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What’s in a Name? Defending Forensics: A Response to Kimble’s “By Any Other Name”

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Abstract
Our essay is a response to Kimble’s “By Any Other Name: On the Merits of Moving Beyond Forensics.” We argue forensics has not lost the battle for its name, since the battle does not necessarily exist. We contend changing the name is unnecessary since forensics is the most accurate label one may apply to interscholastic speaking and debating. Furthermore, changing the name would have considerable negative repercussions. Instead, the forensic community needs to return to its roots as educators and activists to enhance public understanding of the term to include forensic speaking and debate. We conclude the name forensics is by no means a perfect name, yet one worth defending.

Keywords: Forensics, speech, debate, naming, identification

Introduction
On October 20, 2012, undergraduate students from across the Midwest gathered at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MNSU) to engage in a type of competition they train for year round. Directors and coaches join them to watch and assess the students. Friends and alumni of the MNSU program returned to be a part of the event. The Larry Schnoor Invitational, hosted annually at MNSU, is a time of competition and community and the individuals were brought together by one activity: forensics.

For decades, forensics has been a favorite activity of many undergraduate students interested in performance, public speaking, interpretation and communication. However, the activity goes beyond an opportunity for competition and performance. As Hinck (2003) noted, forensics is a unique blend of competitive goals and educational opportunities, and are the driving force behind its continuation. Unfortunately, recognition of the activity has been on the decline. One possible reason is the term forensics has been appropriated for alternative meanings within popular culture.

Kimble, a former director of forensics at George Mason University, provided an interesting suggestion: why not rename the activity? Kimble (2012) asserted the name has essentially become useless and no longer has a unique meaning to the activity. He maintained “the de facto possession of forensics has changed hands, leaving those involved in competitive speaking with a name that, for the vast majority of the public, no longer means what it once did” (Kimble, 2012, p. 71). Therefore, because of the misunderstandings and misrepresentation the name gives the activity, Kimble proposed moving beyond the name forensics.
Kimble’s (2012) suggestion is an intriguing one. Anyone involved in the activity is aware how the term can be misleading to those outside of the intercollegiate forensic community. Jokes about television shows like CSI: Miami and emails begging for help to solve a murder case are met with exasperated sighs. The situations are not worn out but rather forensics educators have all faced this frustration before. Even when our conversation partners have some understanding of forensics as an activity, they often equate it as just being debate. The misrepresentation negates the numerous debate styles and the individual events which give our field its variety and dynamism. However, the suggestion to move away from the word forensics is an unnecessary task and an overwhelming task that, even if possible, would do more to harm the activity.

Therefore, we propose three major counterarguments. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, we continue to use forensics in reference to the activity. First, we identify a disconnect between external and internal audiences. Second, we argue the name is ingrained in our activity’s cultural dynamic. Third, we propose stronger courses of action than changing the name.

**Forensics: Why Justify Against CSI?**

One of the primary reasons Kimble (2012) proposed a name change for forensics was the appropriation by popular culture and its use by other disciplines. Kimble explained the process began with the emergence of formalized forensic sciences in the medical and legal fields. The term then worked its way into genres of popular culture, such as mystery novels and television crime genres. The term eventually achieved a new connotation pertaining only to modes of scientific investigation. Kimble believed the appropriation of forensics was causing confusion and suggested the forensic activity change its name. However, the suggestion does not take into consideration the intended audience, internal or external. The trends of popular culture have little bearing on academia as a whole and forensics, a co-curricular activity, is of a similar vein. Therefore, a name change should not be motivated by external factors.

One of the important points to consider is how forensics is reflective of communication theory development overall. Although Kimble (2012) explained the activity was not an exact fit to Aristotle’s definition of forensics, the same could be stated for any speech labeling itself using one of Aristotle’s rhetorical forms. Smith (1979) noted that often forensic, deliberative, and epideictic addresses often overlap in a single speech, as each form of address can fulfill a particular function to make a single address more effective. By this reasoning, the categorical approach cannot be considered to be a truly defining characteristic of address. Essentially, the activity’s migration away from the Aristotelian definition of forensics could be indicative of a similar shift in communication studies as a whole.

