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**“My college education has come
from my participation
in the forensics team”:**

**An examination of the skills and
benefits of collegiate forensic participation**

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“My College Education Has Come from My Participation in the Forensics Team”: An Examination of the Skills and Benefits of Collegiate Forensic Participation

Kristopher Copeland & Kendrea James

This qualitative case study provides an intensive and holistic description of the perceived educational benefits and skills developed by students who participate in forensics. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 students who were in the process of competing in speech and debate. Participants discussed multiple benefits of participating in forensics, such as improving skills in public speaking, listening, organization and structure, networking, time management, group work, and increasing knowledge and broadening worldview. Additionally, participants explained how the skills developed in forensics related to educational and professional experiences. The current study adds unique value by providing a comprehensive explanation of what students perceive they gain by forensic participation, which continues the discussion regarding the educational impact of forensics on students. As a result, the findings suggest forensics complements a student’s overall education and provides career preparation. Implications for forensic educators and students are discussed.

Keywords: educational benefits; forensics; professional experiences

Forensic educators find themselves continuously justifying the activity to administrators, colleagues, and other stakeholders. While it is relatively easy to describe the activity in terms of trophies and competition, forensic educators should champion the applied educational benefits of the activity. Kelly and Richardson (2010) noted, “One of the most important features of the practice of forensics pedagogy is the ability to measure learning” (p. 174). Focusing on educational measurement, Kelly, Paine, Richardson, and White (2014) outlined specific learning outcomes for students competing in individual events, including knowledge and skills of the communication discipline, public speaking, critical thinking, and upholding ethical practices.

However, as Billings (2011) noted, forensic research has mostly focused on successful competition rather than the educational effects of competing on a forensic program. Therefore, educational benefits, as Billings suggests, are far more implicitly suggested than explicitly stated by scholars. Rogers (2005) further exacerbated this notion by stating that forensic research provides few studies that “support the positive outcomes for [forensic] participation that



[literature] claims" (p. 14). While there has been empirical research produced regarding the educational benefits of forensics (see Billings, 2011; Holm & Carmack, 2012; McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Rogers, 2002; 2005; Thompson, 2003; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001), much scholarship has been theoretical and from a coaching perspective; more applied research regarding the educational benefits of competing is necessary. First, research data is helpful for forensic educators to justify the continuation of programs to administrators and outside stakeholders. As higher education institutions continue to restrict financially, forensic programs may find an even greater need to rely on descriptive data from qualitative researchers to define the benefits of the forensic activity. Second, researching perceived educational benefits of forensics by students can verify theoretical benefits postulated by forensic educators. Third, research studies by McMillian and Todd-Mancillas (1991), Rogers (2002; 2005), Thompson (2003), Billings (2011), and Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001) focus on educational skills and benefits, but research can be expanded. McMillian and Todd-Mancillas (1991) and Rogers (2002; 2005) utilized survey methods to measure the impact of forensics on educational skills and benefits, Thompson (2003) addressed mental preparation and anxiety, Billings (2011) relied on data from competitors who reflected back on the forensic experience to describe the benefits of forensics, and Williams et al. (2001) examined educational benefits of competitive debate. As a result, researchers have yet to conceptually describe, explain, and define how students in the process of competing in forensics perceive their skill development and how students assess those educational outcomes through program experience.

The findings from this study are useful when explaining and justifying forensics and the impact the programs have beyond competitive success. The findings of the present study provide ways that are more effective for forensic educators to justify the activity and to enhance the knowledge, skills, and educational benefits students derive from participation in forensics. To that end, this study intends to fill the gap in the literature related to benefits and skills of competing in forensics. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to complement the previous studies related to educational benefits (see Billings 2011; McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991, Rogers, 2002; 2005; Thompson, 2003; Williams et al., 2001) by providing a conceptual understanding of how students describe the learning experience of competing in forensics through qualitative interviews with students competing in the activity. Therefore, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What educational benefits and practical skills do students perceive they gain by competing in forensics?

RQ2: What skills attained through the forensic experience do students perceive to be related to career and professional goals?

