of these instances were omissions of verbal citations for what this analysis deemed as a new claim or fact.

Adding to the complexity of this issue is the tendency for speakers to begin verbal citations with stock phrases like “According to...”, “[Source] notes...”, or “[Author] stated in an online article...”. These stock phrases, while useful in making verbal citations palatable for the audience and grammatically correct within the context of the speech, may in fact exacerbate the issue of inaccurate citation. Stock citation phrases (like those

listed above) assume the author's direct influence on the speaker's message or the direct presence of information in the source, thereby nullifying the normal process of synthesis in research. In other words, there is no verbal citation stock phrase that indicates the incorporation of multiple sources in the formation of a cohesive, multi-focal platform which is then paraphrased and presented in the speakers' own words. If a speaker read about their topic from five different sources and then composed a claim derived from all of those sources, they are in a citation bind. In the previous example using the LA Times, the speaker most likely got that information from a variety of sources, but due to time constraints, only cited one source. Without a way around this bind, the speaker is left to present this synthesized information as lifted directly from a singular source (which is often not accurate) or to present it as "common knowledge" information without direct citation, further muddying the academic accuracy of the information presented.

Another example of Source Deception is source-splitting: when the speaker cites different sources, even though the information is gathered from the same primary source. For example, when a news outlet like the Associated Press releases a story which is then published in other news outlets, the exact same story may be accredited to the Detroit Times and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the Associated Press. The student may then cite all three news outlets throughout the speech, essentially giving credit for the original article where credit is not due. Several instances of source-splitting occurred in the speeches, with one speaker pulling the majority of his/her information from only two sources. A speaker who engages in source-splitting technically cites where he/she retrieved the material accurately. However, the information originated from one primary source and should be attributed as such. Because speakers fail to disclose this distinction, source-splitting qualifies as a source deception.

The last major kind of source deception is when information and a source are verbally cited, but the source name has been changed to something else. For example, instead of correctly citing the Huffington Post, a speaker might cite CNN instead. This analysis found this source deception occurred several times. In one case, the speaker attempted to present information critical to one of his/her main points in a more credible light by attributing the information to a reputable university source. In reality, the information came from a website directly tied to vested players in the speaker's topic. It is the authors' interpretation that source deception in this case was done to bolster the credibility of the fact being cited, as well as the broader point of the speech, by avoiding ties to a potentially biased source.

There were other instances of source deception that did not fall into larger categories. One speaker cited a book with an author's name completely changed to a name with harder consonant sounds. Another example includes a speaker spouting a quick list of sources about the topic without giving any specific information about the sources (e.g., "...the New York Times, Time Magazine, and the Washington Post all report that..."). One source from another speech was cited as "recent" even though it was four years old at the time of the presentation. With all of its iterations, Source Deception is a particularly tedious phenomenon to track and account for. As with Fabrication, it is possible to engage in Source Deception unintentionally, specifically when student competitors cope with the nerves that come with competition. However, even unintentional Source Deception constitutes a breach of trust between the speaker and their audience and demands attention and correction.

### *Plagiarism*

Plagiarism differs from fabrication and source deception in that speakers state false information untrue to source material. This could (but does not necessarily) mean the information is fabricated or altered with the intention to deceive the audience. Accidental plagiarism can occur, especially when we remember we are dealing with undergraduate students often put under intense competitive pressure. However, examples of plagiarism do seem more likely to be intentional source misuse than the other two categories. While this examination cannot determine intent, nor does it attempt to, certain signs point to planned deceit. Frank's (1983) analysis found that plagiarism does indeed occur and instances of it should be brought to light. The cases of plagiarism uncovered by this analysis were few in number, but the nature of evident plagiarism is no less disturbing.

In one instance where the evident plagiarism is most likely to be accidental, one speaker attributed claims in his/her implication section without any valid evidence of support. Instead of having sources that connected the topic to the ascribed implications, the speaker cited generic information and made conjecture a part of his/her informative presentation. A basic example of this might be a speaker giving a speech on automobiles and in the implication section citing a source that says cars run on gasoline, but then extrapolating about the labor concerns of the oil industry. The source at hand notes only that cars run on gasoline, but the speaker's main point isn't about that; there is a topical connection between the source and the claim, but when the speaker talks about labor concerns, no sources are cited. There appears to be a disconnect from the source information and what the speaker ultimately asserts. This may not be construed as plagiarism in the traditional sense, but this form of "soap box informative speaking" presents the audience more with what the speaker thinks and less with what the sources provide. Plagiarism of this kind may deceive the audience into viewing speaker opinion as reputable reporting. While speakers are expected to contextualize source material as part of the process of integrating borrowed information into the speech, this particular speech contained the only example (of the six analyzed) of this type of plagiarism, reconstructing opinion as evidence.

In a more alarming situation, a different speaker cited a source that not only did not contain the information cited, but contradicted much of what was being presented in the speech. In fact, many of the sources cited in the speech offered information counter to what was said by the speaker. This misrepresentation of information is troubling because it indicates the speaker seemingly chose to ignore certain aspects of his/her topic in order to present material in a favorable light. This same speech cited statistics that this analysis was unable to verify from any source, cited or otherwise. In the speech, a person was mentioned in an example but no record of this story was found either in the source cited or elsewhere. While it is certainly possible that we simply did not find the statistics or story, the signs points to plagiarism.

An even more heinous violation occurred in another speech, where not only did the speaker present false findings from a real study (statistics cited from the study were not found in the actual study), but the speech also had several misquotes, twice attributing direct words to people which were altered from the original phrasing. Possibly the greatest abuse of evidence was that direct portions of this speech can be found in a source

not cited. In a passage from the speech, forty-two out of forty-eight consecutive words were lifted straight from a Wikipedia page related to the topic. The only alterations were to rephrase a date, add an adjective, and summarize a longer passage from the webpage. It certainly is possible that the speaker has since edited the Wikipedia page after delivering the speech that season. However, just as in the previous speech, the evidence suggests plagiaristic intent.