Kimble (2012) argued large national organizations have changed their names before. For example, he noted how the National Communication Association (NCA) was the Speech Communication Association (SCA) until 1997. The association, however, lists five different names in its history (National Communication Association, n.d.):
1. National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (1914-1922)
2. National Association of Teachers of Speech (1923-1945)

As Cohen (1994) pointed out in his history of the discipline, each progressive name change of the organization was compelled by internal dynamics supported by the expanding boundaries of our discipline. However, Kimble (2012) suggested forensics change its name because of pop culture trends. The difference here is an internal versus external impetus. We argue a difference exists between changing an organization’s name for theoretical development and changing the name of an activity because of popular culture pressures. We do not identify by Kimble any theoretical or disciplinary reason to change the name of forensics.

The ultimate question in the discussion is why should a co-curricular activity with a strong educational and academic history bend to the whims of popular culture? We identify a strong divide between popular culture and academics, and forensics is no exception. Popular culture is decidedly whimsical and trends easily change. Forensic sciences may fall out of popularity in crime dramas; terminologies continually spiral through the pop culture vocabulary.

**What’s in a Name? Forensics in the Cultural Dynamic**

*Forensics* is far more than an ambiguous, floating term to loosely describe the activity. *Forensics* has become the term by which the activity, and the resulting culture and infrastructure, has defined itself. To walk away from term would require a redefinition of the culture in both name and structure. Essentially, adopting a new name is not feasible for a number of reasons.

First, the term *forensics* has become an integral part of our terminology on an individual and organizational level. The very terms we use to define ourselves as forensic educators—Director of Forensics (DOF) and Assistant Director of Forensics (ADOF)—would be removed. The action in turn could lead to a lack of distinguishment for forensic educators. Directors of forensics, must be “‘jack of all trades’ teachers’” (Bartanen, as cited in Williams & Gantt, 2005, p. 54). Without a title which associates with the activity, forensic educators may go unrecognized for the hard work that they do.

The same holds true for forensics assistants and education programs directly associated with forensics. For example, Minnesota State University, Mankato is known for its educational excellence in forensics. The MFA-Forensics degree has received the Most Innovative Program by the Masters Education Section of the National Communication Association (“Communication studies graduate,” 2012). Without the term *forensics*, the program and its unique work become indistinguishable by name.

The impact of a name change goes well beyond job titles and degrees. The organizations which are responsible for forensics on state, national and international levels would require a name change. The National Forensics Association
(NFA), the American Forensic Association (AFA), the International Forensic Association and (IFA), the National Christian College Forensic Association (NCCFA), the Minnesota Collegiate Forensic Association, the Texas Forensic Association, the Nebraska Intercollegiate Forensic Association, are just a few of the governing bodies of collegiate forensics requiring a name change. The same is true at the high school level for the National Forensics League (NFL), the Wisconsin High School Forensic Association, Indiana High School Forensic Association, and the Wyoming High School Forensics Association, Wisconsin Forensic Coaches’ Association, and dozens of other organizations. Finally, local high school, college, and university programs would need to follow suit (e.g., Maverick Forensics, Logan Forensics, the Texas Forensic Union, Kishwaukee College Forensics, Lewis & Clark Forensics).

The term forensics is for all these associations and teams a unifying word and indicate a common endeavor. A name change would affect hundreds, if not thousands, of organizations, thus running the risk of fracturing a relatively unified community with shared educational and competitive goals.

A name change could result in a split in the activity itself. Currently, forensics encompasses both speech and debate, as the activities focus on education through competitive speaking, performance, and argument. The National Forensics Association is one such organization, blending individual events (speech) with Lincoln-Douglas debate at the national tournament (National Forensics Association, 2012). However, moving away from forensics could separate the two activities. The separation would further complicate the organizational structure of the activity.

