

*Abstract: Among the most significant changes in the evolution of forensic activities has been the growth of specialized participation, with students, educators, and programs focusing on debate or individual events. The manifestations of this specialization are seen in the decreasing number of tournaments offering opportunities for students to compete in both categories of competition. While some preservation of broad-based participation is seen with the growing popularity of parliamentary formats, the move away from broad-based participation is clear. This trend is argued to be alarming due to its negative impact on forensics pedagogy, the training of forensics educators, and the forensics laboratory. Suggestions for compromise are offered.*

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY?  
THE IMPACT OF SPECIALIZED TOURNAMENTS  
ON FORENSICS PEDAGOGY, FORENSICS PROFESSIONALS,  
AND THE FORENSICS LABORATORY**

**Scott Jensen**  
Director of Forensics  
Webster University, St. Louis, MO

By some accounts collegiate forensics has never been stronger. Countless debate formats and individual events are available to the forensic student. The activity has more organizations and national tournaments than Willy Wonka has chocolate. Never before have so many choices been available to the forensic student and educator. As positive as this may appear, I argue that this proliferation of forensic alternatives is leading our activity down a path of disunion that should be alarming to those concerned with the pedagogical value of forensics. The time has come for members of our activity to dismiss competitive specialization and embrace the diversity, cooperativeness, and educational richness that is associated with a broad-based forensic laboratory. The place to begin this reversal in trends is the forensic tournament.

I first outline the situation as it exists today and the problems that it creates. Alternatives will be suggested that allow all members of the forensic community the freedom to choose without perpetuating an environment of focus.

**The Situation**

It has become increasingly difficult for forensic programs and their students and professional members to actively embrace both individual events and debate. The notion of debate has changed significantly in recent years, growing into a competitive arena that offers research-oriented debate (in both team and individual formats) through several organizations, as well as parliamentary debate--a format that encourages a blend of critical thinking and effective presentational skills. Meanwhile, at least 11 individual events are available to competitors through two national organizations and several regional and state groups. Added to these opportunities are three honorary fraternities with which programs and their members can affiliate.

Such range in choice makes it problematic for programs that wish to compete in a breadth of forensic events. Preston (1997), in outlining competitive options available to programs, writes, "without comprehensive staff and budget resources, having a forensics program to encompass all types mentioned in this article would be illusory and in some instances pedagogically contradictory" (p. 274). Earlier in this decade, most programs reported that they sought to provide broad-based opportunities for their students (Jensen, 1993). The climate now seems to have changed. Bartanen (1996), in perhaps the most comprehensive assessment of forensics to date, reports several alarming survey results. When asking respondents questions regarding diversity, mean scores consistently revealed feelings that diversity in participation was discouraged in terms of teaching, communication styles, and argument. Mean scores also revealed that respondents view forensics as too factionalized, and that the forensic community is doing too little to attract diverse student participation, educators, and judging pools.

A review of the 1997 Intercollegiate Tournament Calendar revealed that a majority (113) of the 225 tournaments listed offer only one category of forensic events (debate, individual events, or student congress). Furthermore,

most tournaments that offer both debate and individual events include only parliamentary and/or Lincoln-Douglas formats (60, compared with seven that offer team policy and individual events). Only 43 tournaments advertise opportunities for multiple debate formats (including team policy) and individual events (Hefling, 1997). These numbers are further misleading because many of the tournaments that allow team policy debate and individual events are administered within a schedule that precludes students from competing in both individual events and debate. While some opportunities for broad-based programs do exist, these tournaments are hosted in several different regions of the country, making it unlikely that a broad-based program can attend more than the few that may (or may not) be in its region. Clearly, it is becoming extremely difficult for programs to enter students in a variety of forensic events during one weekend.

Exacerbating the present ills within our activity is the number of national, regional, and state organizations that are vying for memberships. As programs affiliate with these organizations, they purchase opportunities to participate in post-season tournaments. With the exception of honorary fraternities, forensic organizations focus on individual events, or single forms of debate. As programs join these groups they often push themselves into a position of focus, unless their resources allow them to compete in a variety of national tournaments and event formats. More and more, members of the community are recognizing winners of the specialized national tournaments as the "true" national champions, creating a perception that the fraternal tournaments are less competitive or illegitimate as national events.

Finally, there is the program that offers both debate and individual events to its students, but through independent squads. These schools sponsor individual event and debate squads, sometimes with independent budgets, but almost always with separate student memberships. While the school embraces the breadth of our activity, it frequently is not structurally possible for students to benefit from a broad range of forensic participation. Further, the separation within the program may send the message that focus is more sound than breadth, furthering support for specialization in the mind of its participants.

