

Strategic Recruitment

Keith Denslow
University of Nebraska

Very few directors or coaches would deny that students are the most important part of a forensics program. Before quality forensics education can begin and before competitive success can appear, the students have to be recruited. Recruiting quality students is a major concern for both beginning and established programs.

It is surprising that one of the most challenging and most important duties of forensics directors has received so little attention. The area of recruitment and retention has not received enough attention in our scholarly forms. Dunham (1968) pointed out that there has been a great deal of attention devoted to the issue of star systems in team membership but does not discuss ways a program can gain student interest. Klopff & Lahman (1967) are a bit more elaborate and devote slightly over a page to the examination of methods for recruiting prospective students. Assuming that there is little more to say about the subject, other texts concerned with directing and administering forensics have similarly paid scant attention.

This paper suggests that the process of recruitment should be more closely examined. Examples of current methods of recruitment will be reviewed, a framework for a systematic recruitment campaign will be suggested, and practical techniques displayed.

Current methods of recruitment are familiar and easily described. The most typical method of recruitment is to ask for referrals. Coaches ask veteran team members if they know any students coming to the university who might be

interested in forensics. Likewise, a director asks other instructors to look for promising talent in oral performance classes. Invitations and announcements are sent out about the team's first meeting of the academic year. A squad may even set up a booth on Freshman Friday and introduce the activity along with a hundred other campus organizations. Occasionally, coaches have enough free time and energy to view or talk with talented prospects at high school tournaments. A smaller section of forensics participants are required to engage in the activity by degree or certification standards.

While these types of recruitment have been effective, under close examination they seem very random. Veterans would tend to suggest people they would like to have as team members and leave out equally talented people they dislike. Other instructors may refer their best students while overlooking someone who would benefit most from the educational opportunities of forensics. Squad meeting announcements, orientation mixers, and tournament recruitment are all methods which are broad in their scope and random in their selection.

The same methods could be faulted for appealing mainly to students predisposed to engaging in forensic activities. Veteran students will suggest people coming to the university from their high school team or people they remember competing against during tournaments. Posted or distributed invitations to squad meetings attract students with past experience or some knowledge of what forensics activities entail. Certainly, recruiting at high school tournaments draws on a pool of prospects which are already familiar with the activity.

An alternative of a systematic or strategic recruitment campaign would be more effective and would lead to greater understanding of the forensics community. A systematic campaign would allow a team to target promotions of forensics skills to different segments of the student body.

Fine (1987) states "the borrowing of marketing concepts by public and nonprofit institutions" can be extremely helpful to the organization (p. 71). The field of marketing management has devoted considerable attention to identifying "needs" and targeting promotions. McCarthy (1971) provides an outline from which a targeted recruiting campaign can be devised. A forensics coach should analyze: (1) potential recruits; (2) recruitment mixes; (3) the team's ability to provide for these recruitment mixes; and (4) team objectives.

Taking these steps in a recruitment campaign pushes a forensics coach to carefully consider the role of the team in the university setting and how best to educate and promote the benefits of involvement in the activity. Rather than a random effort which tends to reach students already with some interest in forensics, a targeted campaign helps develop strategies for the development of the team while exposing new groups to the skills and concepts of inter-collegiate speech and debate.

The concern of potential recruits has been given some consideration as part of program objectives. Rieke (1968) discusses the value of diversity in forensic education. Dunham states that "if a teacher is concerned with meeting needs of students, he should try to involve as many students in the program as possible" (p. 101). Still, the issue of who can benefit from the particular design and focus of the program should be included in the recruitment strategy.

Equally important is the concern of what mixture of students would facilitate the best forensic education and encourage the building of a pleasantly diverse learning atmosphere. If the team is considered a microcosm of the university, then the director should attempt to recruit a mixture which is representative of the student body. Efforts should be made to recruiting a cross-section of majors along with minority and physically disabled students.

Team resources such as coaching time, facilities, and budget may all affect the strategy to recruit the desired mixture of students. Larger numbers of students may stretch the resources a team has available, and concessions for the sake of recruiting mix may need to be made. For example, travel and care of physically challenged students may require special vehicle and hotel arrangements. Possible resource shortages should be anticipated and the recruitment strategy should include answers for such questions.

Finally, the team objectives must be included and expressed in the recruitment strategy. When recruiting prospects, it becomes imperative that the student learns what the team hopes to achieve. Clearly outlined estimates of the amounts of time and effort to reach different accomplishments should be available. The inclusion of the objectives in the strategy allows recruits to understand what becoming a "member of the team" means.

Within the framework of strategic recruitment, there are two main functions to the process: promotion about the benefits which accrue from participation in forensics activities to gain attention, and provide an opening for education about the opportunities available.

Target promotions gain the attention of specific segments of the potential recruits. One method which can be used is the testimonial method. Posters and flyers with testimonials by famous persons can be used to gain attention and entice prospects into learning more. Testimonials by Lee Iacocca such as "I was a member of the debate team" or "Not every manager has to be an orator or a writer. But more and more kids are coming out of school without the basic ability to express themselves clearly," could be used to attract the attention of business, accounting, and engineering students. Business, home economics and interior design major may be influenced by statements from Mary Kay Ash such as: "I became interested in the debating team and became a member and won some honors. I've never lost

my love for extemporaneous speaking." Pre-law, political science and minority students may gain an interest if it is pointed out that Barbara Jordan was a champion speaker in college. "I was the Tennessee State debating champion," proclaimed by Ted Turner, may kindle the interest of broadcasting or business majors. Other examples are easily available from sports, education and science.

Other promotional methods may include special lectures or publications about the benefits of communication and argumentative training. Each of these promotions must be directed to gain the attention of specific target groups of potential recruits. Rather than attempt to present the same benefits to everyone, strategic recruiting will focus the message for each audience.

The other step in the recruitment strategy is education about the opportunities available in forensics. A major portion of this effort should be directed at the advisors of majors, classes and campus organizations. It is still true that we hear academic colleagues exclaim: "Forensics . . . isn't that cutting up dead bodies?" A concerned effort must be established and maintained to help advisors understand both the activity and its benefits for students.

The strategy of education should also be targeted to the specific audience. Several recent studies from *Communication Education* provide support for the importance of communication education for anyone in the business world. Forensic education has been shown to be particularly helpful in the legal profession. Strategic recruiting will, in effect, show student and advisor what forensics is and why it is important.

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