

## Finding Strength in Numbers A Collaborative Team Approach to Directing Forensic Programs

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### Abstract

Much has been written regarding pressures facing directors of forensics and forensic educators in general. Most of these pressures are associated with managing a slate of professional responsibilities that exceed those of most professional educators, along with balancing professional and personal lives. While much attention has been paid to the role of the director of forensics as an educator, colleague, and mentor, less has been written regarding the director as a manager of professional colleagues. Similarly, little discussion is found within forensic scholarship regarding the challenges and opportunities associated with multiple staff members within a single forensic program.

We advocate a collaborative team approach to directing the forensic program. Our paper addresses the rationale for such an approach, justifying assistants as a means of improving programs and enhancing lives of the professionals leading those programs. We also detail one model for collaborative administration that has, on balance, worked to attain and exceed university and program goals. Finally, the paper outlines particular issues associated with collaborative administration and strategies for responding to such issues. In the end, we advocate a collaborative team approach to directing forensic programs as an excellent means of maximizing the potential of forensic students and professionals.

### Introduction

Forensic education is an odd profession. Like other time-demanding careers, forensic professionals find themselves trying to balance excessive professional commitments with personal lives. Within the educational arena this means teaching, committee work, pursuing professional development projects, advising, grading, and any other job one's chair or dean finds. Forensic educators then add to this slate of responsibilities their forensic position, which often may be another 20 or more hour a week commitment. Of course personal lives must be calculated into this delicate exercise in time management and prioritizing. At the same time, most forensic professionals simultaneously acknowledge profound and unique work pressures with extreme satisfaction

with their career choice (Jensen and Jensen, 2004; McDonald, 2001).

Despite the passion most forensic educators feel for their professional calling, few would reject the offer of a helping hand. Many programs benefit from multiple professional staff. In fact, some research confirms what would seem to be a logical correlation between competitive success and size of the professional staff (Bauer and Young, 2000). Many programs benefit from multiple staff members who can share the myriad responsibilities that accompany administering a forensic program. With a professional staff come decisions as to how these colleagues can best be integrated into the overall culture of the program. Managed ineffectively, assistance can become counter-productive to the goals of effectively administering a forensic program with limited stress and emotional labor.

We acknowledge the need for multiple staff members within forensic programs. While we understand that, ultimately, someone must be the director and delegation of responsibility is important, a spirit of collaboration is an effective approach to administering a forensic program. In this paper we outline the need for forensic staffs. We then propose a hierarchical collaborative model of forensic program administration. In the end we suggest potential challenges and responses to these challenges associated with such a collectivist approach to forensic program management.

### A Rationale for a Team Approach to Program Administration

Forensic educators face unique pressures that make their professional lives challenging. Burnett (2002) paints a rather pessimistic view on potential burnout of collegiate forensic directors. She writes "forensics coaches are caught in a vicious circle in which the system, as it currently exists, will continue to burn out those individuals who wish to educate their students and administer a fine forensics program, and who also wish to be valued faculty members in their departments as well as have a life outside the activity" (p. 80). As young educators or even program directors, individuals can be overwhelmed by the challenges of balancing personal and professional lives as well as how to handle the nuances of a

professorship/forensic duality. While it is grounded in debate, Dauber and Penetta (1994) preface the draft document from the Quail Roost Conference. This conference and document, while outlining rigorous expectations for debate educators seeking tenure, also acknowledges the importance of professionally evaluating debate educators in ways that reflect the inherent dimensions of their appointment. Williams and Gantt (2005) report a study that outlines responsibilities that define a director of forensics from other educators. Jensen and Dersch (2007), in their framing of forensic educators as at-risk professionals, offer inventories of both challenges and coping strategies associated with forensic education and administration. Ultimately, the pressures we suggest stem from the differences between a forensic and non-forensic educator. Further, these pressures can lead to profound ramifications for the forensic professional's health and personal life (Jensen and Jensen, 2007; Leland, 2004). Each of these differences and challenges provide independent warrants for a staff, or team approach to administering a forensic program.

