

## Helping Programs Survive Utilizing the Concepts of Sustainability as Viable Means of Program Growth

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### Abstract

One of the many responsibilities and duties of a forensics coach is conducting long range planning for their respective program. Recruiting students and retaining them is paramount to surviving. When numerous programs across the country have ceased to exist, examining this issue takes on paramount importance. In the past, the forensic community has engaged into important discussion about the growth of programs within our activity. However, I adamantly believe directors at smaller programs need to shift their focus from growth to developing a philosophy of sustainability. This paper will defend this position by describing the concept of sustainability as it relates to the practices of recruitment and retention of students. Specific attention will focus on the concept of "best practice" in helping establish suggestions for the survival of forensic programs.

### Introduction

Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Mike Wartman director of the Twin Cities Forensics League. Anyone in district four who has ever attended a TCFL (Twin Cities Forensics League) is very familiar with the crazy antics of Mike and his rapid award ceremony procedures. In conversing with Mike we begin discussing the upcoming state tournament in Minnesota. Mike began to reminisce about his days of being Director of Forensics at Normandale Community College. One story in particular stuck with me and has become the primary motivation and direction for this paper.

Mike was telling me about the 1981 or 1982 Minnesota State Tournament (let's be honest, after awhile students and tournaments all tend to blend together). I was prepared to hear about a routine state tournament but there was nothing routine about his story. The particular year in question had a remarkable 17 two year or community college programs in attendance at that tournament. In fact, Mike told me that there use to be a separate state tournament in the two year division based on the sheer number of schools and entries.

Many of us in the forensics community become attached to a particular school, state or district. I competed for two years in Illinois and also did some volunteer coaching. I also did two years of student coaching in Michigan. Both of these states are truly

remarkable and hold special memories. But, I will always have a special connection with forensics in the state of Minnesota. I competed two years as an undergraduate in this state. I completed my graduate degrees in Minnesota. I was an assistant director of forensics for three years at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Finally, I have started a small program at South Central College which is located in Mankato, Minnesota. I consider myself fortunate to say that my small program is entering into its third year of existence.

I had difficulty fathoming the story being told to me. In the eleven years that I have been affiliated with Minnesota forensics I have never seen the state tournament attended by any more than fifteen schools. To consider that a separate state tournament was held on the two year level literally blows my mind, so to speak.

However, the story takes an all too familiar turn. Out of those seventeen teams which attended the two year Minnesota state tournament, only one of those programs still exists today. Sixteen viable and active forensic programs on the two year level have disappeared. Sadly, some four programs in the state have also disappeared during my years of coaching involvement in Minnesota. While this is disheartening, I know Minnesota is not the only state which has experienced the loss of programs.

As coaches, directors and scholars in the forensics community we must be compelled to address this trend. The elimination of programs is not a new issue. While no exact statistics have been collected, if the forensics community would put their respective collective memories and experiences together, I would have to imagine the number of programs which have disappeared would be staggering.

As we approach the gathering of forensics colleagues at this 2008 Developmental Conference, I am compelled to ask this question which will drive the focus of this paper. What can the forensics community do to stave off the elimination of programs? I believe one answer is directors utilizing approaches which reinforce the concept of sustainability.

This paper will first discuss the general nature of growth in programs. Then I will lay out the concepts of sustainability. Critical attention will focus on the concept of best practice as it relates to sustainability. Practical suggestions for best practice will then be

explained to help coaches and directors comprehend how adopting a sustainable mindset could help save forensics programs.

### **Growth in Forensics**

The idea of growth within in the forensics community centers around two general avenues of discussion. First, growth is applied to individual programs. This involves strategies, techniques and practices programs use to recruit and retain students for their respective programs. The second element of growth typically discussed by the forensics community is the creation of new programs and providing steps for new directors to help them start a program from “scratch.” Both of these general concepts are extremely important and more research, discussion and implementation of these ideas needs to occur.

The forensics community has engaged into some very thoughtful and critical research in regards into the numerous issues which threaten the survival of a program. Predominantly, these factors include coach burnout and attempting to juggle the numerous demands and roles a director of forensics has to juggle.