### **Discussion**

Frank (1983) noted the largest amount of sources cited in a speech in the 1981 NFA Persuasive Speaking Final round was fifteen. In contrast, the speakers in the 2011 NFA Informative Speaking Final round incorporated unique citations totaling twenty-two, sixteen, twelve, twelve, ten, and seven. Citations in the 1981 round numbered at fifty-eight compared to the seventy-eight sources cited in 2011. Comparing the source citation totals may not be indicative of a growing use of evidence given that the respective analyses investigated different speaking events (Persuasive/Informative). However, the increased citations are something to note for future researchers tracking trends in evidence use.

Investigating the amount of sources cited in a national final round certainly has its merits, but it was the actual use of those sources that was the focus of the present analysis. Frank (1983) argued that when it comes to judges being able to tell the difference between real or deceitful evidence use in a speech round, “they probably will not ever be able to do so” (p. 106). Without punitive threat any speaker may garner competitive incentive to perform unethical practices. We are not suggesting those in the final round did not earn their placing rightly. Nor are we asserting that source misuse and misattribution is necessarily a purposeful, insidious practice on the part of speakers or coaches. Rather, we are observing that without a system to properly check for evidence abuse, students, within and without national final rounds, may not adhere to higher ethical standards.

Although students should not need fear as a motivator, one way to prevent abuses like those documented above might be for tournament directors to require printed copies of source material annotated with their citations, and to do systematic reviews of the final rounds. Of course, annotations on a reference page will not prevent instances of fabrication and deception wherein a student's claim cannot be tracked to a source because that source has since been altered (e.g., dynamic sources like webpages). In such cases, the cataloguing of sources should include a screen shot of the source information, complete with date/time-stamp, to demonstrate the accuracy of the source information and the source citation at the time the speech was written and delivered. With many students turning to the internet to gather the most recent source material possible, our cataloguing strategies must evolve to account for the unfixed nature of these sources. Reference annotation and “screen-shot cataloguing” would not completely prevent abuse of evidence. However, it might incentivize the prevention of negligent behavior by providing a clear pathway toward transparency. Added transparency would make it easier to distinguish between purposeful, malicious source misuse and accidental source misattribution. When judges and/or tournament directors suspect source misuse, they would be able to reference the annotated manuscript and/or screen-shots to decipher if the speaker has fabricated information or if the student merely misspoke in the round.

Forensic adjudicators would be able to more confidently defend the punitive action of purposeful source misuse as well as avoid punitive action when the students' annotated references prove the action unnecessary. As in real-world public speaking situations, wherein the onus to defend the truth of a rhetor's claims falls on the rhetor, student competitors should responsibly prepare themselves to defend the voracity of their claims if and when they are called into question.

Instances of intentional fabrication, source deception, and plagiarism should be rooted out and strongly discouraged; not doing so sends the message that it is acceptable to deceive audiences for personal gain as long as you are not caught. Of course, not all abuse we've documented is necessarily intentional, which is why the organization would have to use discretion while reviewing evidence. Clearly this approach is not ideal because it is retroactive – it does not actively teach students how to use sources correctly but would only act as a punitive measure. Our community should take a more active approach in preventing this as well as penalizing blatant abuses of evidence.

While misleading citation practices certainly impact the game of forensics, the more important aspect of this is how it ties into our educational goals as a community. Frank (1983) noted citations are important, but perhaps less so in a speech as compared to other academic work, observing that “a speech requires less complete documentation than a term paper or journal article” (p. 105). However, citations are still considered an important part of public speaking. As forensics educators, we have a responsibility to teach our students about the importance of giving credit where credit is due and for the most part, we feel the community does an acceptable job of emphasizing that importance. If we agree with Frank (1983) that many problems with evidence use may result from carelessness on the student's part, coaches may have to double check student work more insistently to prevent source misuse and misattribution.

The real problem may stem from the fact that oral citations, preferable speaking style, and time restrictions all inhibit accurate presentation of evidence. Preventing more instances of evidence abuse requires that we give students the adequate tools they need to credit sources. One way would be to conceive of more accurate verbal citation stock phrases that account for situations in which students paraphrase or synthesize multiple sources into one integrated idea. This approach however returns us to the similar problem of how to give credit to all sources involved. It appears to be a puzzle without an easy answer and in lieu of a better system, we may have to resign ourselves to the fact that some instances of source amalgamation do not lend themselves to verbal citation and are simply part of integrating research seamlessly into a speech.

This calls into question the merits of current verbal source citation practices in forensics. If citations cause this much trouble we may need to reconsider how we teach and judge source use in speeches. Frank (1983) questioned whether source ambiguity is morally objectionable in this context, comparing a news reporter to a forensic speaker. While Frank argued documentation is important as a judging criterion in contest speaking because it reflects curricular learning objectives, the point of looking to non-academic speaking scenarios is not lost on us. With education praxis trending toward the practical, at what point do we start to bend traditional practices and teach students what they see in Presidential addresses, TED talks, and other forms of modern public address? As teachers, we find our classroom students objecting to the requirement of full citations due to its cumbersome nature and lack of real-world exemplars. While such an extreme

departure from our traditional pedagogy is not something we are advocating for here, forensic educators might benefit from novel approaches to sources, citations, and use of evidence in speeches.

The authors do not claim to have addressed source misuse and misattribution in its entirety, nor do they promote the suggestions above as the only way(s) to address this issue. The present analysis has only attempted to reinvigorate an old discussion pertaining to source usage and citation in modern forensics speeches. This is a conversation that must be carried forth by all those with vested interest in the health and integrity of forensic competition: the student competitors who face potential discipline for source misuse, the coaches who are reflected in the work of their students, and the adjudicators who judge the merits of students' competitive works. Future researchers should explore the potential for a re-prioritization of source citation in different forms of speaking. Forensic educators must find ways to adapt to the demands of dynamic technology when assessing source usage and citation. Additionally, forensic educators should continue to explore the real-world applications of evidence usage in modern public speaking. With an ever-growing list of ways to gather information, speakers may have a more difficult time giving proper source credit. Instead of clinging to traditions that may no longer work, coaches need to be continue to discuss the problems found in this analysis in hopes that innovative solutions arise.

