

Relating to Publics An Additional Role of the Director of Forensics

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Abstract

Without fostering effective relationships with students, departments and administrators, a forensic program can easily succumb to budget cuts. This paper attempts to analyze the relationships that must be managed for a director of forensics to run a successful program. To this end, a review of the literature is given, an analysis of this literature is conducted and research questions are given that will further enrich future inquiry into the public relations role of the director of forensics.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years over forty schools that previously competed in intercollegiate forensics at the National Forensics Association national tournament have lost their teams. Even forensics programs that found incredible competitive success at a national level such as Indiana University, as high as third at NFA and a perennial top ten school, have lost funding and cease to exist. Unfortunately for Indiana University the administration was unable to see the value of such an expensive co-curricular activity. Many programs share the same fate or die when a coach leaves or is cut for budget reasons. As many in the forensics community know well, most programs live and die by their coaches. Because it was run by graduate students, the forensics program at Indiana University had no director to build and manage relationships with the publics it depended on for survival. At many of the schools that no longer participate in collegiate forensics the director could have avoided the budgetary chopping block if stronger relationships with the department and administration had been established. While some seasoned directors have even added scholarly material on relating to administrations (Cunningham, 2005; Paine, 2007) and departments (Dreher, 2007), many new directors have no idea where to start or focus on coaching rather than managing the program's other relationships. This is understandable when the short term needs of the twenty students with five events each is obvious and the public relations role of the director appears far off, even more so when the team is run by graduate students who must also teach and take classes. Yet, without strong connections with departments, administrations, and student government, forensics programs are unable to grow and have no defense from being deemed fat that needs to be cut from budgets. The most important task for

directors of forensics is to recognize how these relationships can be established and how to maintain them in relation to one another.

The immense value of forensics for all parts of the college or university system has been clearly documented (Cunningham, 2005; Dreher, 2007; Hinck, 2005; Holm and Miller, 2004; Littlefield, 1991; Mcmillan and Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Morris, 2007; Paine, 2007). The challenge for the director remains communicating that value to the forensics program's publics and demonstrating the need for each public to maintain a positive relationship with the program. This paper is an attempt to help directors to maintain those relationships and to balance their role as coach with their role as a public relations professional. To this end, a review of the literature is organized by important publics. An analysis of this literature is given from which research questions are established that can help to commence further inquiry into the role of public relations in directing forensics.

Managing Relationships with Students

As the figurehead of the forensics program the director is responsible for maintaining a relationship with students who are currently on the team as well as any new recruits who are looking to join. It is important that directors maintain open two-way symmetrical communication with students. This everyday interpersonal level of communication is vital for maintaining a productive team. Also, it is important for new members to feel wanted and appreciated and to keep the team from splitting into fragments.

Paine and Stanley (2003) explore this level of team management by searching for ways that directors can make the team fun. Their article suggests that by keeping the team fun students will stay in the activity longer and coaches will be able to prevent burn out. Paine and Stanley (2003) surveyed 106 students and found that students have fun when they are with other members of the forensics community, play the game of forensics and view the activity as educationally beneficial. Students are unhappy when they perceive that the activity punishes risk-taking and when the activity seems too professional. With this in mind, directors need to incorporate elements of fun into team life in order to sponsor a healthy learning environment. By communicating the playful nature of forensics and by explaining the educational

value of the activity to students the director of forensics and students can find mutual benefit. Furthermore, it is necessary for directors to facilitate risk taking and to work with students to incorporate new ideas that keep the activity fresh and enjoyable. Through actions such as this a director can establish a culture that is positive, fun, and educational.

This type of culture can be positive for recruiting as well. Dean and Dean (1985) describe the process of recruiting within the university. For many schools that do not have the funding for scholarships or recruiting trips this can be an excellent team building method. Dean and Dean (1985) explain that the team needs to interact with potential recruits early because the forensics program will have to compete with athletics, Greek life, and other organizations for potential students. It is also important to strategically market to students who have interest in public speaking. This can be done by developing relationships with the admissions department so when students receive a questionnaire asking for their interests, public speaking can be one of the options. This information can be given to the director of forensics and a mailing list can be started at the beginning of the school year. Also, Dean and Dean (1985) discovered that returning students can help with recruiting by calling potential students or by performing at an informational meeting. Student newspaper advertisements can also be an inexpensive and very effective means of recruiting. Furthermore, when potential recruits come to a team meeting with returning members who demonstrate a positive team climate as described by Paine and Stanley (2003) the recruits are more likely to join. In order to keep new and returning members informed Dean and Dean (1985) suggests holding a weekly team meeting so students can ask questions and maintain involvement in the team. Also, any possible recruits who surface during the year can be directed to these meetings for more information.