First, Being a director of a forensics program can be a stressful juggling act. The demands of academic teaching, course preparation work, research projects, and committee or department meetings are difficult to balance by themselves. Workman

(1997) identifies six areas of competency that forensics directors must possess in order to succeed in their role of leading their forensics program. Workman notes that a director must be competent in the instruction of events, financial management, all areas of leadership, being an administrator, professionalism and as an interpersonal mentor for students.

The idea that coaches experience “burnout” from the excessive demands of collegiate forensics has received a fair share of critical attention. (Billings, 2002; Burnett, 2002; Holm & Miller, 2004). The majority of forensics teams do not have internal institutional assistance with department faculty or graduate students aiding in the running of their programs. The director is the sole individual responsible for all aspects of team management. This task can be extremely overwhelming, especially for the newly hired director of forensics.

However, I firmly believe an essential element of growth has been omitted from this discussion. Discussion needs to start about how forensic programs can simply survive. In my opinion, this is not a conscious negative choice by the forensics community. I believe the idea of programs surviving is inherently implied in the discussion of growth. But more research and discussion needs to happen about the issues directly related to program survival. Sustainability is one such approach.

### **Sustainability**

The concept of sustainability originally stems from ecological thinking. At the core of sustainability is creating a set of values which will reinforce care and respect for both the ecosystem and for the people living within that ecosystem. This concept suggests that a sense of well being can be established for both the system and its people.

A primary tenet of sustainability is the concept of best practice. Best practice can be defined as the idea that there is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive or reward that is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. (Hargroves & Smith, 2005).

The possibility does exist for the concept of best practice to become skewed. People may utilize the least amount of resources for ultimate outcome or achievement, which does follow the concept of best practice. However, if this approach is constantly followed, then the development of a norm is established. This norm then automatically is assumed to be the “best practice” to accomplish a particular task. People will then naturally not seek out future or other possible “best practice” elements to constantly improve.

### **Application of Best Practice to Forensics Growth**

There are numerous aspects or ideas which could be discussed about the nature of “best practice” in forensics. I will focus only two areas. The first will be the aspect of recruiting as it relates to growth issues. The second area will focus on coaching aspects and growth.

Since I have become Director of Forensics at South Central College I have purposely elected to NOT actively recruit students to my program. For instance, after two years, I have not put recruitment posters or flyers around my campus. I do not attend our freshman orientation sessions. While this may change in the near future, I haven’t worked with area high school programs to spread the word about my small program. This is not to say I do not recruit students. I would have to recruit some students or I simply would not have a team. My recruitment strategies are focused to very specific components of which I will expand upon later in the paper.

I know there are numerous programs which have very active recruitment strategies in place. These programs may offer summer camps, high school workshops, attend freshman orientation, offer high school tournaments, provide scholarships and a litany of other recruiting strategies. I simply do not have the time, energy or resources available to conduct recruiting on this level. I envy large programs which have these resources. Clearly, to maintain their large team identity and sweepstakes posi-

tion(s) at national tournaments, the “best practice” for these teams is to actively seek numerous recruits.

This minimal approach to recruitment and team growth is clearly not applicable to every program. However, to small programs or single coach programs, this approach is appropriate. I will lay out some “best practice” suggestions which will help a program sustain itself within the realm of recruiting students and overall team size. These suggestions can help ensure the sustainability of these types of programs.

### **Best Practice Recruitment Strategies**

My sustainable “best practice” is to essentially minimize my recruiting strategies and attempts. These strategies include targeting other student organizations for finding speech students. If applicable by location, another strategy is asking for graduate coaching help from another program. Limiting the size of one’s team is another “best practice suggestion. Finally, making students very aware of their practical and fiscal responsibilities and converting to a philosophical difference of what growth actually entails are all viable suggestions for team sustainability.

First, I believe director of forensics should locate and target other on campus organizations for recruitment possibilities. I believe this has two major advantages. First the type of student recruited will be the type of student directors would want for their team. Second, this will be more conducive than large scale “cattle call” recruitment strategies.

Focus should be directed towards finding students in organizations which have a presentation or speaking component already intrinsically specific to their respective organization or competition(s). On my particular campus there are student groups like Business Professionals of America, DEX (an organization composed of marketing students) and Skills USA (an organization of students presenting their work in the technical arts) all offer regional and national speaking meets/competitions. All of these groups present their respective projects, ideas and research in oral competitions.