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**A Little Help from My Friends:  
A Relational Health Communication Competence  
Approach to Social Support for Forensic Educators**

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The purpose of this study was to examine factors that impact forensic educators' perceived social support, including communication competence, job stress, and job burnout. Communicatively competent educators reported higher levels of administrative and family support than forensic educators who did not report high levels of communication competence. Educators who reported high levels of stress and burnout report lower levels of support from supervisors, coworkers, and family compared to educators who reported low levels of stress and burnout. Female coaches reported lower levels of support from supervisors, coworkers, and families, compared to male coaches. Educators with a large coaching staff reported high levels of coworker support; educators with small or no coaching staff did not report high levels of coworker support. These findings offer insight into the support networks of forensic educators and the impact of these networks on stress and burnout.

Workplace stress and its implications at all organizational levels has been intensively studied for decades (Burgess, Irvine, & Wallymahmed, 2010; Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990; Miller, Zook, & Ellis, 1989; Ray & Miller, 1991), focusing on a variety of professions, including managers, police officers, nurses, doctors, human service professionals, and important for this study, teachers (Ray, 1983; Wright, Banas, Bessarabova, & Bernard, 2010; Zhang & Zhu, 2007). Communication plays a pivotal role in stress and coping experiences because interactions with others help to mitigate and, in some cases, eliminated burnout feelings in individuals across professions (Schneider, 1997; Smeltzer, 1987). Organizational members who have a solid social support system at work are more effectively able to buffer the negative effects of stress (Baker, O'Brien, & Salahuddin, 2007). Additionally, the quality of perceived social support from family and coworkers is influenced by an individual's level of communication competence (Kreps, 1988; Query & Kreps, 1996).



A unique mix of educator and coach, forensic coaches might be asked to teach, coach students, mentor, judge at tournaments, and promote their teams to their department and university administrators. The fact forensic coaches are juggling multiple roles and responsibilities makes them prone to stress and burnout (Carmack & Holm, 2013). Although scholars have explored the job stressors, burnout, and social support for teachers and athletic coaches (Dale & Weinberg, 1989; Kertz-Welzel, 2009; Lealand, 2004; Nikolaos, 2012; Raedeke, Granzky, & Warren, 2000; Tashman, Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2010; Zhang & Zhang, 2012; Zhang & Zhu, 2007), researchers have remained relatively silent about job stress and burnout in forensics, focusing on theoretical discussions or causes of stress (Gill, 1990; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Preston, 1995; Richardson, 2005). Turning to a more empirical approach called for by Richardson (2005), Carmack and Holm (2013) previously found that forensic educators report high levels of emotional exhaustion as their primary type of burnout. Sex also played a role; female coaches reported higher levels of stress than their male counterparts.

The next step in understanding forensic educator stress and burnout is examining social support networks and the impact of these networks on educators' perceived stress and burnout. Social support is often framed as one of the major communicative solutions to mitigate stress and burnout (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Developing and maintaining multiple support networks at work and at home is crucial for successfully negotiating these stressful roles and responsibilities. Additionally, being able to competently explain workplace stressors to a variety of stakeholders might help educators find support strategies to reduce stress and burnout. The quantity and quality of social support opportunities is heavily influenced by an individual's communication competence (Kreps, 1988; Query & Kreps, 1996; Query & Wright, 2003). To date, forensic scholars have not addressed issues forensic coaches' perceived organizational and social support and its impact on stress and burnout. In order to address the growing concern about stress and burnout in the forensic community (Richardson, 2005), we must examine the perceived supportive networks available to forensic educators.

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that impact forensic coaches' perceived work and social support for coaching and teaching, specifically focusing on communication competence, job stress, and job burnout. We begin with a discussion of the key variables of this study: social and work support, job stress, job burnout, and communication competence. After explaining the study's methodological design, we present the findings of different factors that impact coaches' perceived support. Finally, we discuss the findings and the implications of these results for forensic educators.

### **Factors Influencing Work and Social Support**

Education is a stressful environment (Farber, 1991), where increases in workload, increases in students in their classrooms, and low pay contribute to instructors becoming frustrated with work. Subsequently, instructors become burnt out as a result of institutional, organizational, and individual factors, such as dealing with inconsistencies between teaching goals and learning outcomes or volunteering for multiple service opportunities. Stress and burnout are major problems for educators because they feel they are often overworked and underappreciated (Farber, 1991). College professors and instructors might also have the added pressures of research and service requirements. For

forensic educators, the stresses of teaching might be compounded by the stressors of coaching, an increased pressure to win, decreased budgets, and difficulties with students (Dale & Weinberg, 1989).

### Job Stress and Burnout

Forensic educators experience a variety of job stressors as they juggle obligations to teach, coach, publish, and engage in service requirements. A number of job stressors may impact coaches' work environment, including behavioral, attitudinal, emotional, interpersonal, and physical stresses (Kahill, 1988). Behavioral stress includes increased absenteeism, high turnover rates, and excessive and unhealthy consumption behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse (Baker, O'Brien, & Salahuddin, 2007; Kovoacs, Kovoacs, & Hegedus, 2010; Lemaire & Wallace, 2010). Attitudinal stressors appear as negative thoughts and hostility towards others (Marshall & Kasman, 1980). Workers experiencing emotional stress become frustrated, irritable, anxious, depressed, and feel a sense of helplessness (Quattrin et al., 2006; Schneider, 1997). Workers encounter interpersonal stress when they have to have difficult conversations with others. Finally, physical stress is common, including headaches, stomach aches, elevated blood pressure, and chest pain (Chipas & McKenna, 2011).

Constantly dealing with the stresses of managing coaching, teaching, publishing, and providing service can lead to burnout. Burnout is the physical and emotional reaction of prolonged exposure to stress at work (Isaksson Ro et al., 2010). Burnout in workers is the result of a variety of elements, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, loss of personal accomplishment, and ultimately, cynicism (Williams, 1989).

