

**Lending a Helping Hand:
Some Suggestions for "Common Sense Meddling"**

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship in forensics tends to be directed at the experienced coach and the more developed programs. However, it is important to remember that there does exist lesser developed and new programs directed by inexperienced directors. This paper suggests some very basic steps the forensics community could take to help these programs develop, including: workshops for new directors, mentor-type assistance, the provision of a division for competition among less advanced students, and more scholarship in the "basics" of program administration.

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Some Suggestions for "Common Sense Meddling"

Little has been written about developing and sustaining new forensics programs. Occasionally an article will discuss an innovative funding mechanism (i.e. Kelley, 1984), or describe ways to strengthening existing programs (Greenstreet, Harris, Littlefield and Underberg, 1989), which may help new programs. Rarely, however, do articles specifically address how to help new programs develop and grow. I feel we need to focus more on the unique interests and problems of new programs, especially those with inexperienced directors.

There may be specific reasons for a lack of interest in these unique concerns. For one, we generally do not like to meddle in other people's affairs. Also, we tend to expect that forensics programs will be run by people familiar with forensics activities. Finally, these issues seem to be ignored because they are perceived as being too obvious to discuss.

These reasons are based on certain assumptions which are not necessarily valid. While, it is true that

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some schools seek out an experienced person to direct their program, others are turned over to inexperienced directors. For example, recently I received a job announcement for a Director of Forensics position which required certain teaching skills, but considered experience in forensics helpful but not necessary. Inexperienced directors may very well want some help from the forensics community, and probably would not perceive that assistance as "meddling." For instance, while determining what tournaments to attend seems obvious to experienced coaches, such decisions may be very difficult for a first time director. These are the people and programs the forensics community should try to help. Certainly this will transcend new programs. But, it is less likely that a well developed program will have to settle for an inexperienced coach. Besides, the best way to maintain growth and development in the activity is to insure a good experience for all programs, old and new. This paper identifies specific actions the experienced members of the forensics community can take to help achieve that goal. I like to think of these efforts as "common sense meddling."

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51. Helping out before the tournament

Many experienced directors can easily plan their season. Using their years of experience, and/or the AFA calender, they determine where they are going, what students they will take, and so on. People who have travelled the circuit for a few years can do this very quickly. They know the tournaments, their strengths and weaknesses, how large they are, and how good the competition is. They use this information to determine how each tournament fits their goals. But what about new coaches? To them every tournament looks the same. Throwing darts, tarot cards and drawing lots can replace good solid planning. Especially for new programs, which are generally on limited budgets, or who are struggling for institutional recognition, the wrong choice can be disastrous.

We need to find ways to share knowledge about these and other facets of program administration with new coaches and programs. Two mechanisms seem reasonably obvious: workshops and mentors.

WORKSHOPS

Colleges around the country offer institutes to high school and college students in all facet of

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forensics. It seems ironic that we can acknowledge the need to bring in new competitors to the activity, but not the need to bring in new coaches and programs. Workshops can serve as an excellent opportunity to bring together new coaches and "old hands." If scheduled prior to the season, new coaches would have an opportunity to better understand their job prior to embarking on the first season.

RECOMMENDATION I: Workshops should be organized to provide training for new coaches in all areas of program administration. The most logical sponsoring organizations would be state forensics associations like the Nebraska Intercollegiate Forensics Association. Chances are there will not be many new coaches each year, so the small geographic unit is best to reduce travel requirements.

MENTORS

The caveat on the number of attendees and the geographic coverage for these workshops raises an important point: not many new programs start every year

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and some hire an experienced coach. Therefore, the number of inexperienced coaches may be small enough to allow for one-on-one attention. This would seem to be the best way to help new programs: give new directors the exact information they need to run their programs. This could be accomplished through a "mentoring" program. Experienced directors would agree to help a new program in the same geographic area. This would provide new coaches with a specific person to contact if they had any questions. Depending on the resources of the mentors and the size of their squads they may even be able to share travel expenses with the new program.

