

An Optimum Balance of Forensic Goals Balancing Competitive and Educational Ends Through Forensic Honoraries

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Abstract

The myriad benefits found through participation in forensics are well documented. Few co- or extra-curricular activities boast the range of opportunity and benefit that are found through forensics. At the same time, this diversity within the activity creates tension for some programs that struggle with the *best* approach to forensic participation. Few would argue that forensics is at the same time educational and competitive. The argument that evolves from this duality of mission is which, if any, is more important or prevalent. Answering this question has led to multiple associations, a wealth of scholarship, and the conclusion that there is likely no definitive answer to the query of which is most important. This paper reviews the debate over balancing competitive and educational goals in forensics. Particular attention is paid to forensic honoraries as associations that bring attention to multiple forensic goals, including both educational and competitive excellence. I conclude with arguments in support of forensic honoraries as outlets for programs seeking a balance of multiple forensic goals.

Introduction

In many ways collegiate forensics has become very much like sending one of my children with a pocket full of money on a trip through the candy store...or more accurately a credit card with a high limit in a toy store. The benefits forensic programs promote to their participants and institutions range from competitive to educational to social. Similarly, there are seemingly limitless choices of events and associations in which programs can participate. These choices can be a blessing when shaping forensic programs around particular institutional cultures and resources. Programs are able to create a face for themselves that reflects their own sets of goals, opportunities, and constraints. At the same time, these myriad choices contribute to a very diverse collegiate forensic atmosphere that can, at times, suffer from fragmentation and the lack of uniformity in what defines the collegiate forensic experience. There are countless national champions in each event each year. There are staffs and budgets that range from next to nothing to an almost embarrassment of riches. While these differences are not inherently negative, the tensions between which choices reflect the best or even an appropriate approach to forensics can promote a divide among programs that differ in

their view and practice of the activity.

One such tension that has long faced our activity is between competition and education. While I doubt many programs would deny the co-existence of each of these ends, there is debate over practices that seemingly emphasize one over the other. It is not enough to accept the ability of programs to embrace both competition and education as complimentary of one another; differences in choices creates perceptions of particular choices being better or worse for blending competition and education into a single approach to forensic activities. While competition and education can, and should, be integrated into any program's approach to forensics, forensic educators must be cognizant of the specific choices they make and how they contribute to competition and education being shared goals of a single program.

A key area in which programs operationalize any blending of competition and education is the events and associations in which they participate. While no forensic association would deny the importance of each of these two goals, many have policies or cultures that vary in their emulation of a blend of competition and education; the effectiveness of balancing the two goals is a judgment each program makes in accordance with its own view of forensics. Again, these differences in views create and reinforce the breadth of choices facing programs.

I argue the forensic honoraries and their events are ideal for promoting a balance of forensic education and competition. While it is presumptuous to identify any forensic choice as the best, honoraries do codify a range of forensic goals and opportunities within their constitutions, tournaments, and cultures. Forensic honoraries offer a comprehensive approach to forensics, not only in terms of events offered, but also in the goals they promote for their members. This breadth of inclusion of goals and events provides a more intrinsic and explicit permutation of competition and education than what is promoted by other associations. I make the case for affiliation with forensic honoraries as a means of integrating a balance of competition and education by framing the debate over balancing these two ends, the nature of honoraries and how they embrace a breadth of forensic goals, and implications of affiliating with honoraries.

Balancing Competition and Education The Debate in Review

Developmental conferences and forensic literature have and continue to frame the debate over competition and education. The earliest definitions of forensics promote the activity as educational at its core. McBath (1975) writes that forensics is “an educational activity...” (p. 11). Even in 1975 McBath acknowledged a range of options available to forensic educators, but posited that “various forensic communities can unite in significant ways if they endorse and pursue the overarching objective of providing students with experience in learning to communicate with people” (p. 11). Despite this focus on learning, it is also understood the activity exists within an atmosphere of competition. Bartanen (1994) writes in his directing forensics text that all the various forensic events “provide a unique opportunity for students to learn valuable life skills in an enjoyable, competitive environment” (p. 1). As a rule, the argument over balancing these two goals has become an enthymeme; because students are competing in forensics they are learning, and students learn to improve themselves as forensic participants in order to elevate their competitive potential. This assumed inherent co-existence of these two goals stems largely from the forensic rituals of practicing to compete that dominate the agendas of many forensic programs. Teaching is certainly at the heart of many educators’ and students’ approaches to practicing. At the same time, Olson (2004) may be correct when he suggests that most of what forensic educators do is motivated by “how it will advance their team competitively” (p. 3). Ribarsky, as part of her argument calling for greater acceptance of innovation, suggests that reinforcement of our existing tournament model is problematic when its “norm perpetuation further hinders the educational values” (p. 20).