Emotional exhaustion occurs when workers feel worn out, fatigued, and have a loss of energy and empathy (Maslach, 2003). Emotional exhaustion may be the result of role overload and uncertainty in work responsibilities (Wu, Zhu, Wang, Wang, & Lan, 2007), both of which may be major stressors for forensic educators. Workers experiencing depersonalization often find themselves treating others as less than human, feeling emotionally distant, treating others like objects (Zhang & Zhu, 2007; Baker et al., 2007). Loss of personal accomplishment is accompanied by feelings of failure and work inadequacy (Baker et al., 2007). This may be especially problematic for forensic coaches as they may begin to question their ability to successfully coach and teach students. The combination of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and loss of personal accomplishment ultimately leads to worker cynicism (Williams, 1989), where workers develop a negative and unsympathetic view of the job, co-workers, and organization (Maslach, 2003). This element of burnout is important when talking about burnout among forensic coaches and support, as coaches who experience burnout may seek out support from family, coworkers, and supervisors. Coaches who do not receive support might, over time, become cynical and leave forensics.

### Social Support

The high levels of stress and burnout associated with interpersonal interactions can be mitigated by social support from co-workers, supervisors, and family. Social support is defined by Feeley, Moon, Kozey, and Slowe (2010) as "information to an individual that communicates that one is cared for, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (p. 171). Social support includes both verbal and nonverbal forms

of communication and influences how individuals perceive themselves, others, and their relationships (Albrecht, Burlison, & Goldsmith, 1994). The support individuals receive from trusted friends and workplace colleagues reassures them in times of crisis or concern. For workers, social support is crucial because support increases emotional affirmation and provides solutions for problems (Park, Wilson, & Lee, 2004).

Social support is an inherently interpersonal communication phenomenon (Burlison, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994), where individuals can give and receive a variety of different types of social support. These different types of social support include informational support (providing information or knowledge), instrumental support (tangible help and assistance), network support (developing a group of people to turn to for any kind of support), esteem support (bolstering of self-esteem) and emotional support (offering warmth, caring, and other appropriate emotions) to their coworkers (du Pre, 2009; Zimmermann & Applegate, 1994). Social support is composed of three components: (1) support schemata, the mental maps of a social support network, (2) supportive relationships, and (3) supportive communication encounters (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996). Although all of these are important for perceived social support; for this study, we have identified the social support network commonly associated with being a forensic educator. This network is unique because the workplace relationships between educators and colleagues, supervisors, and administration may be specific to forensics, specific to their work outside of forensics, or a combination of both.

Segrin and Passalacqua (2010) clarified the difference between social *integration* and social *support*. Social integration “entails participation in a range of social relationships within one’s social network” whereas “social support is an interpersonal process in which the provider’s communication helps the recipient manage uncertainty and difficulties associated with the situation that she/he is in” (p. 313). This distinction is important because it underscores the fact that while one can be fully integrated into a work environment and have outside interests, unless an individual’s interpersonal communication interactions include reassuring messages or bolstering messages that help us deal with concerns and troubles, he or she is not receiving social support. Knowing the difference between integration and support is also important because social support has been shown to decrease stress and burnout (Babin, Palazzolo, & Rivera, 2012; Feeley et al., 2010; Wright, Banas, Bessarabova, & Bernard, 2010), provide a buffer from a variety of physical and psychological problems (Pauley & Hesse, 2009), and increases loyalty to the organization (Feeley et al., 2010).

An important factor which may impact perceived support is the sex of the individual (Hobfoll & Stokes, 1988). Research on sex differences and social support is somewhat uneven, primarily because of the conflating of sex and gender. Gender, not sex, is often correlated with positive social support (Reevy & Maslach, 2001). Gender (although it was operationalized as sex) played a significant role in how individuals made sense of social support, with females reporting feeling that there were more support opportunities (Hanasona et al., 2011). Reevy and Maslach (2001) argued this was the result of social support being socially constructed as an overall feminine experience. However, different types of support were framed as more masculine, such as tangible support (Reevy & Maslach, 2001). Previous research found that sex differences existed regarding stress among forensic educators (Carmack & Holm, 2013); this, coupled with

the belief that social support is framed as a solution to stress and burnout, leads to the possibility that male and female coaches will perceive support differently.

H<sub>1</sub>: Female forensic educators will report higher levels of perceived support than male forensic educators.

Forensic educators have a variety of social support networks from which to turn; however, these can be separated into two categories: work and family. Work social support networks include other organizational members, including colleagues/co-workers, supervisors, and administrators. Positive workplace interpersonal relationships help to reduce stress and burnout (Ray, 1987) and these interpersonal relationships may help forensic educators to develop productive social support networks. Workplace social support is not a blanket support network. The importance of supervisor support and coworker support are widely known to help workers decrease workplace stress (Albrecht, Irey, & Mundy, 1982; Blau, 1981; Miller et al., 1990; Ray, 1991; Ray & Miller, 1991). Supervisors primarily provide instructional or instrumental support, often in the form of information, changes in workload, or structural programs to help deal with stress (Ray, 1987). Conversely, coworkers primarily provide emotional support, with communication focusing on venting or providing empathy for stress (Miller et al., 1990). What is missing is the distinction between supervisors and administrators. For forensic educators, supervisors are their immediate superiors, such as department heads. Assistant coaches might also have a director of forensics or debate as a supervisor. Forensic educators might also interact with a number of administrators, such as deans, provosts, and presidents, as they celebrate the successes of their teams as well as when they deal with budget issues.

Forensic educators might be presented with a number of support opportunities from supervisors and administrators to help with the workload associated with directing and coaching. Two of the more popular opportunities are course releases and coaching staffs. Course releases are commonly assigned to educators who serve in an administrative capacity and are meant to be a release from a teaching obligation. Course release times can vary from one course release a year to half of each semester's contract hours assigned to administrative work. Faculty members who receive course releases have reported higher levels of perceived support from administrators and supervisors (Marek, 2009). Another popular support structure is a coaching staff. Coaching staff may include assistant directors, coaches, and graduate student assistants. A coaching staff can be formal (assigned by the department head) or informal (volunteer coaching). Staff size can be based on budget, the presence of a graduate program, and team size. It is possible that these opportunities would be perceived as examples of support, especially from supervisors, administrators, and co-workers.

