

Maintaining and Enhancing Institutional Relevance Long-term Program Sustainability in an Era of Increased Intra-Institutional Competition for Resources

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Abstract

The preservation and growth of intercollegiate forensic programs does not, and should not, depend on the singular factor of competitive results. The value of a program is rooted, in great part, in intra-institutional factors. This paper puts forth an assertion related to increasing the institutional value of forensics programs. Emphasis is placed on expanding the scope of the program goals and framing the success of a program on a non-competitive basis. The intra-institutional framing of program identity as “centers of excellence” functions as a central tenet.

Introduction

The National Development Conference on Individual Events is an excellent opportunity for our community to discuss a variety of issues related to “what we teach.” Yet, none are more central to our cause than the sustainability of forensics programs within the college and university curriculums nationally. We cannot nurture a discussion about growth unless we, first, tackle the issue of sustainability. This essay seeks to frame the collection of voices presented in this session on the “growth of forensics programs.” The full measure of the papers presented in this panel focus on achieving intra-institutional goals. While forensic program administrators are often pre-occupied with expectations and identities that exist outside of the institution that their program represents, there is no more important task than to illustrate the scope and value of a program on an intra-institutional basis. The papers in this panel feed this ongoing conversation with considerations of the extending our reach to non-competitive, civic minded objectives; re-envisioning the nature and composition of a competitive team; recruitment of students with the central goal of sustainability; and confronting the next 40 years with the rise of new media. Each of these is an important matter for the discussion of sustainability. Additionally, when taken as a collective the papers clearly illustrate the diverse set of issues that our community faces with regard to growth and program maintenance. This brief essay seeks to make an additional contribution to the discussion by highlighting the common threads that unify this set of papers.

Forensics program administrators must maintain a consistent appreciation of the perception intra-institutional value of forensics programs. As several papers in this session highlight, forensics programs accomplish much more than competitive experiences and products. As a group of scholars and scholar-students, forensics programs are uniquely positioned for academic and civic engagement. Megan Hogue (Forensics as a tool for political engagement: Fostering advocacy outside the activity) smartly attended to the concept to civic engagement. This example emphasizes the fact the program goals that reach beyond competitive products quickly translate into increased value for the institution at large. Hollihan (1990) notes that, “most [higher education] administrators compute costs by calculating the cost per student served” (p. 439). By demonstrating that a forensics program serves multiple elements of the mission of the university, programs are enhanced at a local level.

An additional example can be identified in academic engagement. Many colleges and universities host regional or national conferences on their campuses. Themed conferences focused on subjects such as the annual women’s conference at the University of West Florida or social justice conference at Central Michigan University are prime examples of academic contexts in which forensics students and administrators can extend their reach into a non-competitive environment. Conferences such as these do not require significant funding, but rather the reconfiguration of program goals in order to place a high value on engaging these experiences as a presenter or participant.

Expanding the scope of forensics program goals to include localized engagement only works to enhance the value of a program to an institution. More importantly, it offers students a more inclusive, diverse and rich experience during their participation in the activity. It is unreasonable to assume that long-term sustainability for forensics programs can be purely based on competitive results. While a competitive result model may serve the needs and expectations of a handful of programs nationally, a large collection of programs must work to create intra-institutional value on the basis of a more broad scope of interests.

The importance of framing the institutional identity of a forensics program is a key concern to sustainability. The term “center of excellence” has become a central phrase in the identification of particularly productive sectors of colleges and universities. Since a majority of intercollegiate forensics programs accomplish a variety programmatic goals each year, significant effort should be made to frame these entities accordingly. A forensics program does not require a national competitive prominence to be considered a “center of excellence” within an institution. Indeed, the goals of most institutions of higher education are largely pedagogical. The intensive and personalized training, personal and professional mentoring, training in ambassadorship, and concentrated academic study that is featured in forensics pedagogy serves such institutional goals in a uniquely fitting fashion. Since many executive administrators are largely unfamiliar with the nuances of forensics practice (i.e. still relaying phone calls to Directors of Forensics from students interested in investigative medicine), then the framing of a programs identity should begin with the substance of the experience. As a secondary matter, competitive products will act as a support for the accomplishment of the pedagogical goals. A variety of different means would serve to operationalize this approach.

Nurturing a more intricate intra-institutional program identity will assist in emphasizing that forensics is, most often, appropriately labeled as a “center of excellence.” More importantly, ensuring that a program maintains a vibrant and diverse set of goals and objectives will continue to breathe life into the endeavor.

An intercollegiate forensics program presents an exciting set of teaching challenges and opportunities. Yet, to grow and nourish this brand of pedagogy, forensics administrators must maintain a keen focus on issues related to sustainability. While a handful issues were addressed in this paper and the corresponding panel, the need to place long-term sustainability on a local level and at the top of the list of priorities for forensics educators is undeniable.

Reference

Hollihan, T. A. (1990). Directing Debate and Forensics. In Daly, J. A., Friedrich, G. W., & Vangellisti (eds.). (1990). *Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.