Managing Alumni

The alumni of a program can be a powerful ally for a forensics program. The alumni of many programs, especially the predominately competitively successful ones, utilize their alums for coaching, funding, and moral support. Also, for many programs their alumni are the first stop gap when a program is in danger of budget cuts or entire elimination. Letters from years worth of alumni whose lives were forever improved because of forensics can be a very persuasive tool.

It is easy for forensic competitors who do not find competitive success to view their experience as unrewarding. Dyer (2007) notes that alumni can be an effective instrument for reminding students about the real benefits of the activity because in an activity where the intense fear of public speaking is almost entirely forgotten and some competitors give twenty

speeches in a day, it is easy to see why the average person is shocked when they find out about forensics. Yet, for the competitors this becomes the norm and they often forget that by simply participating in the activity students gain skills that will place them in the highest percent of public speaking ability. By bringing alumni to team meetings to discuss how forensics has helped them or by using alumni testimonials on team flyers, students can be reminded of the educational value of forensics and new recruits can become new team members. Alumni can also be used as quality judges, additional coaches, and financial sponsors. Directors need to utilize this pool to develop and protect their organization.

Many universities expect forensic directors to participate in fundraising for the team as well as all of their other duties. Hink (2005) offers suggestions for developing an endowment that can keep a team functioning and possibly independent of administrative funding. Hink (2005) argues that directors need to understand the history of their program in order to use that history with alumni. By knowing the history directors will know the stories that keep alumni supporting the team. The internet can be used to develop an alumni website that can explain the current team's successes and what the team needs are for the year. This website can later become a report that will be a record of the history of the team. Also, a website can be used to contact alumni that have been lost. Hink (2005) explains that such a website can be used by alumni to convince other alumni to help with the current team. Hink (2005) also suggests coordinating with the college development office to use development officers who are experienced at cultivating contacts with financially successful alumni. This method can be used to significantly increase an endowment. Finally, Hink (2005) recommends directors develop alumni events such as an era versus era debate or a golf outing that can bring past students and coaches together, reminding them that they are still part of the team.

Involving the Department

Forensic programs are unique in their role as co-curricular competitive activity. Unlike most athletic teams, few departments exist solely for the support of a forensics program. Hence, many directors can feel like the team is funded by but not actually a part of their department. Many forensics teams are located in a communication department but this is not always the case. Some teams are supported by the honors department, political science, business, education or at times by no actual department at all. Regardless, the department can become a valuable asset or the beginning of the end; therefore, it is vital that a director learns how to manage this relationship.

At some colleges and universities forensics is still part of the curricula. Dreher (2007) describes

how students in Argumentation and Debate at Bethel University were required to participate in at least one policy debate tournament and one Lincoln-Douglas debate tournament. Students in the Persuasion course were required to write and memorize a persuasive speech for competition at one or more tournaments. As faculty changed, the requirement was eliminated from the Persuasion class but students in the major are still required to participate in at least one tournament. As the major has grown exponentially Dreher (2007) notes that this has become much more difficult on the department but the original process was effective at involving all students and faculty in forensics. Not every program can participate in such activities but it is important to note that a forensics instructor can have a quantitatively as well as qualitatively large impact on students. Dreher (2007) also argues that directors should suggest that the department reexamine the traditional model of scholarship. Involvement in forensics means that directors are constantly reevaluating their teaching and working to improve, researching new material, synthesizing that material with students and improving the overall quality of the discipline in general. Dreher (2007) advocates for a system where directors are not required to publish or perish when their common activities are equally beneficial. If such a change can occur than directors would have more time to spend on teaching and with their families, resulting in less burnout and a better education for students.

Morris (2007) also describes the incredible time commitment facing a director of forensics but notes that many directors feel as if they are an anomaly. More importantly Morris (2007) points out how few directors of forensics with competitively successful programs have tenure or a PhD. Of twenty-three directors of nationally ranked forensics programs only four had a PhD. and fifteen had an M.A. Only one was tenured and fourteen were on renewable contracts. Morris (2007) suggests that departments and directors need to work together to re-evaluate the tenure process because one possible reason for such a discrepancy may be the lack of time directors have to publish. Also, Morris (2007) notes that some departments do not view forensic publications as equivalent to other publications. Furthermore, eighteen of the twenty-three directors have seriously thought about leaving the activity. With such findings in mind it is vital that directors work to develop a two-way symmetrical relationship with their department faculty in order to communicate these difficulties with departments. Directors should also work to incorporate other faculty into the coaching process in order to save time, gain valuable insight for students, involve the department in the team and demonstrate the workload required of a director of forensics.

Managing a Relationship with Administration

Administrators come from decidedly different backgrounds, many with no experience with forensics. This can be especially challenging when administrators are looking at budget cutbacks and see forensics as unnecessary. At the same time, administrators who are supportive can perpetuate a thriving program. Because of the differences in administrators it is vital for a forensics program to have an open relationship with administration. Only when both sides know what the other wants can the two find mutual benefit.