H<sub>2</sub>: Forensic educators who receive course releases will report higher levels of perceived support than forensic educators who do not receive course releases.

H<sub>3</sub>: Educators with larger coaching staffs will report higher levels of perceived support than coaches with small coaching staffs.

Cobb (1976) noted that “as life progresses, support is derived increasingly from other members of the family, then from peers at work and in the community” (pp. 301-302). As interaction networks grow, social support networks need to grow, as well. Social support for forensics coaches extends beyond just their biological family to their team and peers and colleagues who coach other teams. This is not to say that family support as a form of social support is not important. Dush and Amato (2005) found that subjective self-reports of well-being increased with increased levels of commitment to pair bonding. Those who were just causally dating scored lower than those who were in steady dating relationships. Steady daters scored lower than those who were co-habitating and all groups scored lower on self-reported well-being than married couples. However, a counter to family support is children or people cohabitating with a partner. Individuals with children and those living unmarried with a significant other tend to report more home and workplace stress as well as have more difficulties dealing with that stress (Ray & Miller, 1994). Regardless, it stands to reason that individuals in relationships have an outlet to disclose concerns, vent about job stress, and seek reassurance for their work.

H<sub>4</sub>: Forensic educators in relationships will report higher levels of perceived support than educators not in relationships.

### Communication Competence

An important element for communicating about support needs and deficits is communication competence. Communication competence is a person’s ability to effectively and appropriately choose among several options for how to behave and communicate in a social context (Duran & Kelly, 1988; McCroskey, 1982; Weimann, 1977). Competent interactions are judged based on how the effective and appropriate communication helps to achieve the relational purposes and goals of the interaction (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1983). A competent communicator is able to master “an underlying set of appropriateness rules for how to interact” (Johnson, 1979, p. 15). Genuine competence entails not only meeting one’s objectives in the short-term but building long-term relationships as well, and is contextually based; people are more competent in some settings than others (Duran & Kelly, 1994; Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982). Communicative competence includes cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains (McCroskey, 1982; Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982), including interaction management, affiliation, behavioral flexibility, social relaxation, and empathy (Weimann, 1977). Dimensions include understanding the communication process, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, and ethical responsibility (Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982). A communicatively competent individual will be able to assess a situation (including cultural and organizational components), understand the variety of options available for how to behave, determine the appropriate way to behave, and act accordingly.

Communication competence is a multidimensional concept, with adaptability as the cornerstone of the concept (Duran, 1992; Duran & Kelly, 1988). The ability to assess and adapt communication styles has been positively related to interaction involvement, specifically in relation to responsiveness, perceptiveness, and attentiveness (Cegala, 1981). Communicatively competent individuals can understand what others are saying (both on a surface level and deeper meaning level) and respond in such ways which

confirm and support their conversational partner (Duran & Kelly, 1988). A number of factors influence a person's ability to develop communication competence, but social confirmation, social composure, and social experience have a major impact on competence development (Duran, 1992; Duran & Kelly, 1994). In other words, the more varied communication encounters a person has, the more opportunities there are to find ways to acknowledge others' goals and maintain composure in the face of an undesired response. Additionally, communication competence is related to socio-emotional skills, such as building rapport, fostering relationships, listening, showing empathy, being flexible, and being culturally sensitive (Yungbluth, 2009).

Situating forensic educators in the forensic organization and the university adds several more dimensions to communication competence. In an organizational setting, communicatively competent employers often demonstrate competence through five communicative events: initiating interactions, self-disclosure, emotional support, conflict management, and negative responses to others and self (Reinking & Bell, 1991). The setting, context, and interactants of an organization must also be taken into account (Johnson, 1979). For forensic educators, this includes the variety of communication interactions they experience (forensic and non-forensic interactions in and outside the classroom), the context of their interactions (which include forensic work and non-forensic work related conversations), and the people with which they interact (forensic and non-forensic interactants). Organizational success has been directly related to communication competence, including organizational achievement and promotability (Reinking & Bell, 1991; Shockley-Zalabak, Staley, & Morley, 1988).

Communication scholars connecting communication competence, stress, burnout, and social support have focused most of their efforts on caring health professions (Kreps, 1988; Weathers, Query, & Kreps, 2010; Wright et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2013). Communication competence is situated at the center of successful relational communication between caregivers and patients, with increased communication competence leading to "therapeutic communication, social support, satisfaction, information exchange, and cooperation" (Kreps, 1988, p. 354). Kreps (1988) posited that communication competence influenced social support (the better you are at communicating, the better you will be at successfully seeking out social support) and both of these helped to decrease stress and burnout. This thesis has been supported by researchers connecting communication competence and health outcomes, with caregivers reporting that being able to talk successfully about their stresses helped to decrease their concerns and ultimately their burnout (Weathers et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2013). Additionally, individuals who report higher levels of communication competence also reported higher levels of perceived social support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Query & Kreps, 1996; Wright et al., 2010) and these all contributed to decreased stress and burnout (Wright et al., 2010).

Although previous research has focused on more traditional careers in the caring profession (Wright et al., 2010), lay caregivers of Alzheimer's patients (Query & Kreps, 1996), and students with depression (Wright et al., 2013) as we have previously argued, forensic educators are in a caring profession, where they teach, coach, and mentor undergraduate and graduate students. Therefore, it is possible that communication competence and social support could be related to stress and burnout in the forensic educator community.

RQ: Is there a significant relationship between forensic coaches' perceived support and their reported communication competence, job stress, and job burnout?

## METHODS

### Participants

A total of 111 collegiate forensic directors and coaches participated in this study. After receiving university IRB approval, participants were contacted via e-mail and through forensics and communication list-servs. Coaches interested in participating were directed to a Qualtrics link to the survey. Among the coaches who participated, 65 were male and 46 were female. Ages ranged from 20 to 64 years, with a majority of participants' ages between 25 and 34 ( $n = 39$ , 35.1%) and 35 to 44 ( $n = 40$ , 36%). Participants were predominantly Caucasian ( $n = 105$ , 94.6%), with one person identifying as Hispanic (1.0%) and five participants identifying as African American (4.5%). A majority of participants had earned a Master's degree ( $n = 64$ , 57.6%) or doctoral degree ( $n = 40$ , 36.0%); five participants (4.5%) had completed a Bachelor's degree and two participants had completed a professional degree (JD, MD). Most participants were married with children ( $n = 49$ , 44.1%), married without children ( $n = 26$ , 23.4%), or single, never married ( $n = 22$ , 19.8%). Nine participants were living with a partner, four were divorced, and one participant was widowed.