A name change for the current forensics system would alter the status of people who identify with forensics. Forensics as an activity has generated decades’ worth of alumni, all of whom still associate with forensics. A web search for “forensics” is how they find programs in their area to help coach and judge. Forensics is how they link back to their alma mater and (hopefully) donate money to keep the program they love running. In fact, Kirch (2005) pointed out alumni are an important source of support and needs to be continuously cultivated. A move away from forensics would constitute a change in the identity of the activity, including the alumni. Changing the name would alienate powerful allies. Cunningham (2005) noted having supportive administrators can be a key to program survival. Administrators already familiar with the activity as forensics may not support a program they do not recognize.

**Taking Back the Name: In Defense of Keeping Our Name**

Changing the name has serious logistical drawbacks. Perhaps the best reason to keep forensics is the alternative terms are no stronger. Kimble (2012) suggested a number of alternative terms, such as speech or debate. However, neither of these terms truly encompasses the breadth of work done by forensics students, directors and coaches. The intensive research, the multiple written drafts, and the hours of delivery practice go well beyond the simple act of speaking or debating. Individual events program is similarly ambiguous and really
gives no indication as to what the activity is about (e.g., individual events can apply equally well to gymnastics, and track and field).

Kimble (2012) suggested several other academic terms to label the activity including rhetoric, argumentation, oratory, sophistics, platform, and forum. However, none of the terms cover the nature of forensics as an activity. At the most basic level, all of the names neglect the oral interpretation events which encompass both performance education and rhetorical elements (Koeppel & Morman, 1991). Kimble (2012) admitted some of the terms, such as rhetoric, may have negative connotations. The end result is changing the contested term forensics to another contested term is a moot point. The effort to combat the negative ethos of the new term is similar to the effort needed to correct individuals who misunderstand forensics.

The negative consequences of alternative terms for our activity, in combination with other difficulties associated with moving away from forensics, suggests maintaining the name is the most reasonable course of action. However, our position does not change Kimble’s (2012) correct assertion of the considerable misunderstanding associated with forensics. Therefore, maintaining forensics as our namesake requires action. Forensics requires education.

Education is a huge part of the forensic activity. Hinck (2003) explained competition for competitors comes through competition. However, if forensics is a co-curricular, educational activity, then all those who participate in forensics have the potential to be educators. Similarly, we are all activists. We work with speeches, literature, and topics of public controversies. Why then are we not turning our educational, activist nature toward the defense of our activity? We have to use our abilities and speak up to clarify what we do.

We offer several possible action steps. Ribarsky (2005) explained using more lay judges at tournaments is educational for both the public and for forensic competitors. A reintroduction of the public allows lay individuals direct observation of the activity, clarifying the work we do. Cunningham (2005) suggested offering performances on campus and making the presence of the forensics team noted throughout the university. Public performances make the program well-known. We should take advantage of every moment of confusion as a moment of clarification. Every time someone says “So do you get to work with dead bodies?” we have an opening to explain forensics.

In fact, we can take this action a step further. Rather than waiting for moments of confusion to provide an opening for clarification, we need to take action to initiate such moments of confusion and to open the dialogue. All we have to do is be creative, which is an inherent part of our activity. For example, the Maverick Forensics team had black jackets with Forensics printed across the back. The jackets parodied those worn by crime scene investigators on numerous television crime dramas. The jackets invite comment and open dialogue about forensics. Kimble (2012) posited a Figure 1: Maverick Forensics Team Jacket
public relations campaign for the forensic activity could bolster the activity’s presence, but a national PR campaign would be expensive and complex. The solution to a macro-level campaign is the micro-level discussion.

**Conclusion**

Kimble’s (2012) discussion on *forensics* is not without merit. His work compels a discussion on the term and our activity. However, his suggestion the activity select a new moniker misses the mark as the negative repercussions outweighs the positive benefits. *Forensics* is still strongly identified with what we do in our activity and is the most accurate term to identify our work.

**References**


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