

Facilitating Dual Service Programs Imperatives for the Future of Forensics

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I do not recall the last time I was at any sort of gathering of directors of forensics for any length of time when the discussion did not at some point turn to the issue of program mortality. Everyone has a story to tell of a program that recently ended, or is at risk of doing so. The most difficult moment in my own forensic career came only three years ago, when secret political maneuverings by a couple of self-aggrandizing administrators (who have since flown from their positions) put an end to a forensics program that was over 100 years old and had produced an average of two national champions over the previous twenty of those years. My story is not unusual; Derryberry (1991, p. 19) cited similar concerns as he reviews the literature and argues that forensic programs are always at the risk of the budget pen. In the current economy, I am convinced that only a few programs—those fortunate enough to be funded by major endowments or alumni/donor agreements—are more than one new administrator away from elimination. In an activity with so many clear educational benefits that I am not even going to bother to review the pertinent literature, it is astonishing to me that this situation endures. Having won every argument made to save my previous program, refuting every single false claim made by the administration for the “unfortunate necessity” of its elimination and even winning the battle in the local press, I am convinced that we can no longer rely on the argumentation techniques of presenting our evidence and assuming a rational audience. We won the popular vote of the community in my situation; but the two administrators at the foot of the program’s elimination were in no mood for rationality. Shrewd deal-making and power-playing won the day, and forensics lost. Instead, I will argue in this paper that we need to embrace some of the movements in contemporary education and link forensics to them. Forensics can win these battles just as successfully as it can demonstrate its educational benefits, and by doing so, will have a chance to survive. I will also argue that the best way to reach this goal is to support the dual purpose, or “full-service,” forensics program. I will begin by defining what I mean by a dual purpose program. Then, I’ll look at the justifications, both historical and potential, of such a program. Finally, and in the spirit of this developmental conference, I will suggest some possible ways to encourage dual purpose programs.

Dual purpose (and I will use the term “full-service” interchangeably) forensics programs are most commonly described as “emphasizing participation in numerous individual events along with one or more types of debate competition” (Derryberry, p. 21). I would add one factor to the definition: the program must exist under the guidance of a single director of forensics or be coordinated by a department chair or similar official who sees the program as a whole. I have worked in programs where the debate program and individual events program were entirely separate, with different directors, different budgets, and students who never met one another. This is not a dual purpose program; it is two programs. Interestingly, the debate side of that particular pair of programs no longer exists. While I know of several institutions where separate debate and individual event programs operate, I know of very few where both flourish. I know of more where even outstanding previous support for each of the separate programs has now diminished to the point that one is in danger. Fortunately, today offers more opportunities than ever to engage the full-service program concept. A program no longer needs to work with individual events at the same time they compete in policy debate over a year-long topic. Parliamentary debate offers an alternative that is extremely friendly to many individual event students. National Forensic Association Lincoln-Douglas debate is also available. With no slight to that activity intended, I will argue in this paper to define dual purpose programs as offering individual events with a type of *team* debate. My sole rationale is that such a definition will offer more opportunities to more students, and more opportunities for forensic programs to make the type of arguments I am suggesting to prevent program attrition.

The benefits of dual purpose forensics programs have historically been linked to the “more is better” breadth of education philosophy. In a previous publication, I have pointed out the resource tensions and pedagogical decisions that lie within such a philosophy (West, “Breadth,” 1997). In that article, I explained my own educational preferences for the full-service program, but did not condemn those directors who made decisions to specialize in either debate or individual events based on their own expertise or their evaluation of available resources. I will not condemn those choices in this paper; however, I do believe that those programs risk extinction in an

era of “enrollment management” and “fiscal responsibility.” Much of the remaining scholarly discussion of dual purpose programs has dealt with the logistical issues that confront directors. Managing resources (West, “Breadth”) and strategies to build team unity (West, “Cohesion,” 2000) are among the most common subjects discussed.

In this paper, however, I want to concentrate on justifications for dual purpose programs that I believe make even stronger arguments for forensics in general. The first of these arguments is that of academic rigor. All of us have made arguments for the educational value of forensics. Wood and Rowland-Morin (1989, p. 81) list more than thirteen studies that document benefits of forensics, including communication skills, critical thinking, and pre-professional training. Kuster (2002, p. 50) argues that educational value is essential to protecting programs during times of budget cuts, and takes individual events to task for failing to provide as strong an argument as possible for grounding itself in theory rather than competition conventions. Indeed, most of the articles cited in Wood and Rowland-Morin’s review pertain to academic debate—primarily team policy debate. But individual events have similar arguments to make; our public speaking events are ostensibly laboratory extensions of the classroom, and oral interpretation is designed to explore the human condition through rigorous analysis of written texts. We need to make those arguments for academic rigor. Another panel at this developmental conference is discussing ethical issues in individual events; I contend that overcoming the influence of convention is one of those ethical issues. Only through our pedagogy can we claim the academic accomplishment that our peers in other departments claim for their own existence. Other scholarship has suggested that we make more use of tournaments themselves as research laboratories (Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986, p. 13); dual service programs will have more to study and more benefits to offer. I think many would be interested in discovering, for instance, whether parliamentary debaters enjoy the same increased skills in critical thinking that have long been associated with policy debate. What about extemporaneous speakers? Those who enter impromptu speaking? We need to look for links. I will revisit the “research” idea later in this paper. For now, I simply ask any doubters to question tenure track faculty; I believe most will attest to the fact that “academic rigor” is now inextricably linked to research. Forensics cannot escape this linkage, nor does it need to. Dual service programs give us more opportunities to do so.