## The Problem

The move of collegiate forensics toward increased specialization has been documented. What merits further discussion are the problems that stem from such focus. Parson (1984) noted at the Second Developmental Conference on Forensics:

The major problem facing American forensics in 1984 is increased fragmentation . . . Someone once remarked that where you will find four Lutherans gathered together you will find four denominations of Lutherans. It is as if there is more strength in diversity than in unity, and the smaller the unit, the more tendency to split up. Besieged by outside forces--by inattentive administrators, inadequate budgets, unmanageable topics--the problem in American forensics is compounded by increased fragmentation and the desire to show that one's particular area of specialization is better, more important, or more substantial than other areas . . . Forensics is, indeed, a House Divided; how long it stands depends to large measure on how long it remains divided (p. 47).

This warning, now 13 years in the past, is more appropriate than ever in 1997. While the overriding concern created by specialization is the very survival of forensics, this paper considers four more specific problems.

## Student Specialization

With fewer opportunities available for students wishing to cross-over between debate and individual events, more specialized forensic students are certain to be the result of our present trends. Each forensic event has its own merit. While individual events teach a variety of ways to communicate, debate challenges students to think critically and defend positions. While parliamentary debate focuses on quick thinking and a blend of effective argument formation and communication, team policy debate can contribute greatly to research abilities and defending ideas through cross examination. Our laboratory can reach its greatest potential of contributing to its participants' growth when it includes a breadth of opportunities and recognition that each activity provides its own unique benefits (see, for

example, Adamo, 1995; Treadaway, 1995). When our students specialize this potential is lost. Derryberry (1991) argues that "students gain more from forensic involvement if their preparation is varied and free of narrow restrictions" (p. 170).

### **Educator Specialization**

As our students become more specialized, so too do our future forensic educators through a cyclical dynamic. In short--as our students graduate to positions as forensic educators they bring their specialization with them into their coaching and teaching. As their programs reflect specialization, new generations of focused students further ingrain the environment of specialization. Jensen (1996), in discussing trends in forensics, argues that "when these students [specialized] pursue forensic positions, they bring with them a limited framework of experiences that they will use to guide them as professional educators" (p. 3).

Bartanen (1996), in his textbook on directing forensics, touches on his view of the future training of forensic educators. Regarding high school teachers, he notes that "they may feel comfortable teaching public speaking but unqualified to teach debate" (p. 7). His conclusion, in light of present trends including specialization, is that "this does not bode well for the long-term health of the activity at either the high school or college level" (p. 7).

### **Programs are Forced into a Choice**

Most forensic programs survive through their competitive ventures at tournaments. There is no doubt that, with the breakdown of tournaments offering only individual events, only debate, or both individual events and debate, programs are having more difficulty selecting tournaments at which all of their students can participate. As a person who has recently developed travel schedules for two programs in different parts of the United States, I can attest to the difficulty in finding tournaments at which my individual events, parliamentary, and CEDA/NDT students can compete. If my experience is representative, two conclusions can be drawn. First, few programs try to compete in the broad range of forensic events previously listed. Second, programs that do compete in a range of events are forced to

travel an incredibly diversified schedule or frequently split their squads on weekends. Either of these manifestations result in the same problem: resources are stretched beyond their capacity.

Certainly some programs opt for an individual events or debate focus for any one of a number of reasons. While these choices have both benefits and drawbacks, the more pressing issue is the program that focuses not out of choice but out of budgetary necessity. This result is not fair to the student who desires to experience a breadth of forensic exposure, nor to the educator who desires to teach a breadth of forensic exposure. I fear that such forced choices are or will soon become the norm as specialization grows.

### **Individual Events and Debate as Competitors**

As an educator who is active in both individual events and debate, I experience the best and worst of both worlds. I often hear criticism of each activity from participants in the other. Whether it is an individual event student or coach who insults a CEDA/NDT debater, a CEDA/NDT debater who criticizes an individual event or its participants, or someone who minimizes the lack of intensity they perceive to accompany parliamentary debate, it seems that an atmosphere of competitiveness between events is growing.

Alexander (1997) notes that separating individual event and debate activities encourages "the 'outsider' perspective that these are two disparate activities" (p. 278). He adds that such a perspective "contradicts how we define and defend what we do and why we do it" (p. 279). The ultimate danger in this separation is what Alexander calls borders of distinction:

This formal separation of the activities feeds into a longstanding Western tradition of creating oppositional pairs. Though not intrinsically combative, oppositional categorization inevitably lends itself to distention: black/white, private/public, real/imagined, fact/fiction, debate/I.E. These borders of distinction demand separation. The insidious nature of this division results in derision; a derision of the other that questions form and functions (e.g., interpretative stance vs. debate delivery; I.E. judge vs. debate).