The opportunity, or lack thereof, for forensic educators to take sabbatical leaves is an issue for forensic educators. Some forensics educators are expected to teach their classes, coach their teams, and travel without the luxury of a sabbatical. Often these are the directors of forensics whose appointment is not tenure track. The inability to take a sabbatical as forensics educator also contributes to burn out that can lead to ineffective administration and teaching, or a departure from their jobs. Many who travel frequently, coach long and late hours, and teach a number of classes need a sabbatical but are not given the opportunity to take one. Conversely, other directors of forensics who are allotted a sabbatical are often unable to seize the opportunity due to the lack of an assistant or the fear the direction their program might take in their absence. Forensic programs are infused with new people and the risk of new norms being established each year. Many directors fear that the patterns established while they are on sabbatical may not be consistent with their vision of the program. Other directors might be told that they can take a sabbatical if they find their replacements, or are willing to allow the program to be student run or put on hiatus in their absence. One would never expect or accept a successful sports coach taking a sabbatical. The idea that Lou Holtz or Bobby Bowden would select a successor to "hold the fort" during their sabbatical is actually pretty funny and yet no one so much as blushes at the proposition for forensic educators.

A substantial number of institutions underestimate and undervalue the amount of time and effort put into running a successful forensic program. Forensic educators are expected to participate fully in

service and committee responsibilities, research and writing, course development and refinement, and usually the forensic allowance they are given is a one course reduction in their teaching load. For that three hour course credit each semester the forensic educator engages in long coaching sessions, traveling each tournament weekend (generally a Thursday through Sunday), budgeting, planning schedules, arranging transportation and accommodations with various bureaucratic hurdles, planning and holding organizational meetings, administrative tasks associated with qualifying students for travel and then entering them into tournaments, creating and enforcing a set of standards and policies as well as other duties, managing staff, leading meetings, recruiting, and promoting the program. If the program hosts a tournament there are another lengthy set of tasks to be managed and accomplished. All of this is underscored with the reality that forensics is not their primary academic appointment. In the long run it is imperative that we come to understand the risks and responses to risks of forensic educator burnout (Richardson, 2005). In the short term, institutions must realize that to successfully execute this agenda of responsibilities a forensic educator must have other professionals who s/he can rely upon to assist with the management of the program.

Several teams are fortunate enough to have an assistant or team of assistants. Klosa (2005) suggests high schools as outlets for coaching assistance. Other potential resources include alumna, colleagues with particular interests in events or debate (when topics correspond with their areas of expertise), parents, and students themselves. There are many ways that assistants can be effectively utilized, including assigning responsibility for one event or group of events, placing an assistant in charge of the team as it travels, or even placing assistants in charge of tournament hosting or other service activities sponsored by the program. Other programs share responsibilities for teaching and administration among all staff members with clearly drawn boundaries of responsibilities. Still, other programs have directors of forensics who administer the program but do little if any coaching/teaching or traveling. Each of these models work wonderfully for select programs. This paper is offering another possible configuration for utilizing assistants that we believe has distinct advantages for most programs.

### **The Collaborative Hierarchical Model**

We call this a collaborative hierarchical model because it strives to achieve the greatest degree of collective input from and discussions with staff before final decisions are made about policies, scheduling, practice regimens, program and student development, tournament administration, travel and most other operational and philosophical issues. The

input is without regard to status of contributing staff members, and is shared with the goal of reaching consensus while reinforcing an interdependent relationship between all professional educators in the program. The model remains hierarchical in that the director maintains final responsibility and therefore final authority on all decisions. While this model may not represent a universal solution, it has succeeded for us over several years. We believe that broadly trained, versatile assistants who operate collaboratively with the director of forensics offer advantage not afforded by other staff configurations. Assistants who are constrained in their responsibilities simply are not trained or possibly inclined to tackle a whole variety of administrative or coaching tasks. It would be very easy for an assistant who is assigned and responsible for interpretation events to feel that administrative tasks were “not their job,” or that hearing extemporaneous speeches “isn’t my area.” In a collaborative team approach staff members do not dismiss responsibilities. The director of forensics directs staff to accomplish tasks or asks them to see what needs to be done. No task is out of bounds, although staff members have preferred tasks, and anyone can do whatever is needed. We believe that the collaborative administration model serves to relieve the pressures of the director of forensics as well as allow the team to properly function even when the director is on sabbatical or not on a tournament.

There are several distinct advantages associated with this collaborative approach to forensic administration and education. This collaboration can be extended to whatever extent the director is comfortable. The important caution for directors of forensics seeking to employ the model is to take into account the culture and structure of the program and institution (Corrie, 1995). Factors unique to particular schools such as course loads or limits on administrative responsibilities for certain faculty ranks can significantly impact the success of collaboration. In our case, all aspects of the program are shared with and taught to the assistants including but not limited to event preparation and coaching, planning the travel and event schedule, budgeting the season, arranging the travel, discerning and filling out the correct paperwork, and obtaining travel advances.