Another potential area of argument for forensics, strengthened by full-service concepts, is to link forensics to the college or university’s “core curriculum.” One of the significant movements in contemporary higher education is the shift from “smorgas-

bord” menu-driven general education programs to the idea of a core curriculum (Inderbitzin & Storrs, 2008, p. 48). Interdisciplinary courses, or departmental courses that appeal to a variety of disciplines, link themselves to a list of learning goals the institution has deemed important to all its graduates. I have been personally involved with this movement, assisting our department chair in linking our department’s basic public speaking course to Eastern Illinois University’s then-new core curriculum as far back as the 1980’s. Individual events should happily join with debate to establish itself within the core curriculum. “Critical thinking,” clearly supported by research in debate, and individual event specialties such as communication competence (Jensen & Jensen, 2006), and appreciation of literature, should be easy to link. We should also be able to make the interdisciplinary nature of our activity work to our advantage; long gone are the days when more than 90% of our forensics students majored in speech education, theater, or pre-law.

The core curriculum has been used as a tool to link to another movement which I also believe holds great potential for the dual purpose forensic program—the call for accountability and assessment. Some institutions, for instance, have used the core curriculum as a “first step” toward accountability (Jordan-Fleming, Klabunde, & Zane, 2005, p. 25). Nelson (2007, p. 24) has noted that the call for instructional accountability in higher education is increasing and at its highest levels ever. Nonetheless, there is still controversy; one scholar argues that higher education accountability has been a “myth,” with institutions manipulating definitions and public relations to avoid actual assessment (Carey, 2007). But the assessment issue is here to stay, and it should be. As educators, we need to know if what we are doing is working. Are we teaching what we say we are teaching? I think the full-service forensic program gives us a marvelous opportunity to put our profession at the forefront of the movement. When I interviewed for my current job, the committee discussion turned to what I believed to be among the values of a forensics program. When I listed critical thinking among those benefits, one member of the committee challenged me. His argument was that he taught critical thinking in all of his classes, and believed that other faculty in every department did so as well. As tactfully as possible, I assured him that I believed he taught critical thinking; however, I also noted that we are in an age of accountability and assessment, and we need to be able to prove that we are teaching what we think we are teaching. I have in my personal collection over a dozen different studies, including my own dissertation, that make a strong empirical case for forensics and its ability to produce quantifiable results in critical thinking. My point is that we in forensics can not only say we are teaching certain concepts—we can prove it. Again,

we should further our research, but I believe we can use our links to core curricular components and key issues in education in a way that meets assessment demands much better than other departments who are still in the “well, our students are doing well in our courses” mode of evaluation. I am not alone in this belief; Littlefield (2006) calls for balancing the competitive and educational aspects of our activity to emphasize and enhance forensics’ epistemic function to meet calls for accountability. McMillan and Todd-Mancillas (1991, p. 1) specifically call for working with individual events to make a clearer link between accountability and program support. Our students accomplish great things; many of our speeches and debates create new knowledge. I love to tell colleagues in my department and others stories of my first-year student who discovered the details of stem-cell research in an informative speech long before President Bush thought to address the issue. Our public speakers, properly taught, can create new ideas and new solutions for myriad social problems. Debate, of course, is built for this purpose. Oral interpretation, properly taught, should give us new insights into the human condition. Again, the only thing we lack is more research proving these outcomes. I will propose solutions to this problem below.

Finally, I think forensics, and particularly individual events, has done less than it could to publicize and use its advantages in linking to the movement for diversity and inclusion in higher education. Here, individual events may have some advantages over debate. Chemerinsky (2001, p. 63) notes that policy debate has historically been a white male activity. Since Chemerinsky debated (in the 1970’s) much progress has been made. Women constitute a much larger portion of the debate community, and there are major minority race and ethnicity voices among coaches and competitors. Initiatives such as urban debate leagues, the Becky Gallentine Award for women in debate, and a general awakening of consciousness continue to achieve progress. Individual events, in my experience, provide enhanced opportunities for inclusion. Siegel (2006, p. 465) notes that the diversity movement is expanding to link colleges and universities with business and professional constituencies. Any forensic coach with a few years of experience probably has a “brag list” of former students and what they are doing in their careers. Those of us who have been involved with forensics for a long time could likely make strong arguments for the diversity of our students in these successful occupations. Jensen and Jensen (2006, p. 24) support the epistemic function of forensics as a way of increasing intercultural awareness in our students. The full-service team concept is an excellent way of achieving heightened interaction between vastly different types of students.