Related Literature

Researchers have indicated that students gain many benefits from competing in forensics; however, research exploring the benefits of forensic participation is largely anecdotal or theoretical and is often explored from a coaching perspective. Some of the pragmatic benefits



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discussed by forensic scholars include educational outcomes (Hinck, 2003), enhanced research skills (Furgerson, 2012; Rowland, 1995), greater critical thinking skills (McGlone, 1974; Rowland, 1995; Williams et al., 2001), development of communication competence (Jensen & Jensen, 2006), improved speaking and communication skills (Bartanen, 1994; Millsap, 1998; Williams, 1996), and stronger academic and professional success (Aden, 1991; Weiler, & Rancer, 1992). For instance, Aden (1991) asserted that viewing forensics as a liberal art “can increase the open-minded consideration of the relative worth of ideas and approaches” (p. 104). Hinck (2003) argued that preparation for tournament competition “can challenge students to develop social skills that are essential to success beyond the college classroom” (p. 62). Bartanen (1994) discussed a variety of benefits related to forensic tournaments, such as learning and critiquing the public speaking process.

Additionally, researchers have noted forensics as a practice in small group communication (Zeuschner, 1992), organizational communication (Swanson, 1992), and mass media (Dreibelbeis & Gullifor, 1992). Researchers have also noted the importance of facilitating skill development through competition and tournaments (Copeland, Stutzman, & Collins, 2015; Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986). Moreover, Friedley (1992) focused on interpersonal communication in her exploration of the dyadic communication between coach and students and advocated for a deeper examination in interpersonal dimensions of communication exchange.

In contrast, a few researchers have engaged in empirical research that specifically examines various aspects of skill development and learning through forensic participation. For instance, Williams et al. (2001) utilized open-ended surveys to examine benefits in relation to debate and discovered public speaking was the most valued skill developed by the activity. Holm and Carmack (2012) discovered that students with forensic experience were more confident in communication graduate programs, had greater success at having papers accepted for publication and presentation, and had higher levels of graduate school success than their peers without forensic experience. Rogers (2002; 2005) measured the impact of forensics and found that forensic students developed a deeper cultural understanding, were more civically and socially responsible, performed better academically, and reported less anxiety than their peers without forensic experience. Thompson (2003) complemented the anxiety finding discovered by Rogers by qualitatively describing that forensic students learn strategies to cope with anxiety.

Furthermore, critical thinking has been of interest to forensic scholars. Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, and Loudon (1999) found that forensics is an experience in public communication skill building that directly relates to increased critical thinking. Additionally, Williams et al. (2001) linked critical thinking skills to preparation and experience of debate. Beyond critical thinking, Stenger (1998) discovered that delivery, organizational skills, and confidence learned from forensics corresponded to skills utilized in professional and academic conference presentations. Utilizing survey data, McMillian and Todd-Mancillas (1991) noted that competitors were drawn to forensics because of the potential to build self-esteem, develop public speaking skills, and increase research ability. Thompson (2003) examined mental preparation and noted that the



forensic competition experience enabled students to “view speaking in more positive ways” (p. 126). Billings (2011) noted that former competitors perceived forensics as enhancing their education by reporting the development of such skills as argument formulation, research, time management and organization, and providing a global perspective. Walker (2014) found that forensic competitors perceived their experience met the learning outcomes for the Basic Communication Course, with forensic competitors reporting deeper learning experiences in such areas as research, delivery of presentations, and critical thinking.

There is no doubt that researchers have examined the forensics activity in relation to educational benefits. However, more applied evidence in the form of descriptive data from qualitative research not only complements existing research by providing rich explanations surrounding students’ perceptions of the benefits gained from forensic participation, it also provides new insight and discoveries to student’s perceptions of the educational activity. Furthermore, focused qualitative data from the student experience is necessary to substantiate perceived claims of student educational benefits and to complement theoretical claims that exist currently in academic literature. Billings (2011) directly examined the benefits by inviting former forensic competitors to reflect back on the usefulness of the activity. To complement Billings, this study’s purpose was to describe and explain how current competitors (i.e. those participating in individual practice, peer coaching, and tournament competition) perceive the benefits and development of skills from forensics. While other studies have used either survey data or qualitative data to examine specific educational benefits, to our knowledge a study has yet to describe the student experience holistically in relation to educational benefits. While other studies examined the development of specific attributes, such as public speaking skills, the current study adds unique value by providing a comprehensive explanation of students’ perceptions of the benefits of participation in forensics while in the process of competing.