The clearest advantage of this procedure to the director is the ability to delegate at any time any of the various and sundry tasks associated with running a program. At the extreme, fully qualifying a staff makes possible even a semester long sabbatical for the director of forensics without the program missing a beat, or at least not many. The staff benefits through the opportunity to see the whole process and therefore become knowledgeable, if not prepared to take on program administration or any part thereof, with little adjustment anxiety. Assistants in

a program like this will have skills above and beyond most other assistants with whom they will compete for positions. Job satisfaction should also be maximized with staff as they are intimately “in the loop” and share equal responsibilities. The “fair” workplace can induce “high involvement and a willingness to collaborate with the organization’s goals, despite low salaries” (Borzaga & Tortia 2006). Open discussions and clear explanations by the director when there are questions make the learning experience of the assistants worth any extra work which might result from a highly involved programs. The director of forensics is essentially mentoring the staff on an on-going basis and this may or may not suit other programs. By building the skill set and confidence of the staff, and treating all the assistants fairly the director is helping to increase their job satisfaction while at the same time creating more flexibility for herself/himself. The staff can take on whatever pressing tasks appear or are delegated.

In our case the program in which we collaborate is widely comprehensive, including at least one and sometimes two forms of debate, any number of the 11 AFA individual events, reader’s theatre, experimental events when offered, hosting of a small and large tournament, audience programs, and community outreach projects. The program’s mission is for the students to gain insight into themselves and understanding about their place in the world through learning and performing in the various genres of individual events and debate. Students are required to participate at some level, even if minimal, in both debate and individual events. Learning and improving are stressed above competitive success although competition is appreciated and efforts to win are certainly present in interactions with students. The program articulates the motto “learning is winning.” The program travels to tournaments offering both debate and individual events (with extremely rare exceptions), representing approximately eight invitational tournament weekends, a state tournament, and at least two national tournaments. The Pi Kappa Delta tournament is always the top priority for the program; it is coupled with, when resources and tournament schedule allow, AFA-NIET and NPDA tournaments.

In keeping with the comprehensive program approach, all staff members are expected to develop adequate levels of expertise to teach and coach each of the individual events and debate. The director is sensitive to initial deficiencies among new staff; they are encouraged to enhance their knowledge base through other staff, and/or more traditional sources such as publications and videos. Students are mandated to practice with each of the staff for each event. This provides a wider perspective for the performer, getting a variety of opinions at each stage of preparation. Any conflicting advice requires a per-

formance choice and a defensible rationale from the student, thereby enhancing the student's preparation and introspection. This practice also increases the meta-communication among staff with regard to performances and preparation, and increases the staff's accountability with each other in terms of providing the most thorough, thoughtful commentary possible. All the comments of all staff may come up in meetings, be solicited by the director or other staff members, and be subject to group scrutiny. There is no pressure to conform to certain views or ideas, simply the expectation that you be willing and able to explain and defend your viewpoint. Clearly, setting a tone of openness and respect for divergent views is a key responsibility of the director for the model to function smoothly. On the positive side, this can provide an educational opportunity for staff to learn from each other. The model works best when staff keeps a positive, open minded and respectful attitude toward each other.

### **Responding to Challenges of the Model**

With any model or situation come challenges. Many people have set up a system which they believe will work for them, but unforeseen situations sometimes arise, and the system can be challenged. Knowing what challenges to expect and appropriate responses to the challenges ahead of time help a forensic educator keep the model in working order.

One challenge directors face is the resistance of staff members (often new) to accept the role of collaborator. Many times if a new assistant is unaware of the collaborative role of the staff they may not be as adaptive as the director would like. Further, a new assistant may feel they either have a lot to prove, or that they know more than the existing staff. This can lead to a resistance to collaborate, and/or a goal of being seen as highly important in the eyes of students. In order for our model to work, all staff members must be willing to set aside their egos and be open to compromise, criticism, and rejection of ideas. By collaborating, compromise is often put into play in order to reach a decision that is best for all.

Another challenge to the model is when an assistant fails to adapt to the norms of the program. Again, some assistants want to "rescue" a program, change its direction, or simply refuse to adapt to the norms that the director has established. These norms can include abiding by particular rules, procedures for having events approved for travel, or knowing how hard to motivate a reticent novice. New assistants are usually the ones guilty of this challenge because they have not always been in the activity long enough to know how to best manage these challenges.