A majority of the participants were instructors ( $n = 52$ , 46.8%), 17 were tenure-track assistant professors (15.3%), 15 were associate professors (13.5%), 12 were full professors (10.8%), six were adjunct instructors (5.4%), and eight were graduate students (7.2%); one participant chose not to answer. Participants taught a wide number of classes, with most coaches teaching three to four classes a semester ( $n = 50$ , 45.0%) or one to two classes a semester ( $n = 47$ , 42.3%); 12 coaches are teaching five or more classes a semester and two coaches do not teach classes at all (10.8%). Seventy-five coaches received one or more course releases to coach (67.5%); thirty-six participants said they did not receive a course release (32.4%). Along with teaching and coaching, a minority of coaches are also mentoring forensics graduate assistants ( $n = 37$ , 33.3%) and/or non-forensics graduate students ( $n = 20$ , 18.0%). Of the 63 participants who responded to the question about type of school at which they taught, 45 taught at a public university or college (71.4%) and 18 taught at a private college or university (28.6%). Forty-eight participants did not indicate at what type of school they taught.

Participants had been coaching for a number of years, with most coaching between four and six years ( $n = 24$ , 21.6%), seven and nine years ( $n = 22$ , 19.8%), and 10 and 15 years ( $n = 22$ , 19.8%); a large number of participants had also been coaching for between 16 and 20 years ( $n = 11$ , 9.9%), and more than 20 years ( $n = 21$ , 18.9%). Along with teaching and service, the participants were also offering multiple coaching hours a week; 54 coaches were offering 11 or more coaching hours a week (48.6%), followed by three to four hours a week ( $n = 15$ , 13.5%), seven to eight hours a week ( $n = 15$ , 13.5%), five to six hours a week ( $n = 11$ , 9.9%), and nine to ten hours a week ( $n = 10$ , 9.0%). Five coaches only offered one to two hours of coaching week (4.5%) and one coach offered less than one hour a week (1.0%). A small portion of coaches were at the beginning of their careers, either in their first year of coaching ( $n = 6$ , 5.4%) or coaching between one

and three years ( $n = 5$ , 4.5%). Many coaches had help coaching; 42 participants have one to two additional coaches on their team (37.8%), 25 coaches have three or four additional coaches (22.5%), and 22 coaches have five or more coaches (19.8%). Twenty-two coaches were the only coaches for their teams (19.8%).

### Instrumentation

*Communication Competence Scale.* The Communication Competence Scale (Wiemann, 1977) was used to measure participants' ability to choose appropriate communication behaviors in order to meet goals and maintain face with others. This 36-item scale uses a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Individuals can score from 36 to 180; individuals scoring between 109 and 180 are considered to have high communication competence. Sample statements included "I am easy to talk to", "I let others know I understand them", and "I am flexible". Five items were reverse-coded before summation of the final score. Reliability was .88 ( $M = 138.77$ ,  $SD = 12.74$ ).

*Social Support and Stress Measure.* In order to measure the different types of familial and work support coaches may receive, Ray and Miller's (1994) adapted Social Support and Stress measure was used. This 26-item scale uses a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale is comprised of five subscales, measuring home/work stress, supervisor support, co-worker support, administrative support, and family support. Statements included "My job often interferes with my family life" and "My supervisor respects me". The subscales are reported separately. Cronbach's alpha was high for each subscale: home/work stress ( $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), supervisor support ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), co-worker support ( $\alpha = .93$ ,  $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), administrative support ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and family support ( $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ).

*Global Measure of Perceived Stress.* To measure forensics coaches' perceived stress, the Global Measure of Perceived Stress was used (Cohen, Karmack, & Mermelstein, 1983). The Global Measure is comprised of 14 items and uses a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from never to very often. Questions ask participants to reflect on daily stressful events. Participants were asked questions such as "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?" and "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?" Seven items were reverse coded before summation. Reliability was .85 ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ).

*Maslach Burnout Inventory.* The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) was used to measure forensics coaches' perceived job burnout. The Burnout Inventory is a 22-item scale with three subscales (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement). The measure uses a 7-point scale ranging from never experienced to every day and includes statements such as "I feel like I'm at the end of my rope", "I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally", and "In my work, I deal with emotional problems very quickly". Eight items were reverse coded before summation. The three subscales are reported separately. Reliability for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement were .92 ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ), .79 ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), and .83 ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), respectively.

### Statistical Analysis



Data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Independent sample *t*-tests were performed to determine differences between participants' sex and perceived support ( $H_1$ ) and differences between whether participants received a course release and perceived support ( $H_2$ ). One-way analysis of variance tests (ANOVA) were conducted to identify differences between size of coaching staff and perceived support ( $H_3$ ). Independent sample *t*-tests were performed to determine differences between relationship status and perceived support ( $H_4$ ). Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to determine relationships between pairwise combinations of support, communication competence, job stress, and job burnout (RQ). Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for sex, course releases, relationship status, and coaching staff and perceived support. Table 2 reports the means and standard deviations for perceived support, communication competence, job stress, and job burnout.