Methodology

To provide a conceptual understanding of how students described the learning experience of competing in forensics, we utilized a qualitative methodology. A qualitative methodology is useful to explore a real-life phenomenon within a bounded system (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1992; Yin, 2009). Merriam (1998) noted, “As the product of an investigation, a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 34). A case study approach was helpful to focus the current study because the research was limited to a specific group of people who were involved in a specific educational phenomenon. Additionally, Merriam (2009) discussed how a case study has a specified and identifiable unit, such as a program or policy. Therefore, students currently competing in forensics became the unit of analysis to understand the learning experience associated with competing in forensic programs. The following sections discuss the participants and data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, and reliability techniques employed in this study.

Participants and Data Collection



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The data collection method for this study was qualitative interviews. After Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited participants for this study by employing a purposeful sampling technique. Patton (2002) noted, “Purposeful sampling focuses on information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). While participants were recruited at regional tournaments in the Midwest and Southwest regions of the United States, participants derived from a variety of states including California, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. We recruited 19 participants who were currently participating in forensics. Participants consisted of eight males and 11 females. Since the purpose of this study was not to measure but instead to provide insight, discovery, and interpretation of the skill building in the context of forensic participation, the 19 participants provided adequate information to reach saturation, or the point in the process where no new information contributes to the developed thematic findings (Creswell, 2008).

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Participants competed in forensics for an average of 3.7 semesters. All participants competed in individual events. Eight participants also competed in Parliamentary (n = 6) or Lincoln Douglas (n = 2) debate. Participant’s average age was 20.4, with a range of 18-31. Participant’s ethnicity consisted of 11 Caucasians, six African-Americans, one Native-American, and one Asian-American. Participants attended a variety of institutions, with five attending two-year colleges, 12 attending public universities, and two attending private colleges. Of the 19 interviews, 14 took place in person and five were conducted by phone.

All participants signed an informed consent form before interviews were conducted. We employed a semi-structured interview protocol that included 18 open-ended questions with relevant probes. Furthermore, all participants consented to having the interviews recorded, which allowed us to transcribe all interviews for data analysis. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality within the findings of the study. Interviews varied in length. The average interview time was 42 minutes. The longest interview lasted 1 hour and 23 minutes and the shortest interview ended after 20 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interview transcriptions provided data in the form of text, which allowed us to code the qualitative data and identify themes utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) asserted that the constant comparative method is useful for a qualitative researcher to code data by categorizing narratives by themes. Themes emerged either by the language or general data from the interviews, allowing a comparison for each emerging property. Data analysis through the constant comparative method followed three systematic steps.

First, we coded interview data. In accordance with Merriam (2009), we began by open coding the data. We read each transcript and made notations, comments, and notes in the margins of each transcript, which provided a brief description of data that was possibly relevant or essential to the study.



The second stage was axial coding, also known as theme construction. Merriam (2009) noted that this stage moves beyond descriptive coding and allows a researcher to reflect on the meanings of the themes. Creswell (2008) noted that themes “are similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea” (p. 256). In this step, we reviewed the notation and comments from stage one of open coding. As Merriam (2009) suggested, we grouped comments and notations that were similar or naturally fit together. As a corollary of stage one, several major themes emerged. At the end of this stage, themes captured a pattern across all of the data that were able to answer the research questions of the study.

The final stage of the constant comparative method was writing up the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that this stage allows a reader to understand a research finding better by providing a detailed report of a specific circumstance.

Reliability Techniques

To establish that the findings of this study were credible, we employed a member check technique. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking provides a judgment of overall credibility of the constructions identified from the interview data. This technique tests data interpretations and conclusions with the participants in which data were originally collected by allowing participants to assess the overall adequacy of the data analysis. We asked all participants to review the preliminary findings from our study. Ten participants approved of the findings. Nine participants did not respond to any of our member check requests. Through the member check process, we established the findings of this study to be trustworthy for the reader.

Findings

With the completion of the analysis of interview data, a descriptive and conceptual understanding was created that directly pointed to practical educational benefits and skills developed by participants of forensics. There was also a deep explanation between the development of educational benefits and skills in forensics to educational and professional experiences. The findings are detailed below.

Benefits of Participating in Forensics

Participants discussed multiple educational benefits of participating in forensics. These benefits focused on the development of practical skills that improved public speaking, listening, organization and structure, knowledge and broadening of worldview, working in groups, networking, and time management. These findings complement the theoretical benefits for student competitors noted in the current forensic literature (see Bartanen, 1994; Furgerson, 2012; Williams, 1996) and extend our knowledge from applied studies (see McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Rogers, 2002; 2005; Walker, 2014; Williams et al., 2001) by further explaining and describing the process.