A third challenge facing programs wanting to utilize a collaborative approach to program administration is the natural tendency for students to gravi-

tate to particular staff members. In the collaborative model, each staff member needs to interact with each student, preferably for about the same amount of time. Whether the reason is as mundane as schedule compatibility or as complex as personality conflicts, reliance on any specific member of the staff can undermine the effectiveness of the coaching by committee process. The answer to this challenge is simply to codify that students must practice for each staff member for each event before they can see any coach a second time (for an approved practice). Additional consecutive practices with one staff member may occasionally be desirable even though it may temporarily skew the ratio of practices to staff members per event, but making those imbalances temporary is necessary. The staff member seeking or accommodating the extra practices should defend those variances to the director and staff. The student benefits from having a number of opinions about the evolution of a piece. If the views are conflicting, the student needs to consider the input and make carefully considered and defensible choices, thereby improving the amount of thought going into preparation before any ballots are ever written in a tournament context. This codified variance in staff/student collaboration for each event conforms to the educational position that the performance needs to address a wide audience, and helps make the students more mature advocates for their ideas.

The value placed on specialization in education is illustrated by the importance of the PhD degree. Following the logic that intensive focused study in a particular area contributes to more effective teaching, it is certainly possible that highly skilled individuals in one event or area might not wish to engage in the collaborative process and or be bothered by program details not falling within their area of specialization. It can be argued that having a staff of generalists might be less effective than a group of selected experts. There are several reasons our model actually contributes to better teaching and student success. In our case, being broadly engaged in our program's events is performatively consistent with an educationally driven comprehensive program in which each educator is responsible for understanding and working with any of our students' events. This breadth mirrors the expectations we have for the student performers and produces an authentic performance which reflects the input of the entire staff. The entire staff was responsible for providing helpful commentary which was discussed with the performer and within the staff. An additional reason our approach does not suffer from an apparent lack of specialization is that such expertise is not abandoned, nor discouraged. While all staff members work with all events, it is natural that some staff will prefer one event over another, or be more confident or capable in teaching/coaching one event over

another. When working within one's area of specialty it stands to reason that those staff/student sessions will reflect the expertise the educator is able to bring to that student.

Two real world challenges are inherent in this model. The collaborative model requires a great deal of time from staff members. In order to make available all necessary training for various aspects of education and administration, share results of teaching/coaching sessions, and monitor program development, time must be shared by staff members. Regular meetings and periods of meta-communication regarding the collaborative process itself are necessary for each element. Staff members, particularly graduate assistants and volunteer coaches, may not have the time to follow this path, despite the pay off in experience at the end. The further danger is that a collaborative program might lose a talented specialist who is unwilling to learn about the other events. To a lesser extent, there could be a difficult transition for a new staff member lacking experience in several areas. Collaborating to help the colleague is the best way to maintain the effectiveness of the model.

We are convinced the rewards for the staff and program justify the extra effort that may be required for the successful execution of the collaborative hierarchical model for forensic program administration. The broad preparation makes the staff better teachers and mentors to the team members. The synergy among events is clear to anyone involved in several of them. The better the appreciation for how the events go together and are distinct, the more effectively one can teach any of them. The staff members have accountability to each other as well as to the student for their teaching and coaching. There is nowhere to hide if one fudges a coaching session. This transparency produces better results for the students and helps the staff improve their teaching skills as well. These collaborative efforts reinforce a shared ownership of the program which helps morale for everyone involved. The process also creates a transparent and hopefully more organized administration. The constant need communication among the staff creates sharedness in mission and bonds between people form or strengthen.

There is a small risk of group think and pressure to conform to the director's point of view. Some might argue this model could become oppressive. This danger is inherent in any situation where one person wields ultimate authority. The tone set by the director and their encouragement of independent thought and even respectful dissent are needed to make all staff members feel safe enough to be honest. The regard for each teacher's lens of experience and philosophy of forensics allows for sometimes animated discussions which we believe ultimately enhance the intellectual environment, the student's

ownership of their material and the vibrancy of the program.

We begin with a set of shared goals and policies, teach to the best of our abilities, work together to get things done and help the students find their own voices, while we try to learn from each other how to understand forensics, communicate with each other and our students and help the performers offer their best efforts to the activity.

### Conclusion

There is little that can relieve the pressures associated with forensic program administration. For most who have selected to become forensic educators, they are engaged in a labor of love. At the same time, having a forensic staff can ease pressures that, if left unchecked, can spiral to lack of job satisfaction on the part of the forensic educator and minimal effectiveness and satisfaction on the part of the forensic student. We propose a model of forensic administration that codifies collaboration among staff members. At its most basic level this model provided much needed support for educators seeking to teach and coach to their fullest potential. At its most ideal level, this collaborative approach to forensic administration and teaching can result in an interdependent program that celebrates sharedness in purpose, effort, and accomplishments.

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