While few would argue the benefits of approaching forensics through a primarily educational lens, Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) argue “promoting the educational value of forensics gives the activity saliency to mask its competitive motives” (p. 14). These authors argue that the culture of forensics is primarily competitive, as reflected in both its rhetoric and practices. They argue that to achieve a balance of education and competition, the forensic community should “be honest about what forensics really is: a competitive activity that no longer needs to clothe itself in the myth of education. Only then can we hope that the present myth of what the activity is all about, will become a future reality” (p. 20). In a response to Burnett, Brand, and Meister, Hinck (2003) acknowledges a dialectical tension within the forensic community between competition and education. At the same time, he suggests that the competitive forensic experience “can contribute to enhanced educational outcomes” (p. 65). He adds that benefits of the competitive experience are regardless of the

degree of competitive success, suggesting “the activities that make competition possible engender positive values for life beyond college” (p. 65).

Additional scholarship has addressed the tensions associated with balancing education and competition. Brownlee (1995) calls for forensic educators to “create an environment within our separate programs that rewards learning, not just winning, and encourage(s) our national organizations to foster tournament activities and awards that appeal to all segments of the student population” (p. 15). West (1997), indicting the concept of qualifying legs for the AFA-NIET, writes “we have created a culture that is primarily focused on qualifying for a national tournament than on the pursuit of excellence in performance” (p. 79). Kistenberg and Ferguson (1989) suggest that competitive forensic arenas may not be the most appropriate contexts for performing literature. Gaer (2002) writes that as students and educators seek to emulate what is competitively successful in particular events, “we do create an activity where students become presentational robots and let freedom of creation and expression go by the wayside” (p. 56). Jensen and Jensen (2007) observe it is the responsibility of the program’s director to create and maintain a program that embodies goals most salient to the program’s culture, and then to sell or promote that program to its institutional community. They “acknowledge in order to effectively promote forensics one must highlight success” (p. 18). At the same time, Jensen and Jensen observe that “forensic success is diverse in its form and genesis,” making it possible for programs to highlight whatever ends they deem most important and relevant to their program and its surrounding community. (p. 20).

The Case for Honoraries as Contexts for Balancing Education and Competition

Regardless of how programs frame themselves, and in what activities a forensic program engages, tournaments and competition are a forensic reality. As such, programs must make decisions as to which tournaments to attend, and the role national tournaments will play in their program. As a rule, supporting a national tournament is consistent with affiliating with the association sponsoring that national tournament. This connection is important because programs, at some level, endorse principles and practices of groups by joining their ranks of membership. There are countless national tournaments, and consequently national associations, from which programs can select. Some national tournaments have qualification standards, generally grounded in particular degrees of competitive success during the regular forensic season, while other tournaments require only membership in the sponsoring association as a requirement for participation.

A factor that may escape consideration by educa-

tors deciding with what associations they will affiliate is the impact that association and its national tournament will have on the program and its students. Consider West's indictment, as he terms it, "the culture of qualifying" and how one national tournament can dictate who competes in which events when, not to mention how it might be inappropriate to enter a tournament simply because an event has already qualified for a tournament seven months in the future (1997). It is the impact associations can have on forensic programs that motivates my call for affiliating with forensic honoraries. The three honoraries, Pi Kappa Delta (PKD), Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha (DSR-TKA), and Phi Rho Pi (PRP) are open to any college, with PRP being restricted to two-year schools. Like other associations, these honoraries each sponsor a national tournament. However, their standards and activities extend their potential impact on programs well beyond an annual national competition. Each holds prospective members to particular standards of academic and competitive excellence and experience. Not only must programs meet membership standards, but educators and students must each meet standards for membership and join individually in order to be part of the honorary's activities. Course offerings in speaking or debate, an active forensic or speaker's bureau program, and meeting accreditation standards of the Association of College Honor Societies are the minimum standards for membership in DSR-TKA. Minimum grade point averages, competitive excellence, and service are required for introductory and advanced degrees of membership in PKD. Minimum levels of experience and competitive success are requirements for membership in PRP.

What makes honoraries uniquely suited to promote a balance of competition and education is their encouragement of both competitive success and academic excellence. Additionally, the honoraries' national tournaments are open to all individual members of the association, thereby affording programs the opportunity of attending a national tournament with any and all members of their program. The three honoraries offer students an opportunity to blend their academic pursuits and forensics in very visible ways. As honor societies, members are able to wear honor chords at commencement as a way of proclaiming their forensic involvement as part of their curriculum. Members are encouraged, and in some cases required for advanced degrees of membership, to engage in community service. Essentially, individuals share membership requirements with their programs, thereby receiving opportunities to participate in a variety of both competitive and non-competitive forensic activities. Even though each national tournament rewards competitive success with tangible awards, this is sometimes done in a very egalitarian manner. For example, the top 10% of an event at the biennial PKD national tournament

receive top honors as superior award winners. Even though a top superior winner is announced, all plaques are exactly the same in an effort to strike a balance between the competitive success of being the best in an event at that national tournament, while de-emphasizing differences among a group of competitors who share a similar measure of success.