If dual programs give us additional opportunities to link to major educational movements which administrators embrace, we should do what we can to encourage such programs. One way to do this is to use competition incentives to increase the visibility of the full-service program. Derryberry (1991, p. 19) mentions Dr. Seth Hawkins’ *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results* publication. As I remember it, this was a pre-internet era print attempt to compile tournament results and rank programs based on their year-long results. Dual purpose programs were ranked, and some used those rankings as appeals for continued administrative support. The advent of internet and e-line based data accumulation would make it easy for a joint debate-individual events project to revive such a recognition. Of course, there would be details to work out, and I would suggest different levels of award status for programs of different size or resources, something we already do to some degree with different levels of team awards in NFA and Novice Nationals. We would have to decide how much weight we give to each area, how many tournaments count, what type of tournaments count more (or less) than others, etc. But if we are really the critical thinkers we claim to be, this ought to be possible. There are other competitive incentives that can be used. Research awards could be used to link individual event scripts with case briefs from debate co-workers. Perhaps programs could use the internet more effectively through websites to display what we do. I believe we need a major initiative to involve the media in providing more coverage for our activity; we must challenge journalists rather than begging them.

Second, we can make tournament formatting and scheduling more conducive to the dual purpose program. I remember one of my last years as a CEDA debate coach, sitting in the coaches’ business meeting at the national tournament. The national executive committee of CEDA had just decided to move the date of CEDA’s next national championship tournament and place it squarely upon the date of the AFA-NIET (a date which had been on the calendar for quite some time). My objection as the sole coach of a program devoted to full-service was met with sarcasm by one of CEDA’s national officers, stating that “those people will just have to make a choice, won’t they?” I was, for a while, ashamed of my profession in that it would elect to leadership persons with such a callous attitude toward forensics students. But I have come to realize that this was one person’s view. There is now a web-published “national tournament calendar.” While CEDA broke this calendar that year, I hope that the leaders of the national organizations could remain in communication with one another to avoid such unfortunate overlaps in the future. In regular season tournaments, “swing” tournaments provide an opportunity to combine two individual events tournaments and one

parliamentary debate tournament for both students and programs (policy debate's time limits make it virtually impossible for a student to do both, but programs could participate in each). Swing tournaments should be viewed with caution; there are wellness implications. But if one of the individual events tournaments is held on either the day before or the day after, programs can make a choice if they need to do so. I also call for rethinking the trend toward running parliamentary debate all the way through to finals prior to the joint IE/Debate awards assembly. While many would argue that this tactic enhances the dual service program, it can also serve to their detriment. Again, wellness and safety are at issue. A program that has completed its individual events competition and been eliminated from parliamentary debate must often wait hours—even most of a day—before students can travel home. This puts tired coaches and students driving vehicles long distances, often late at night. An earlier awards assembly after debate preliminary rounds, or perhaps the first out round, have been completed could accomplish dual program recognition and cohesion goals. Dozens of speaker awards and first-round elimination awards could accompany the individual event awards for such recognition. Regional coordinators of individual event and debate organizations should maintain contact with one another to, as much as possible, assure that debate tournaments and individual event tournaments spread out along the schedule to facilitate travel by full-service programs.

National organizations might consider using a program accreditation process to recognize and reward full-service programs. Beyond the public relations benefits of competitive rankings, accreditation as a program could provide further evidence directors of forensics might use in making arguments for program funding or continuance. No hierarchy need be established to insult directors who continue to choose one-dimensional forensics programs; they can receive a different accreditation. But some professional standards sort impetus might help us link toward the core curriculum and accountability movements.

Finally, we should encourage programs to use cyberspace to increase the intercultural interaction made possible by the dual purpose program. Schwartz-DuPre (2006) writes about the use of cyber communities to enhance the benefits of debate for women. Similar use could overcome the geographic obstacles of communication for students in dual purpose programs. Available instruments such as Facebook or YouTube could serve goals of team cohesion and mutual understanding.

These solutions are rudimentary ideas that need much “development”—not necessarily a bad thing at a “developmental conference.” I don't want to overclaim their possibilities. I sincerely doubt that anything could have prevented the destruction of my

former program I mentioned in the beginning of this essay. That action was taken in secret, made use of falsified data, and was couched in outright dishonesty. Forensics money was taken for pet projects designed to bolster the resume of an administrator seeking . million public relations machine to overwhelm truth. But for most of us, I believe our survival is a matter of finding arguments administrators will accept. Movements such as academic rigor, core curriculum, accountability, and diversity give us new opportunities, and I believe the dual purpose, full-service program is best equipped to undertake those efforts.

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