Public speaking skills. All participants noted that participation in forensics enhanced their public speaking skills, which is the process of developing, organizing, and giving a speech



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directly to an audience. Public speaking skills were enhanced because forensics provides a platform to polish those skills. Jonathon noted, “When you do speech and debate you’re expecting to upgrade your speaking skills and it just happens inevitably because you’re always talking in front of people.” Amy explained how forensics provides a setting to continuously polish her public speaking skills through the repetition of experience. She noted, “I don’t have to get up there and give it once and I’m done. I don’t have to do it once until my next topic. No. I have to consistently do it, keep doing it. It pushes me.”

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Several minor themes related to public speaking skills emerged in this study. For instance, seven participants discussed the development of audience analysis in preparation for speaking at tournaments. Since forensic students continually speak in front of a variety of judges and audiences, learning to adjust a presentation according to an audience is valuable. Kristie explained, “Adaptation is really important. I think that is a skill you learn in speech and debate. You can learn it really quickly to adapt extremely fast, especially in debate.”

Additionally, eight participants noted that the speaking experience in forensics fostered confidence, or building the belief in the reliability of speaking well in front of others. Sara stated,

For me, the confidence is huge. I didn’t have a ton of confidence, but with forensics you have to be. So in forensics you walk into that room and you have to own that room. It’s like I’m speaking. You are listening. Yeah, a lot of confidence. That has helped me with my speaking. I don’t apologize for what I’m saying. What I have to say is important, and you are listening because it’s important.

Tyson noted that the development of confidence applies outside of forensics when he stated, “Confidence is definitely something that has improved. With developing yourself as a thinker and as a speaker, you can have more confidence in your everyday life. That confidence opens a bunch of other doors.” In slight contrast, Kristie acknowledged that forensics may not be the solitary builder of confidence when she stated, “I won’t discredit speech and debate because there are so many external factors to confidence in an individual. Speech and debate is one of them. I can’t pinpoint how, but it’s one of the parts.”

Additionally, another minor theme relating to public speaking dealt with anxiety. While public speaking anxiety exists, six participants noted that the forensic experience helped them apply stress management when faced with public speaking anxiety. Michael discussed specific strategies that he employs based on his experience in forensics. He noted:

Right before I go into a round I try my best to absolutely clear my mind. I try to focus on absolutely nothing. If I try to focus on what I did wrong with a piece, or what I’m about to do with it, then my mind will start running on wheels.

Tony focused on gaining speaking experience in relation to nerves when he stated, “The anxiety goes away after you speak in an auditorium full of 80 people. Giving a speech in a classroom seems easy.”



The final minor theme related to public speaking is the development of improvisation skills, or speaking quickly with little preparation. Eight participants noted the development of impromptu speaking due to forensics. Students are challenged to speak with little preparation through the individual events of impromptu and extemp as well as through debate. Jonathon mentioned, "I feel like our presentations skills are already there. And we're able to talk on our feet and communicate better, which is important. I'm also able to think on my feet pretty quickly from debate skills."


Listening. A skill that 11 participants discussed was listening, which is the process of receiving, understanding, and responding to messages. The tournament experience provides a space for students to practice listening. For example, Brandy discussed the practice of listening in individual events when she said, "Everyone can find catharsis performing something that means something to them personally. So emotions can run high. It's like your interpersonal skills. To listen to what someone else is saying and give them the benefit of the doubt." In relation to the development of listening in forensics and applying the skill outside of the activity, Atlanta stated, "Now, when I talk to someone, I focus a lot more on listening to what they are saying and get what they are saying in my head. So now instead of just hearing what they say I've learned to listen."

Structure and organization. Participants described forensics as an experience that helps sharpen structural and organizational skills, which provided the resources, time, and the planning to prepare presentations. Harry mentioned, "I would say it's definitely an activity that forces you to have good organizational skills or else you're just not going to succeed."

In relation to structure and organization, 10 participants noted that forensics enhanced their research skills. Research is a cornerstone in public address and debate and students reflected on how developing this skill was helpful. Elise stated, "When I started speech and debate in college I learned how to search for statistics and research. I learned how to research and I learned how to outline correctly." Atlanta credited forensics with sharpening her research skills in general when she stated, "It [forensics] taught me how to research. The only way I'm doing well in college is the research methods and work ethic I learned from debate. It's just helped me greatly in my studies."