RECOMMENDATION II: Experienced coaches should agree to help new programs by providing whatever assistance they can. Specifically, a mentor should be available to answer the most basic questions, and in addition, provide whatever additional support may be needed.

Obviously, new coaches need to know about these efforts or they are useless. Therefore, local organizations should inform schools considering new programs of this

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service. In addition to geographic proximity, the local organizations have an additional advantage in this process. Because they are closer to people in the area, local organizations are more likely to hear about the development of new programs.

2. Helping out at the tournament

Many fledgling programs struggle for administrative support. While it is unfortunate, some administrators tend to equate success with winning. However, it is often difficult for new programs to compete with existing programs. Therefore, we should adopt tournament procedures that allow these people to compete at their own level. At local tournaments a novice division should be created. At national tournaments, first year participants should be recognized.

NOVICE DIVISION

The creation of a novice level would allow students to get accustomed to the college circuit. This would help all first year students, but it will especially help new programs that do not have past experiences to learn from. While it would be nice to limit these divisions to only new programs, there probably are not enough new programs in a region to make this feasible at most

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tournaments. Thus the novice level could include all students in their first year of competition, who truly are not capable of competing at the senior level. I would like to propose some way to enforce that standard, but there truly is not any. Thus, if we wish to commit to the fostering of new programs, all coaches must recognize the spirit of the novice division.

As to the operation of the division, that could be left to individual tournament hosts. Some may choose to operate an entirely separate division. Others may opt for a system in which all students compete in one division, with the top competitors (novice or otherwise) advancing to finals. The remaining six highest novices compete in the novice final.

RECOMMENDATION III: Tournament directors should provide a novice division at their tournament, especially if there are a number of new programs in the area.

Some tournament directors claim that no one would enter these divisions. It may be that coaches currently enter their students in open competition because there

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is no other option. Tournament directors have nothing to lose by offering a novice division; if no one enters the division, it can just be canceled. However, even if a few students enter the division, it should be maintained.

NATIONAL COMPETITION

The problem of a small number of first year programs does not appear to be a problem at the national tournaments, at least in terms of first year participants. In fact from 1980-1989 an average of 14.5 new programs competed at the NFA National Tournament each year (Twenty Years of Champions, 1990). In addition more programs, especially newer ones, may attend national tournaments if they could compete (at least for one award) against other schools with equal experience. Establishing such an award would be easiest within the NFA structure, which already utilizes a stratified sweepstakes system. But the AFA should consider offering a competition among first year participants as well.

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RECOMMENDATION IV: The national tournaments should offer a special sweepstakes award to schools competing at a national tournament for the first time.

3. Some notes about scholarship in forensics

No one likes to work on an article that is likely to be rejected, and one of the most common reasons for rejection is that there is nothing new or innovative about an article. While articles about basic program operation probably fall into this category, some people would benefit from such articles. Therefore, we need to take steps to encourage scholarship in this area. One of the best ways to do this would be to dedicate one special issue to these concerns. Not only would a specific call for papers encourage submission of articles on these themes, but in the future the issue could be used as a "guidebook" for new directors.

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RECOMMENDATION V: One of the journals dealing with specific forensics issues should publish a special issue dedicated to basic program operation. Article topics could include: program administration, selecting tournaments, gaining publicity, and perhaps even travel tips.

Every program wants to be successful. At an administrative level, a successful program will justify continued funding and bring recognition to the school (which will also justify continued funding). Much as we hate to admit it, we live in a world of limited resources, and the continuation of any program depends on whether or not the administration believes that program is justifiable. At a more personal level, no one wants to be associated with an unsuccessful program.

It would seem that the best way to encourage the continuation of forensics programs is to do everything we can to foster a positive experience. The suggestions in this paper are a positive step in that direction, and I would encourage the forensics community to consider implementing these ideas.

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