The current trend creates gaps, the basis of difference, and prioritization of focus (p. 279). That way, schools that promote diversity are not arbitrarily penalized by having perhaps some of their best entries disqualified for no reason before a tournament begins (p. 8).

Such competitiveness is probably not a surprise, given that increasingly these events have fewer participants that cross into other events. It is common for the majority of individuals at tournaments to be participants in either individual events or debate. At awards assemblies I see individual event participants stand for pentathlon winners and debate participants stand for top speakers. Not long ago it seems that everyone in an awards ceremony would stand to honor the accomplishments of students and programs, regardless of event. Such competitiveness will inevitably further the specialization and factionalization that is already becoming commonplace in the forensic community.

### **Solutions?**

This paper argues that steps should be taken to endorse and provide opportunities that further breadth in the forensic community. Present trends suggest that this may in fact be the minority view. West (1997), a director of a broad-based program, provides a rationale for his choice:

I cannot justify a thesis that in-depth teaching of critical thinking skills is of more "value" to our society than learning about the human condition through performance and analysis of texts. Nor can I justify a claim that the delivery skills inherent in some platform public speaking events is of greater good than the depth of analysis available through policy debate. I also believe that different students have different needs and interests, and that my job happens to be (by my own choice) to meet as many of those needs as possible (p. 263).

While programs and their administrators must ultimately choose their response to forensic's specialization, tournament directors can aid in providing options that make it possible for participants desiring breadth to experience a variety of forensic opportunities. Preston (1992), in outlining ethical considerations when managing tournaments, argued that tournaments should be scheduled in a way such that debaters are not limited in terms of

### **Design Tournament Schedules to Allow Cross-Over**

Much has been said and written about how to administer tournaments in a manner that is both humane and efficient, while being responsive to the needs and desires of the forensic community. Some tournament directors' answer to the ideal tournament schedule has been to either offer only debate or individual events, or separate some debate formats from individual events.

While I am sympathetic with the call to reduce the average tournament burdens, I fear that the commonly accepted answer has been to disregard certain forensic opportunities. It appears that the greatest tension exists between CEDA/NDT debate and other factions of the forensic community. The rarest of tournaments in this year's AFA calendar is the one that offers both CEDA/NDT and individual events. Tournament managers can be influential in welcoming the programs and their participants who choose to participate in debate (any format) and individual events by allowing such range of participation at their tournaments.

First, tournament directors can experiment with schedules that allow maximum cross-over between debate and individual events. Such a schedule almost certainly must take place in a long two days or into a partial third day. When the availability of rooms and critics allow, a two-flight individual event tournament makes it easier to do things in two days, although an early start on the first day is essential.

Second, tournament directors can reserve one or two flights of individual events for cross-over from debate. While some individual events would still not be available to debaters, there would remain some opportunity to experience the value of broad-based participation.

Third, tournaments can capitalize on the increasingly popular individual event swing. Some swings now feature one tournament that includes both debate and individual events, while the second tournament offers just individual

events. Within this format the tournament offering both categories of events can run them concurrently and still offer debaters exposure to individual events in the second tournament.

The fourth suggestion for tournament scheduling seems to be growing in popularity. Tournament directors can allow participants in some debate formats to also participate in individual events. While this makes sense, given the length of time it takes to complete a Lincoln-Douglas or parliamentary debate round, it also severs CEDA/NDT debaters from the remaining factions of the forensic community. Nevertheless, it is a better alternative than not allowing students any debate or individual event cross-over.

### **Forensic Issue Forums**

While allowing a breadth of competitive opportunities at tournaments is the best solution to specialization, another alternative is to provide forensic forums that focus on issues critical to the entire forensic community. Creating an arena that centers around concerns that unite participants is a way of reducing feelings of competitiveness that increasingly characterize the tournament atmosphere. Forums might be scheduled before awards assemblies or during meal breaks. They can focus on issues ranging from diversity in forensics to graduate and career opportunities for forensic students.

### **Expand Critic Pools**

I don't know of many tournaments that turn critics away. I also don't know of a better way to expose educators to new events than to assign them as critics in those events. While several debate and individual event critics may likely refuse the "opportunity" to judge events in which they have not entered students, such exposure can do wonders to open eyes and build respect. My experiences with placing debate coaches in individual events or individual event coaches in a debate round have almost always been positive. Debaters will utilize their skills in adaptation for their critic. Individual event students will benefit from insights they may not have seen on past ballots. No doubt there will always be the debate and individual participants who view this

cross-over as negative. Still, the potential gains to be made from such judge assignments are worth the effort.