If a student is involved in other student organizations, this particular student has the likelihood they would adapt well to the demands of forensics competition. First, these students are clearly committed and understand the demands of getting ready for a competition. The fear of public speaking and presentation is not nearly as difficult to overcome for these students who have presentation experience. While all students (and their coaches) are all super busy, it is not a difficult leap of logic to think these students would not commit to another organization/team. A smart forensics coach simply has to find the connection and appeal of what the student is doing in their first student organization and translate that to the appropriate individual event. Addi-

tionally, many of these organizations are semester based groups. All of their meetings and competitions tend to end within a short period of time thus allowing time to commit to forensics.

Second, by focusing on specific student organizations, this helps the director avoid “cattle call” recruitment ideas. The director does not have to post posters or flyers all over campus. The director does not to attend freshman orientation sessions. The director does have to wait and simply see who walks through their door. The director saves time by giving the “spiel” of the benefits of doing to forensics to very interested students. Granted, not all of these students will join, but targeting a specific group helps the director plan in a timelier manner.

### **Coaching Help and Growth**

To combat the lack of coaching help often associated with directors of small programs or single coach run programs, I suggest seeking out the help of graduate students. If there is a university in the immediate area, contacting the department chair or director of forensics might prove to be a valuable asset. A graduate student might be convinced to help assist with coaching.

The benefits of this graduate student coaching idea are numerous. This student could earn internship or individual study credit by providing some coaching assistance. This graduate student would establish professional network connections outside of their own graduate program which could be beneficial for reference or recommendation letter purposes in the graduate student’s future. If the graduate student is already coaching at their respective program, a conflict of interest can be avoided by merely limiting coaching exposure to one or two students at the volunteer program and coding them against each other at tournaments. Finally, programs sharing graduate students/coaches would help foster an overall friendlier atmosphere in collegiate competition.

Third, a very tough love best practice move, in regards to recruitment and team size, is to simply limit the size of a team. I fully recognize many programs may already adopt this particular measure especially in regards to travel to specific tournaments. However, I am referring to overall team size. A director simply needs to recognize their limitations in time, financial resources and travel. This goes against the open door policy and friendly nature of our activity. We encourage all students to participate in our activity. However, limitations do exist. Many sports teams enforce a strict team size. For program sustainability directors need to discover how many students they can truly accommodate within their resources and stick to that number. I understand opponents may suggest peer coaching, student fundraising and resource saving ideas, but the bottom

line is a cap on team size is the “best practice” idea a coach can utilize for their program.

As part of this tough love approach, the fourth “best practice” suggestion is to ensure that students are always aware of their responsibilities. Once again, I am confident most programs clearly lay out all guidelines, rules and team policies to students. But directors must make sure these are carried through and practice tough love when needed in order for a team to sustain itself.

Finally, directors looking to sustain their programs need to shift their thinking away from growth issues and into sustainable methods. Many coaches dream of having big teams, arriving to tournaments in two or three vans and competing for the national title. While these dreams are fun, they are not very realistic for all programs. There are simply smaller programs in our community which need to set realistic goals for themselves. While this is not an earth shattering suggestion, how directors think about their program clearly sets the tone and direction for their program.

Actual growth is a tangential concept. All programs experience both boom and lean years in regards to the actual number of students competing. While directors certainly would like to control every variable affecting their program, the inevitable truth is we cannot control everything.

### Conclusion

My personal approach to recruiting and building my program may not be a popular one. I have had to switch focus from concentrating on growth to one of sustainability. By incorporating some “best practice” suggestions, I hope to keep my program afloat.

Quite simply, I am more concerned with survival. When my small program was started two years ago, people were convinced both in my school and by some within the forensics community that South Central would never be able to field an active forensics program. I would be lying if I were to say this process has been easy. I came from a very large and respectable program where I was simply another coach among many. To make the transition into starting a program has been difficult but extremely rewarding. I need to take certain measure to ensure my program survives and can sustain itself now and in the future. I do not want to become one of those programs that are talked about in fond memory by “old timers” in the community

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