## RESULTS

Hypotheses 1 posited there would a difference between participant sex and perceived levels of support. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that female coaches reported significantly less support from their supervisors than male coaches ( $t(111)=2.16$ ;  $p<.01$ ), significantly less support from their coworkers than male coaches ( $t(111)=2.84$ ;  $p<.01$ ), and significantly less support from their families than male coaches ( $t(111)=.582$ ;  $p<.001$ ). There were no other significant differences between the groups in terms of perceived support from administration.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that significant differences in perceived support would exist between educators who received a course release for forensics and educators who did not receive a course release. Independent samples *t*-tests also revealed only one significant difference of perceived levels of support for coaches who receive a course release. An independent *t*-test found that coaches who did not receive a course release reported significantly more support from their families than coaches who did receive a course release ( $t(111)=-.988$ ;  $p<.05$ ). There were no other significant differences between the groups in terms of perceived support from supervisors, coworkers, and administration.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that coaching size would influence perceived support. A one-way ANOVA was also run to determine if coaching staff size influenced how participants reported perceived support. The one-way ANOVA revealed that coworker support differed significantly based on the coaching staff size  $F(3, 105) = 3.095$ ,  $p < .05$ . The Bonferroni post hoc test also revealed that coaches working on teams with 5 or more coaches on staff reported significantly higher levels of support from their coworkers than other coaches. No other significant differences existed.

Hypothesis 4 stated that educators in relationships would report higher levels of perceived support than single or divorced educators. Independent samples *t*-tests determined that coaches in relationships reported receiving higher levels of support from their families than educators not in relationships, ( $t(111)=3.10$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Mean differences suggests that coaches who are married without children receive higher levels of support from their families than other coaches. No other significant differences were discovered.

**Table 1**  
Means and Standard Deviations for Support Responses Related to Sex, Course Releases,  
Relationship Status, Coaching Staff

	<i>N</i>	Supervisor <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Coworker <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Administrative <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Family <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male coaches	65	3.83	.92	3.69	.84	2.98	1.01	4.37	.58
Female coaches	46	3.41	1.11	3.16	1.09	2.73	.88	4.28	.98
Received course release	75	3.67	1.10	3.47	1.04	2.83	.99	4.28	.85
No course release	36	3.63	.84	3.46	.86	2.96	.91	4.44	.57
Single, never married	22	3.42	.91	3.30	1.03	2.44	1.04	3.83	.93
Married without children	26	3.61	1.03	3.51	.76	2.97	.91	4.56	.57
Married with children	49	3.76	1.10	3.51	.76	2.99	.93	4.47	.64
Divorced	4	4.04	.95	3.37	1.25	2.83	.95	4.06	1.39
Widowed	1	3.33	--	3.83	--	3.16	--	4.75	--
Living with partner	9	3.65	1.02	3.87	.67	3.02	1.07	4.22	.76
Only coach	22	3.82	.98	3.28	.91	2.76	.81	4.19	.86
1-2 coaches	42	3.59	.92	3.25	1.03	2.78	.99	4.39	.83
3-4 coaches	25	3.53	1.23	3.56	1.02	2.86	.97	4.29	.73
5 or more coaches	22	3.75	1.02	3.97	.73	3.19	1.03	4.41	.60

Data were analyzed to determine the relationship between perceived levels of support, communication competence, job stress, and job burnout (RQ). The research question asked if there were any significant relationships between these variables. As indicated by Table 2, significant positive correlations were observed between administrative support and communication competence ( $r[109] = .204, p < .05$ ) and family support and communication competence ( $r[109] = .199, p < .05$ ). No other significant positive relationships existed. Participants who reported high levels of communication competence also report receiving more support for coaching from their college/university administration and from their families.

Several significant negative relationships were observed (see Table 2) between job stress and supervisor support ( $r[104] = -.326, p < .01$ ), job stress and coworker support ( $r[104] = -.224, p < .05$ ), job stress and family support ( $r[104] = -.226, p < .05$ ), emotional exhaustion and supervisor support ( $r[104] = -.277, p < .01$ ), emotional exhaustion and coworker support ( $r[104] = -.273, p < .01$ ), and personal achievement and coworker support ( $r[100] = -.200, p < .05$ ). No other significant negative relationships existed. Participants who reported high levels of job stress reported receiving less support from their supervisors, coworkers, and families. Additionally, coaches who reported being emotionally exhausted by their jobs reported receiving less support from supervisors and coworkers. Finally, coaches who feel a lack of personal achievement feel they receive less support from coworkers.

**Table 2**  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Coefficients for Stress, Burnout, and Job Satisfaction

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Stress ( <i>N</i> = 111)	2.84	.51	---	-.24*	.62**	.38**	.41**	-.33**	-.22*	-.11	-.23*
2. Communication Competence ( <i>N</i> = 111)	138.77	12.74		---	-.20*	-.28**	-.36**	.19	.10	.20*	.20*
3. Burnout-Emotional Exhaustion ( <i>N</i> = 111)	3.69	1.29			---	.47**	.28**	-.28**	-.27**	-.10	-.12
4. Burnout-Depersonalization ( <i>N</i> = 111)	2.36	1.08				---	.35**	-.14	-.12	-.04	-.06
5. Burnout-Personal Accomplishment ( <i>N</i> = 111)	2.39	.84					---	-.12	-.20*	-.16	-.11
6. Supervisor Support ( <i>N</i> = 111)	3.66	1.01						---	.400*	.43*	.15
7. Coworker Support ( <i>N</i> = 111)	3.48	.98							---	.28*	.11
8. Administrative Support ( <i>N</i> = 111)	2.88	.96								---	.17
9. Family Support ( <i>N</i> = 111)	4.34	.77									---

\* Correlation significant at .05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation significant at .01 and .001 level (2-tailed)

## DISCUSSION

Stress and burnout are considered “occupational hazards” of the education profession (Pettegrew & Wolf, 1982), and forensic educators have an additional layer of stress as the result of coaching and mentoring a forensics team. The purpose of this study was to examine the social support, communication competence, job stress, and job burnout in forensic coaches. The results indicated that those who scored higher in communication competence had reported receiving more support from administration and family. Educators who reported higher levels of communication competence could have better relationships with administrators and with their family members because they are able to successfully communicate their needs and frustrations. For example, if workplace stress is the result of not having an appropriate budget, communicatively competent forensic educator would be able to adapt their communication message to different administrators to successfully argue for a budget increase. Conversely, forensic educators with lower reported levels of communication competence might have difficulties discussing the stressors of their work with their family. These two groups are especially important for forensic educators; administrators might control budgets and coaching spaces while families might be the ones educators turn to vent about work.