Tyson explained how his development of research skills helps as an audience member at competitive tournaments when he stated:

You're able to kind of recognize what reputable sources are and what reputable sources aren't the more that you are doing research and the more that you are even sitting in rounds because you hear what people are quoting. When you see articles from those things or when you see articles that are general resources, you are able to like second guess what is going on or you can take something with a little more strength and a little more weight because you know what's a good type of resource from research. And you know what is not a good [web] site to research.



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Additionally, 12 participants noted that forensics led to developing skills in argumentation. Lisa explained:

A bunch of my classes right now currently talk about argument structure, like the Toulmin model of argumentation structure. That's what we learn in practice so that's really something important to know, I feel like, if you're in the liberal arts community. So, literally what I'm learning in [forensics] practice goes hand in hand to what I'm learning in class currently. So it's pretty cool.

Annette added, "It really honed my mental focus on what order things should go in. I've also noticed that everything is an argument. Like everything we say we see or have in the world around us is some form of argument."

Likewise, seven participants specifically noted that critical thinking was essential to structuring an argument and organization. Tommy noted, "I really developed my critical thinking skills a lot." Chase explained it as follows:

Critical thinking, you have to really be able to see things from two different sides, because in debate you have an affirmative case and a negative case. Most people just assume in debate you take one side but in reality you take both sides so you can see the full spectrum of reality. Throughout life I've just gone through that. I see what this guy is saying and what this guy is saying. But I don't think that. It helps you find that middle.

Broadens worldview. Fourteen participants described the forensic experience as increasing their knowledge and, therefore, broadening one's worldview. Michael stated, "One of the coolest things about public speaking is just getting to learn about things in the world. I think that my speech and debate experiences have dramatically expanded the way I think about the world." Jackie focused on individual events when she stated:

Experiencing other people's thoughts and ideas and just seeing all these views, I guess, on the world from other people it makes me feel like I'm more educated. Well, not educated, but like knowledgeable of like the world and I feel like I'm able to talk to people more because I've learned things from different people.

While forensics expands participant's worldview, twelve participants specifically discussed the development of empathy. Tyson noted, "Speech and debate helps me to shape a lot of my opinions and values and empathize with other people's opinions and values. It helps achieve more understanding and empathy so you can deal with people on a broader level." Erica explained that the forensics experience has led her to be "more empathetic and sympathetic towards other people's situations. You have to be diverse. I think it's important for each side to understand the other so you can appreciate it and not degrade it." The development of empathy allows participants to bring voice to the marginalized. Michael stated:

One thing I really love about speech and debate, especially when it comes to persuasive [speaking] and all the other speeches, is there is a very niche group, minority groups kind



of get a voice here more than they would in other places. It helps me address or try to reach out and help those.

Along with developing empathy, participants are able to select topics and chose pieces for individual events that are related to important social causes. Thirteen participants noted how the diversity of ideas and pieces allow forensic participants the ability to introduce diverse ideas, leading to widening the knowledge of others. Atlanta provided the following example: Page | 29

In my POI or my poetry, my messages are more important than winning. So I'm driven to be better and have a better work ethic because I care about what I'm saying. Basically it taught me to be passionate in what I'm doing and only do things that I love. For example, I have a POI about the stigmatization about menstruation and how it has negatively added to their portrayal in society as a lower class.

Jaxon described his piece as allowing him an outlet to express his identity. He stated,

I'm gay and I kept it a secret for a while and in my intro I don't like describe the piece really. I say, I give a source and stuff and there's this whole anthology of words on this website for you to tell people who you are. And it was so personal. You have to find something that speaks to you. I love it.

Group work. Fourteen participants described forensics as a setting to practice small group communication, which is the experience of working with other people to accomplish a common purpose or goal. Forensics allows students to experience group work through a variety of ways, such as working with peers through speech and debate practice or earning team sweepstake points. For instance, Jonathon mentioned,

It's [forensics] really time consuming but also we work in small groups with each other. We all hate each other. (laughs) Not really, but we spend so much time with each other. It is sometimes difficult to deal with everyone but that happens when you have a family type system among a team.

