

Helping the Inexperienced Director

Alice J. Jaswal, Ph.D.
Nebraska Wesleyan University

The formation of a new Individual Events program is an event welcomed by the forensics community for both philosophical and pragmatic reasons. Philosophically, there is a sense of reaffirmation of the worth of current I.E. programs and a sense of satisfaction that other students will have the opportunity to experience the benefits we believe such programs offer. From a pragmatic point of view, new programs in our geographical area can mean larger numbers of entries -- which may translate into more "legs" for those of us whose students need them. Also, perhaps at some later date, the new program may host a tournament -- which might help our travel schedules.

Ideally, this new program would come into existence with the total support of the administration of the college or university and a recognition for the need for munificent funding and for faculty with experience and training necessary to develop and run a quality I.E. program. Unfortunately, my experience with new or "revitalized" programs in my area of the country over the last twenty some years has led me to believe that this is not always the case. Sometimes, when urged by students who have had positive I.E. experiences in high school, or perhaps by alums who testify to the importance of a now-discontinued I.E. program, administrators may decide that they will give an I.E. program a try. However, they may feel unwilling or unable to commit much in terms of money and unwilling to hire an additional faculty member to be responsible for the program. Consequently, the person who teaches speech, or perhaps the person who teaches oral interp. or

perhaps the person who directs the plays is drafted -- or "made an offer s/he can't refuse."

Some people may argue that, unless the institution can provide adequate funding and experienced staffing, there should be no program. I imagine we all know of at least one prospective program which never really got off the ground because the "director" did not know what needed to be done and was unwilling to dedicate the tremendous amount of time and energy needed to learn about I.E. and then to run the program. However, I would also imagine that most of us can think of at least one or two programs in our area which started under less than auspicious circumstances and have managed to do reasonably well in terms of student involvement and success.

The programs I am aware of that fit into this latter category have been fortunate in having directors who, though their previous knowledge and experience in the wonderful world of forensics may have been extremely limited or even nonexistent, were willing to go far beyond "the call of duty" to learn about it. I believe those of us with established programs have an obligation to do whatever we can to help these fledgling directors. In point of fact, I would be willing to bet that most of us already do. What I would like to do in this presentation is to encourage thought/discussion about the sorts of things we need to do on an individual basis, and then raise the issue of what, if anything, the national organizations concerned with I.E. might do to help.

This paper is not a research project or an experimental study. It is based on my own experiences, on discussions with I.E. directors who felt they lacked adequate training, and on discussions with "seasoned" directors who have aided new directors and new programs.

The novice directors with whom I visited were unanimous in their choice of the most important thing they felt they needed, and that was an experienced

director who would be willing to serve as a mentor. Although there are probably several definitions of this term, in this context it seems to mean a person who will be available and willing to answer any and all questions relating to getting the I.E. program started, running it, publicizing it and anything else. Regardless of what the novice director has been able to read about I.E., there are always going to be some things which are confusing and need to be explained -- and sometimes explained and explained again. Perhaps equally as important in the long run is to make sure the new coaches have the opportunity to meet other coaches in the area and are made to feel welcome. One would expect that any new coach would be welcomed, but the novice coach is particularly in need of an encouraging reception. Hopefully, state organizations would make a special effort to integrate the new person into their planning meetings and to try to explain things which might be unique to the state or to the area.

Some of us teach courses on how to direct the high school forensics program. Often, we have handouts on coaching strategies for different events and lists of potential interp selections and speech topics. Obviously, not everything suitable for high school will be suitable on the college level, but at least there would be some concrete specifics to work from.

The new director should try to take a graduate or even an undergraduate course in directing the forensics program if at all possible. If it is not feasible, then s/he might consider attending a high school institute in the area. This would provide an opportunity to observe how coaches work with students and would also provide an opportunity to meet high school students who might be "recruitable" at a later date.

The rookie director may face a formidable task in trying to get students involved if the program is new or has been comatose for some time. The people I have visited with claimed they were most successful when they recruited out of

their own classes. People who do well on the first speech in the basic speech course may be bribed or blackmailed into polishing that speech and trying it at a tournament. Aspiring actors/actresses who audition for a play may be intrigued with the possibility of doing dramatic interpretation or a dramatic duo. Other teachers can be helpful in locating prospects. Some colleges have detailed activity information on incoming freshmen which might provide a list of names of people to contact about the program and what it has to offer. College newspapers are often looking for items relating to campus activities and frequently will provide a news story about the new program in an early issue. Many of us use an "interest night" to attract new participants and some suggestions as to what has worked well for us might provide the new person with ideas they can adopt or modify.