Perhaps the most surprising finding was that female forensic educators report receiving less perceived support from the families. There are a number of reasons this may be the case, all related to the general premise that the family is “women’s work” and women are expected to fulfill the responsibilities of the family. Female educators may be experiencing the result of the second shift (Hochschild, 2003). The second shift suggests that women work two “jobs”—one in the traditional workforce and the other at home. This results in the work-family conflict (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999), where women struggle to balance work and family. It is possible that female educators do not have time to seek out support from their families because they are too busy supplying support to their families. Work-family spillover, the push of family or work into the other category may also be a concern (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007). Female workers report long hours as a major factor which causes work to spill over into family expectations (Maume & Houston, 2001). Forensics is a profession associated with long hours and time away from family; evening team meetings and coaching and tournament travel mean that coaches put in more than 40 hours a week away from families. Coaches (male and female) are away from their families, but with the added expectations of family for female coaches, they might not be able to receive the family support they need.

Interestingly, communication competence did not appear to have any significant connection to support from supervisors and co-workers. Although there is no previous communication research examining communication competence and support from specific work groups, organizational members often report turning to co-workers and supervisors because they are the ones with whom members come into the most contact (Beehr, Jex, Stacy, & Murray, 2000; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) and these two support groups can help reduce stress and burnout (Babin & Boles, 1996; Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987). There are several possible explanations for why forensic educators’ level of communication competence did not have a significant impact on perceived support from supervisors and

co-workers. In this study, supervisor was operationalized as someone who has immediate and direct involvement in the evaluation of the forensic educator (a department head or chair). Although being able to competently adapt messages about stress and burnout is important for communicating with supervisors, coaches may not speak to supervisors about this because it could lead to negative evaluations. Previous research supports this concern, with supervisors identifying stress and burnout identified as reasons for terminations (Goodman & Boss, 1999). Another explanation could be who forensic educators consider co-workers and their interactions with those co-workers. Forensic educators might have multiple co-workers, including departmental colleagues, other coaches, and even graduate assistants. Depending on how often forensic educators interact with co-workers and in what settings, coaches might not seek support from these groups. If they are not seeking support, there would be less of a reason for a coach to communicatively competent about support.

The results of this study highlight the importance of communication competence in piecing together the puzzle of forensic educator well-being. Being unable to communicate about job stressors is directly connected to burnout (Wright et al., 2010, 2013) and coaches who report being emotionally exhausted report higher levels of intent to leave forensics (Carmack & Holm 2013). Results also showed significant negative relationships between job stress and support from family, co-workers, and supervisors and between emotional exhaustion and supervisor and coworker support. In short, forensic coaches who experience higher levels of job stress and emotional exhaustion are the coaches who perceive they are not receiving needed support from their family, coworkers, and supervisors. Absent from these findings is administration. This is a surprising omission. Administration often turns to successful coaches and teams to “sell” the university, using the successes of the team to bolster the academic image of the university. Administrators might provide forensic educators with the needed funding needed to travel to larger tournaments and recruit competitive students. This could increase stress for forensic educators, but it is possible it does not create enough to outweigh the support.

Finally, the research yielded results showing that coaches who were part of programs with five or more coaches reported significantly higher levels of coworker support than those with four or less (or no additional) coaches. To successfully coach and manage a team, coaching staffs need to be cohesive units. Increased coworker support, in the form of other coaches, could be because of a sense of shared values and commitment and seeing team accomplishments as a communal effort. Feelings of coworker support may be the result of those shared perceptions and activities. It could also be that a larger coaching staff has more influence and recognition in a department, which could lead to more supportive communication from coworkers outside of forensics being passed along to the coaches because there are simply more connections in the department and more coaches to receive the comments.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations with the current study. First, the data collected were all self-report data and as such subject to the lens of human bias. But given that the data being collected related to perceptions of support, self-report techniques were most appropriate. Second, the sample size (111 participants) is relatively small. This limitation

is tempered, however, by the fact that the entire population size of active collegiate forensic coaches is estimated to be 200-250. Finally, when asking about coworker support, we did not clarify who counted as a coworker. It is possible that some participants answered the questions with other coaches in mind, while others may have been thinking about non-forensics faculty members.

As an exploratory study, there are a variety of future projects from this line of research. Future research could examine the role of social support messages from team members to coaching staff. Given that the members of a team would not necessarily fall under any of the groups identified in this research project, students on the team comprise a significant amount of coaches' interpersonal relationships. This piece is the relationship puzzle is important for understanding coaches' support matrix. Additionally, this study focuses primarily on organizational factors that influence support, with interpersonal factors as a secondary emphasis. Future research could separate the two areas, examining interpersonal and familial stress and burnout as a result of coaching and stress. This study only reports perceived support from coaches' perspective. In order to understand the complexity of support, future research needs to explore how families, administrators, coworkers, and supervisors perceive the support they provide forensic educators. More research is also needed examining the potentially gendered nature of forensic education. If male and female coaches experience different stressors and receive different support, scholars need to identify these differences in order to identify ways to help all educators. Finally, it would be valuable to explore the impact of social support matching, where the types of support received match the needs of the individual to alleviate the stressor (Cutrona, 1990); For example, if a forensic educator reports experiencing a certain type of stressor, how does the educator seek out and receive a matching type of support? This study did not differentiate the types of stressors experienced by forensic educators; however, this would be an important next step in order to begin to identify specific support tactics.

These results support what many of forensic educators have suspected and reaffirm the importance of supervisors, family, and colleagues providing positive support for the work coaches do in the classroom, during coaching, and at tournaments. Burnout could be mitigated or even circumvented with supportive communication from family, coworkers, and supervisors, but it is important for educators to be communicatively competent in how they seek out support. Given the years of training and education that are required to be an effective coach, as well as the prestige a successful team brings to a department and university, it is organizationally wise to keep forensic educators from burning out. Recognition and respect cost nothing to give and do so much for the coach, the forensics team, the department, the university, and the forensic community at large.

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## 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 a 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 (Jenkins, 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 budgets 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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