The small group experience of forensics can foster synergy for individuals that work with classmates as a team. Jackie emphasized the importance of idea generation within the group interaction. She noted,

You're given ideas that you wouldn't have thought of on your own. And that's very helpful. Like my coaches, and other people on my team even they're just like "have you thought of doing this" and I'm like, oh my goodness. No, I haven't. Why didn't I?

Networking. Eleven participants discussed networking. A benefit of forensics is the ability to create networking opportunities for students, as tournament experiences provide connections with other students and faculty members from around the U.S. Brandy explained:

I have been able to meet people I would have otherwise not have been able to meet. I found that it's good for networking. You meet a lot of people out on the circuit both as

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competitors and judges from other schools. I've even been offered transfer scholarships to private schools that have teams.

Harry supported this idea and stated:

I think there is definitely a social benefit. I think you get to meet a lot more people and get a lot more experiences than an average college student. In college, in and of itself, you already get to meet so many different, wide variety of people, and I think forensics adds another layer to that. Where now you're traveling more, you're seeing kind of the world outside of campus.

Time management. The final skill that 10 participants discussed was time management, which is the ability to effectively use one's time. Annette stated, "It's [forensics] taught me time management skills." More specifically, Kristie focused on the application of time management at tournaments when she stated, "Punctuality, to be on time, to be at rounds on times. That can be applied outside of this world. That is respectability."

Additionally, time management was discussed in terms of balance between time in forensics, schoolwork, and other outside commitments. Atlanta stated,

With me, speech and debate has helped me with time allocation because it does take up a lot of our time. If I have a tournament and we leave at noon on Thursday and we don't get back until midnight on Sunday, that's my whole weekend. So, I have to figure out how to do homework earlier in the week. Definitely the time management.

Skills Related to Educational and Professional Experiences

Participants discussed the fact that the educational benefits and skills developed in forensics leads to a well-rounded education. In general, participants noted that forensic skills are applicable to educational courses, the workforce, and professional etiquette. These findings complement theoretical and applied discussions related to professional success (see Aden, 1991; Billings, 2011; Holm & Carmack, 2012; Rogers, 2002; 2005; Weiler, & Rancer, 1992) and provide rich descriptions of the experience from students actively competing in the activity.

Well-rounded education. Simply put, Atlanta stated, "You get a more well-rounded education" when participating in forensics. Forensics provides a space for students to expand their collegiate learning experience outside of the classroom walls. More specifically, Brandy stated:

I feel like the pedagogy and the way we learn through the activity, that it changes student's lives. It's not surpassed by anything else I have ever seen. My college education has come from my participation in the forensics team. I've learned more in forensics than I did in my philosophy class. I've learned more in forensics than from any type of economics class. I've learned more in forensics than I did in my human relations class or my international communication, like a business communication class, that deals with different cultures.



Likewise, Tyson noted,

To be quite frank, I feel like I have learned more in my speech and debate career than I have learned in any classroom. Just the topics that people are covering. You don't talk about North Korea nuclear proliferation in class. [In forensics] You talk about things that people don't normally discuss.

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Kristie noted that the expansion of knowledge learned from forensics simply aided her education when she stated, "It really expanded on my intelligence at college a lot. I don't know if I would have just gone to regular classes I would be as well-rounded as going to tournaments around the country."

Application to coursework. Ten participants noted that skills developed in forensics were applicable to coursework in higher education. Tommy noted, "I also use my public speaking [skills] when I have a class presentation." Likewise, Jaxon described using his forensics experience in relation to college by stating:

Definitely in class. Having to speak at all. It [forensics] teaches you like structure and how to actually debate and argue with logical reasoning and how to build your own case and how to research like that. My highest grade outside of speech and debate is in English and history and government class because debate incorporates those two.

Furthermore, Tommy explained how improvisation skills apply outside of forensics when he noted, "I use my impromptu skills all the time when I am in classes, which I probably shouldn't admit."

Application to career. Additionally, 14 participants also described the applicability of skills learned in forensics in relation to career and professional goals. Annette explained the following:

I want to go to law school when I get done. So just the knowledge of what an argument is and what a good argument requires is going to help a lot in law school. So, I mean just the development of everything. I'm going to need speaking for law school. I'm going to need the organization. I'm going to need the way we professionally dress. I'm going to need everything that we use from debate in my future.