Very early on, the new director needs to learn what tournaments are available so that a tentative schedule may be developed. Some potential participants are very interested in knowing where the team will be going -- especially if they like to travel and a couple of tournaments are offered in interesting places. The AFA schedule is not likely to be available to anyone except current coaches -- so we need to be certain we share this with the new person. Often, we can also provide guidance in terms of the relative difficulty of the tournaments and perhaps advise which tournaments should be top priority ones if, as is often the case, funding is limited and only a few tournaments will be possible the first year.

General advice relating to money matters may be helpful. Things we take for granted like entry fees, judging ratio and judging fees, car/van rentals and meal allowances sometimes need explanation. The different national tournaments and their qualification procedures should be discussed at the beginning of the forensics season. Some administrations place a great deal of importance on national tournament participation, regardless of the qualification procedures.

The beginning director may wish to concentrate on only a few events. Those of us who are "experienced" need to make sure the rules for the different events are fully understood. Video tapes might be suggested. We might offer some of our more successful competitors as "demonstrators" and encourage them to share their experiences/perceptions of their events. Not only would this be helpful for those involved in the new program, it is also a positive experience for our students. We might invite the new director to observe some practice sessions as we work with our beginning students.

New coaches and competitors may benefit from attending an early tournament as observers. Those of us who have been at this activity forever tend to forget how confusing a tournament can be (although having novice participants who "didn't know they had to do more than one round" does serve to remind us now and then.) The use of codes, double and triple entries, tournament courtesies and conventions are easier to explain when they have been observed – although I must confess, it will "make sense" only when they have actually gone through it. First-time observers may need to be cautioned not to become discouraged; some of the people they will be watching have been involved in the event for several years.

The new person may need help filling out the tournament entry form and should be warned to check the rules for each tournament carefully as there are some tournament directors who decide to be creative and choose not to follow AFA rules. Deadlines need to be pointed out and problems caused by late drops explained. Some of the coaches I have talked with recalled not being prepared for the keen competitive atmosphere they encountered.

Many of us have a list of "do's and don'ts" for our competitors which a rookie coach might find helpful as a basis for preparing the novice competitor. It may be helpful to encourage the coach to think through what sort of expectations are realistic for the first tournament and how these expectations might be

communicated to the students. Perhaps a warning is in order about the potential for unusual ballots and inattentive judges. One beginning coach wished that he has been advised not to hand out ballots until the team was in the van so that the reaction to the ballots would have been limited to his own school.

Hopefully, after the first tournament, things will be much clearer for both coach and contestants. Sharing experiences and feelings about it and setting goals for the next tournament serve as an important "bonding exercise" for many squads - "older" as well as "beginning."

Remind the director to try to get as much publicity for the team's activity as possible. Sometimes a story about the number of students from the school who participated is about all you will want to include. Obviously, when a student does break to finals or wins a trophy, a longer story would be warranted. A story in the alumni news is also a good idea.

The success of some programs is measured by their administrations according to the numbers of students involved in the programs. If this is the case, the director will need to plan accordingly. In the beginning, a program may have rather low standards for participation in national tournaments. As more students become involved, expectations may be raised. I think it is important that those of us who have been involved for some time share our struggle with how to deal with hard-working students who may never be very successful in terms of winning, but who may be gaining valuable confidence and training when it comes to national tournament participation.

For those new programs with limited budgets, we may be able to provide some help. Those of us who run tournaments can give these programs a break on fees. Those of us with teams too large for cars, but not large enough to fill up the van, can provide transportation for a couple of students. In some cases -- such as

for a national tournament -- we may be able to accommodate one or two students with our own.

Although I believe the help given to "new" people by "seasoned" people is critical, I wonder if there should not be more of an effort made by national organizations to make life a little easier for the novice coach. Apparently, there is a packet designed for the beginning director/program put out by AFA, but its existence is not well publicized and there are difficulties in terms of keeping it updated. Hopefully, these difficulties can be solved and a way found to get the packet to the people who desperately need it. Certainly those of us who believe in the value of I.E. programs need to do whatever we can to help those inexperienced directors who are willing to try to provide I.E. opportunities to students who would otherwise not have them.