Paine (2007) notes that many instructors including directors of forensics feel as if they are misunderstood by administration and not given the credit they deserve. However, the same can be said from the perspective of the administrator. Paine (2007) points out that commonly administrators must jump through endless hoops and maneuver through internal politics to scrounge up a small amount of funds in an under funded college. Good relationships between directors and administrators take a great deal of time, patience, and care. Paine (2007) describes two paradigms that must be recognized, the traditional view of the university as the "seat of learning" and the contemporary view of the university as a "business." If administrators come from the "seat of learning" perspective directors should focus on the critical thinking, enhanced performance, and research abilities developed by forensic students. Paine (2007) recommends justifying the forensic program to administrators by pointing out how well it fits with the institution's mission statement. When administrators view the team from a business perspective it is important to point out how many students the university recruits for forensics, the positive press coverage gained by the team, how the university can market the team's success to build departmental reputation and other ways the program fits in from a monetary standpoint.

It is also important to get to know the university administrators from the ground up (Cunningham, 2005). Cunningham (2005) notes that by working up the administrative ladder no one feels left behind and each person feels involved in the process of building a forensics program. When coming in to a program with an already existing relationship with administration Cunningham (2005) suggests ignoring the hearsay from the outgoing director. Making new ground with administrators can impress them and gain allies. Cunningham (2005) also notes, by positively impacting the campus with community involvement and campus programs a new director can quickly gain the attention of administrators. Cunningham (2005) recommends teams develop welcome week activities for students and a performance series. Also, directors should have students volunteer to perform at administrative functions and

host high school tournaments so that administrators can see all of the prospective students that the forensic team can cater to.

It is important to maintain this relationship after it has been built. This can be done by keeping administrators informed about the team's successes and the on campus activities. Cunningham (2005) advises directors to ask a public relations student to volunteer to help with the team. This can often be a member of the team who can make flyers, press releases, or just send an e-mail to administrators. Also, directors should become involved in national organizations. At the University of Indianapolis in 1990 the program was in danger of being cut. A first place finish in Division III sweepstakes at NFA that year was the only national championship in the school's history and the team budget was quadrupled that year (Cunningham, 2005). Finally, Cunningham (2005) suggests doing little things like sending thank you cards to administrators for supporting the team. Through methods such as these, directors can begin the slow process of bonding the institution administration with the forensics team.

Preempting Legal Crisis

After countless hours on van rides, staying together in hotel rooms, and meeting for outside of school activities, many coaches become good friends with students. This can become a unique challenge because legal boundaries separate coaches from simply being fellow competitors.

Frank (2005) explains common legal issues facing directors of forensics as well as ways to keep coaches from crossing legal lines. Frank (2005) points out that directors must first take into account the private or public status of the institution because a public institution affords more rights than a private, where the school by-laws become the rules. Also, coaches need to recognize that when traveling they must act on behalf of and in accordance with their institutional standards and sexual harassment must never be allowed. Even coaches who know that a student on the team is being harassed by another student and do nothing about it are liable for harassment themselves (Frank, 2005). Frank (2005) explains an array of legal concerns when directing a forensics program but most notably argues that directors should always use common sense first. Directors must always have the well being of the students as the most important priority. A coach supplying alcohol to minors, sexually harassing a student or breaking an array of other laws can immediately result in the termination of the coach and possibly the end of the program. Directors should make the ramifications of such actions clear to all coaches and students because directors of forensics must be able to be trusted by their departments, administrations, and most importantly, students. A legal crisis often has no recourse or possibility of management other

than the termination of a coach or banning of a student.

Limitations and Analysis

The literature surrounding the public relations aspects of forensics is clearly limited. Almost all of the literature is contained to the university or college setting and there is little research exploring how forensic programs can or should interact with the communities outside of campus. This includes the interaction between intercollegiate forensics and high school forensics. This element is essential for recruiting purposes and for developing students when they transition from the high school to intercollegiate program. Furthermore, more research needs to be done to determine how programs participate in service activities in the community off-campus. The forensics community must also further research the prospect of marketing to off-campus communities to bring awareness and a larger audience to forensics competitions. There is a nearly endless list of possibilities for future research on the relationship between public relations and forensics and the forensics community should be concerned with this because it is indicative of a lack of forensics research in general. Directors and coaches should use the limited time they have to work on publishing to develop forensics literature rather than other topics. With this analysis and limitations of the current literature surrounding the intersection of public relations and forensics in mind, the following research questions are asked in order to prompt future research.

- RQ 1: What are effective ways that directors of forensics can manage their time in order to further study the role of public relations in forensics?
- RQ 2: Should the forensic community attempt to market forensics to an audience outside of the forensic community? If so, what is the best way to market to this audience?
- RQ 3: How can intercollegiate forensics strengthen the relationships between high school and intercollegiate forensics programs?
- RQ 4: How can the forensic community work together to defend programs that are in danger of being cut by departments or administrations?

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