An additional reason for affiliating with honoraries as a means of balancing competitive and educational outcomes is the accessibility of the tournament to virtually all forensic students. Students need not meet a competitively-based standard to participate. Further, nearly any event in which the program participates is offered, along with events unique to that honorary. This represents two important benefits. First, students can be a part of a national tournament regardless of their competitive success during the year. Second, programs can provide their students a national tournament experience that is a team event. If team bonding and nurturing of all team members are program goals, honoraries and their national tournaments provide the ideal national experience. Bartanen (1997), in her keynote address at the Pi Kappa Delta Professional Development Conference, asked and answered the question, "even if reformed incrementally or systematically, is the vehicle of the competitive tournament sufficient for accomplishment of the mission of forensic education? Pi Kappa Delta has strongly answered 'no' to that question" (p. 8). She identifies the unique benefits and expectations of membership in PKD as testimony to its unique ability to blend multiple goals within a single forensic program.

While it may be that no association—honorary or otherwise—completely captures the essence of a given program, the combination of competitive, academic, and service excellence makes honoraries ideal affiliations for forensic programs seeking to embrace a breadth of engagement within the forensic activity. At the same time, there are implications for programs to consider when joining honoraries.

Implications for Affiliation

I acknowledge at the onset that honoraries may not fit well within every forensic program's culture. There are particular program characteristics that blend well with honoraries, such as comprehensive programs whose students participate in both individual events and debate, programs that travel to a small number of tournaments during the year, or programs that seek broad participation from several students regardless of competitive success or potential for success. At the same time, other programs may reject honoraries as being inconsistent with the mission of their program. While a number of factors contribute to decisions about with which associations to affiliate the focus of this paper is the connection between affiliations and the integration of both competition and education into a single forensic

program. Considering a few implications of affiliating with honoraries can help guide this important program decision.

Initially, a critical distinction of the national honorary tournaments is the lack of any criteria for entering other than being a member of the honorary. Clearly this differs from tournaments such as AFA-NIET, NFA, and NDT, all of which have specific competitive-based standards for being able to enter the tournament. The lack of qualification-based entry standards opens the field of potential competitors to a full range of competitive ability, which may well include the interper who reads from the script book to the public address speaker whose rhetorical and delivery skills are Kennedy or King-like. Even though one can argue that the truly accomplished students will ultimately be the ones who are recognized among the best, individual rounds of competition may reflect levels of performance that are not commensurate with what one might expect at a national championship tournament. Similarly, larger events allow for greater propensity that students who are less competitively talented than others can find ways to the upper tier of recognized performers while more competitively accomplished students fail to receive similar recognitions. At the same time, open entry national tournaments allow for the possibility that less experienced students with events that did not meet certain national tournaments' measures of quality can still be competitively successful. Similarly, the opportunity for all to enter a national tournament promotes any educational opportunity associated with the competitive experience for any and all competitors.

A second implication rests in the range of events in which a particular program participates. National honorary tournaments are comprehensive in nature, meaning a variety of both individual and debate events are offered. Comprehensive tournaments inherently mandate down-time for students who specialize in debate or individual events. More specialized programs may be unwilling or unable to exhaust resources for a tournament at which they spend half the tournament schedule not competing. Even though students are always able to enter additional events, the motivation for doing so at the end of a season may be minimal. Other national tournaments, with only a few exceptions, specialize in either individual events or a particular format of debate; these allow students and educators greater focus and, perhaps, more intensity in their participation. Conversely, the combination of comprehensive event offerings and open-entry allows for a true team nationals experience. Only program resources stand as a possible barrier to any student entering the tournament. Programs can promote the honorary nationals as a team event at which point the season culminates in a collective experience. This also does not preclude the same program from entering more

competitively successful students at qualification-based national tournaments, allowing for a blend of egalitarian and elite nationals experiences.

A third implication is the degree to which programs with memberships in honoraries actively promote that membership. Any association has the potential to benefit member programs. The unique qualities of honoraries, as have been outlined earlier in this paper, envelop service, competition, and academic excellence. Not supporting the national tournament for one's affiliate honorary communicates questionable support for this multi-tiered approach to forensics. Programs that embrace these goals can better communicate the importance of such an integration of priorities by supporting tournaments and associations that promote such integration.

Conclusions

There are no doubt additional implications for programs to consider when deciding which national associations and tournaments to support. For some programs this means selecting the one national tournament experience that is most affordable, while others may schedule as many as three or four national tournaments as a way of broadening the unique competitive and educational benefits that come from being at nationals. In the end forensic programs and their administrators will make decisions about what best serves the goals of their programs and host institutions. These decisions will range from which students may join to which national tournaments the program will support. As Schnoor and Alexander (1997) note, these decisions "are 'professional' choices and should be respected as such by all of us" (p. 15). Further, we must all acknowledge that individual programs will view competition and education through different lenses. While there is a tendency for students and educators to characterize certain national tournaments or program choices as appropriate or inappropriate, such rhetoric unfairly disenfranchises programs and their students. It also presumes an ultimate nationals experience, or the right choice, neither of which exists in the world of forensics. Ultimately, as Littlefield (2006) writes, "whether competitive or not, educationally sound or not, the knowledge afforded students who engage in forensics provides a certainty or truth that cannot be gained in another environment. That is why forensics is philosophically justified" (p. 11).

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