Brandy summed it up by stating,

I know for sure whatever position I'm in I will be using my communication skills and the things that I have learned in forensics because that's where my passion lies and that's where I best serve other people and business is sharing the knowledge and skills I've learned within the community.

Professional etiquette. The final theme relating to the application of skills is professional etiquette, which was discussed by 11 participants. Sara noted, "Honestly, for me you learn a lot about professionalism. What is appropriate and what's not." Specifically, the



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experience of forensics teaches students how to professionally communicate with others. Erica noted:

Professionalism, being able to dress up. You have to look like you are presentable for an interview. You have to carry yourself well. You can't present like you are in a child's environment. You have to be held accountable for your responsibilities being on time for your rounds being on time for the tournament in general. Learning how to speak outside of the round too. In the bathroom, wherever you go, it's always smart to watch what you say because you have to be considerate of those around you.

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In addition, the practice and development of communication skills with others in forensics is applicable to professional and career goals. Amy summed it up by stating:

In addition, it's [forensics] also helped me with my social skills because of the environment that competitions present and my ability to communicate professionally with judges helps me communicate professionally with my own coworkers and employers. The ability to communicate with other competitors helps me to communicate with other students on campus.

Discussion

The present study builds upon the existing literature related to the educational skills developed through forensic competition (see Billings, 2011; McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Rogers, 2002; 2005; Stenger, 1998; Thompson, 2003). While forensic programs certainly vary across the U.S., there is no doubt that students grasp the deep application of the activity to their own educational growth and development. The implications of the present study are arranged to help forensic educators and students effectively develop experiences that maximizes the potential for educational growth.

Contributions to Existing Research

Scholars have pointed out that forensic research has mostly neglected empirical studies that demonstrate the educational growth of students participating in programs (See Billings, 2011; Rogers, 2005). While previous literature has theoretically focused on the benefits of forensics (see Aden, 1991; Bartanen, 1994; Furgerson, 2012; Hinck, 2003; Jensen & Jensen, 2006; McGlone, 1974; Millsap, 1998; Rowland, 1995; Weiler, & Rancer, 1992; Williams, 1996; Williams et al., 2001), the applied research produced about educational benefits of forensic participation has been narrowly focused on specific skills (Holm & Carmack, 2012; McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Rogers, 2002; 2005; Thompson, 2003; Williams et al., 2001) or data had been drawn from students who were reflecting back on the activity (Billings, 2011). The findings of the current study add unique value by providing a comprehensive explanation of what students perceive they gain through forensic participation, which provides a more detailed understanding of the experiential-learning taking place through forensics than what has been noted by previous researchers.



The existing literature identifies many theoretical benefits for student competitors, including speaking and communication skills (Bartanen, 1994; Millsap, 1998; Williams, 1996), enhanced research skills (Furgerson, 2012; Rowland, 1995), greater critical thinking skill development (McGlone, 1974; Rowland, 1995; Williams et al., 2001), improved communication competence (Jensen & Jensen, 2006), and greater academic and professional success (Aden, 1991; Weiler, & Rancer, 1992). The amount and variety of topics related to education and learning through forensics emphasizes the important role the activity plays at educational institutions. However, it is important to note that researchers have moved beyond the theoretical framework to explicitly examine forensic participation. As a result, forensics is linked to increased critical thinking (Allen et al., 1999; Walker, 2014; Williams et al., 2001), enhanced delivery and public speaking development (McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Stenger, 1998; Walker, 2014), enriched research ability (McMillian & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Walker, 2014), clearer organization development (Billings, 2011; Stenger, 1998) and providing a global perspective (Billings, 2011; Rogers, 2002; 2005). The descriptive findings from this study confirm previous literature; however, the findings also extend our knowledge by providing greater depth to each of the previous areas listed above along with detailing new insight regarding students' perceptions of the educational activity. Therefore, the current study not only confirms previous research but also adds value by providing additional descriptive and conceptual knowledge of the skills and benefits derived from participants competing in forensics.

Specifically, the current study confirms the findings from previous literature with results that point to enhanced public speaking, organization, critical thinking, broadening of worldview, and time management, but this study adds explanation and insight by providing deeper explanation as to the development of each skill area. For instance, all participants acknowledged that participating in forensics fosters public speaking skills; however, participants provided specific details about the importance of developing skills in audience adaptation, confidence, reducing anxiety, and applying improvisation skills in the public speaking process. The descriptive results explain the deep application of the public speaking experience of participants by providing specific details that complement previous research. From a student's perspective, forensics is more than just winning trophies. Forensics provides an experiential-learning environment where students find personal and academic growth.