### **Celebrate Our Differences**

The final suggestion is one that may be the most difficult to achieve. It may also be the most important step. We must find ways to celebrate the diversity that continues to grow in our community. Alexander (1997) writes "the border between individual events and debate infuses each with alternate ways of knowing and discussing the other. It offers participants a way of understanding both, realizing the potency of logic and the power of performance" (p. 281).

I recently discussed the issue of specialization with a CEDA/NDT colleague who coaches debaters in a competitively successful program that separates its individual event and debate activities. She clearly prefers to be involved with team policy debate. However, she also has training in individual events, respects the time and effort that is necessary to excel in individual events, and praises programs that opt to participate in a variety of events. This attitude of respect for differences can help to maintain bridges between individual events and debate.

While students will make their own ideological choices with regards to forensic opportunities, they can be influenced by their educators. McGee and Simerly (1997) suggest "compassionate specialization," wherein program directors find ways for students to compete in areas outside of a specialized program's events. Such a philosophy can further the notion of inclusion within an environment that might otherwise appear unaccepting of certain forensic opportunities. Additionally, insisting on courtesy toward those who participate in events different from your program, praising student accomplishments across the forensic spectrum, and even allowing opportunities to experience new forensic events can communicate the message that room exists for all under the forensic tent.

### **Conclusion**

The trend toward specialization in the forensic community is difficult to

ignore. While a number of reasons exist for this special developmental conference on individual events, there are reasons to fear such a trend. Our activity is a laboratory, with the tournament arena serving as a center for much of what is practiced. It follows logically that answers to our community's problems can often be found in the tournament. Adjusting our tournaments so as to allow more broad-based participation and interaction among participants from all forensic events can help our community to realize its potential to teach diverse skills and expose forensic participants to a wide array of communication and argument styles.

Conferences such as this individual events developmental conference are important. But even with the attention it is giving to Lincoln-Douglas and parliamentary debate, its focus is individual events. Our community has much to celebrate, not the least of which is its diverse opportunities. However, we must also be cognizant of the potential expanded choice has to create division. It has been 13 years since a national developmental conference on forensics has been held. With the exception of the bi-annual Pi Kappa Delta developmental conferences that began in 1989, our only opportunity to discuss problems of factionalization have been at bi-annual argumentation conferences, individual event developmental conferences, or on panels at professional meetings. As concerned educators, we must see beyond our "specialty" and look toward the richness of an activity that can and should unite students and educators in a common bond.

### Works Cited

Adamo, G. L. (1995). Reform vs. abandonment: Supplemental activities as ways to maintain the integrity of debate. In S. L. Jensen (Ed.), Proceedings From the Pi Kappa Delta Developmental Conference. Lake Charles, LA: Pi Kappa Delta, 110-117.

Alexander, B. (1997). Border crossing or forging gaps?: Pragmatic tensions between supporting individual events and debate. The Southern Journal of Forensics, 1, 276-281.

Bartanen, M. D. (1996). A preliminary assessment of the professional climate of forensic education, part 2. The Forensic, 882, 1-15.

Bartanen, M. D. (1996). Teaching and Directing Forensics. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.

Derryberry, B. R. (1991). Forensic preparations and the undergraduate curriculum: Options and strategies for development. In S. Roden, (Ed.). Proceedings to the 1991 Professional Development Conference. Conway, AR: Pi Kappa Delta, 161-174.

Hefling, J. (1997). Intercollegiate tournament calendar. AFA Newsletter, 19, 18-45.

Jensen, S. L. (1993). A survey analysis of regional and national programs and competitive trends in collegiate forensics. The Forensic, 78, 1-10.

Jensen, S. (1996, November). Unifying research and teaching: Pedagogy for the transition from forensics competition to education. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Diego, CA.

McGee, B. R. & Simerly, G. (1997). On compassionate specialization. The Southern Journal of Forensics, 1, 282-285.

Parson, D., (Ed.). (1984). American Forensics in Perspective. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Preston, C. T., Jr. (1992, November). Ethical practices and choices in tournament operations. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Preston, C. T., Jr. (1997). Principles, participation, and particulars: Choosing activities for forensics programs. The Southern Journal of Forensics, 1, 267-275.

Treadaway, G. (1995). A pedagogical rationale for re-establishing complimentary debate and individual events programs. In S. L. Jensen (Ed.). Proceedings From the Pi Kappa Delta Developmental Conference. Lake Charles, LA: Pi Kappa Delta, 17-24.

West, T. L. (1997). Breadth vs. depth: The tension between debate and individual events in intercollegiate forensics competition. The Southern Journal of Forensics, 1, 261-266.