Additionally, the present study highlights important skills that have not been explicitly discussed through applied research. For instance, participants noted that forensic participation fostered skills in group work. While Zeuschner (1992) implied group communication as a benefit of the forensic laboratory, this study explicitly describes the experience as an exercise in group communication. Because of the nature of the activity, students typically develop a bond with their team and with students from other teams. The experience provides a community to competitors who tend to share a sense of progressive ideas advocated within the tournament experience.



Benefits of Collegiate Forensic Participation

A forensic experience can also enhance communication skills for students, which is a direct application of the communication studies discipline. The activity itself requires students to deliver presentations in front of a live audience and provides opportunities for students to discuss topics, deliver speeches, and engage in conversation with students, faculty, and community members from across the U.S. This active communication leads to networking opportunities for students, which is a skill that will serve them well in their professional career.

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Moreover, participants noted the life skills learned from forensics are related to skills applicable to professional careers. Harris et al. (1986) noted, “for years, forensics has been justified as an activity which teaches necessary ‘life skills’” (p. 15). Forensics provides a training ground to prepare presentations in other settings and develop other valuable skills. More specifically, students learn professionalism and effective strategies to communicate and network with others, which participants noted was important in preparation for a future career. Forensics is an opportunity to teach students skills that are useful for one’s life. As noted by Billings (2011), more research should continue to focus on the benefits of participating in forensics. Applied evidence is helpful for the forensic educator to promote the activity. Forensic educators should not imply these benefits. Explicit evidence helps to legitimize the program to students, colleagues, administrators, and outside stakeholders.

Implications for Forensic Educators and Students

Several implications can be derived from the findings in relation to the roles of the forensic educator and student. First, forensic educators should keep in mind the wide variety of educational benefits students gain from forensic participation. Therefore, maintaining and explicitly detailing a personal philosophy related to the educational growth from the forensic experience is necessary for students to see how forensic educators connect the activity to the educational environment (see Bartanen, 1994).

Additionally, forensic educators could allow students to establish clear goals for their own educational growth through the activity, which would allow students to take deliberate ownership for the learning through the activity. Forensic educators should find opportunities through coaching, mentoring, and/or advising to allow students to develop and establish personal goals related to skills and educational growth that can be fostered through forensics.

Conclusion: Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides explicit descriptions and explanations of how students describe the learning experience of competing in forensics, limitations exist. The limitations of this study relate to the participants selected and the data collection process. First, the participants selected for the current study yield limitations. Participants in this study derived from various backgrounds in forensics. Some participants only competed in individual events, while others also engaged in debate events. It may be helpful to find participants that compete only in individual events, only debate events, and a combination of both individual events and debate that could provide comparisons in the description of the experiences. A future study on the skills



developed in collegiate forensics should apply criteria purposeful sampling and focus on students who have experience in specific competition areas.

Moreover, the amount of forensic experience of participants varied. A few participants had high school experience in forensics and it was hard for them to separate the college and high school experience. A future study related to skills and benefits of forensics could examine students longitudinally by first gathering data during their high school experience and continuing to collect data when a student competes in college. Furthermore, the frequency of tournament experiences varied among students. Examining the frequency of forensic competition in relation to learning outcomes could help provide deeper explanation as to the skills developed through the activity.

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A final limitation related to participants stems from the omission of forensic educators' perspectives of working with students. Since coaches work closely with forensic students, future research examining the perspective of coaches could add more description relating to the types of skills students develop through the coaching process of forensics.

An additional area of limitation in the current study relates to the data collection process. Five participants were interviewed by phone and the other 14 participants were interviewed in person. We acknowledge that interviewing participants by phone possibly affected probing questions, as nonverbal cues were unavailable since the participants were not face-to-face. However, we did find that both types of interviews yielded rich descriptions of the forensic experience. During the coding process, we did not find that themes were inconsistent due to the way that data was collected in-person or via phone.

While a few studies have focused on the explicit skills and benefits of forensics, more scholars have implied the benefits of forensics. This study provides clear description and explanation in discovering the explicit skills and benefits of competing in forensics. This research is important to continue the discussion about the educational impact that forensics has on students and how the experience can complement their overall education and provide career preparation.



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